

## SOME NEW TESTAMENT KEY WORDS IN SAMOAN

The Christian Church began its work in the islands of Samoa in about 1830. The language was first reduced to writing. Samoans speak a language which has affinities with those of other parts of Polynesia, such as Tonga, Tahiti and the Cook Islands, and also with the Maori language of New Zealand. Other factors apart, the very absence of written records prior to 1830 gave great prominence to the village orators, the repositories of a history remembered with some precision for five hundred years, and, with an increasing admixture of mythology, for a further five hundred years back. With the language reduced to writing the missionaries of the London Missionary Society turned their attention to the translation of the New Testament; the Gospel according to St Matthew appeared in 1837, the whole New Testament in 1846, and both Old and New Testaments in 1855. Various revisions followed, culminating in the 1884 version which was simple, dignified and beautiful, definitive of the language and profound in its influence on the thought and lives of the people. The revision of the 1884 version of the New Testament was begun in 1962, the work being undertaken by members of the Congregational, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches in Samoa.

The Samoan islands lie, roughly speaking, between Fiji and Tahiti, about 1,500 miles N.N.E. of New Zealand. They have been inhabited for at least two thousand years. Samoan legends display the belief that the spirits of the dead swam from island to island in a westerly direction until, reaching the westernmost tip of the westernmost island of the Samoan group, they entered the underground way to the abode of the dead, *Pulotu*, which lay far away to the West, presumably close by the land from which their ancestors had migrated.

The legends also display the belief in 'many gods and many lords', and while any attempt at classification leads inevitably to over-simplification, the attempt must be made. The account given here follows the classification made by J. B. Stair. First, there were the great gods, the *atua* who lived in the heavens and were responsible for the creation of the earth and of all living creatures. Thus, according to legend, *Tagaloa* made the heavens and then the earth; the two largest islands were two stones rolled down from the heavens, or, in another version, they were dragged up from the sea with a fish-hook. There are various accounts of the origin of man and of the name *Samoa* itself. One legend states that *Tagaloa* had two children, a son named *Moa* and a daughter, *Lu*. One night *Tagaloa* heard *Lu*'s son, *Lu*, singing *Moa-Lu*, but after a time this changed to *Lu-Moa*, *Lu-Moa*, and *Tagaloa*, supposing that *Lu* (the grandchild) wished to put himself before the first born, *Moa*, beat him. *Lu* escaped to earth which he made *Sa-Moa*, that is sacred to *Moa*.

The second class of gods consisted of the deified spirits of the chiefs, the

*tupua* who lived in *Pulotu*. Thirdly, there were the numerous *situ* (war gods, and district and family gods, and the patrons of the various arts and crafts). The *situ* could animate insects such as the centipede, and birds and fish; they could also speak through the priestly orators who were their keepers. Every family group had its *situ* to which it paid reverence by gifts of food and drink. Sometimes this was done in the main house of the family group; less frequently there was a special house or temple set aside for the purpose. Since the advent of Christianity, the *situ* have tended to exercise some of the functions ascribed to evil spirits in the New Testament.

Finally, there were the *saualii*, an inferior type of *situ*, not represented by priests or revered in special houses, and equivalent perhaps to ghosts or apparitions.

### The translation of *theos*, God

In the translation of the Scriptures, the class name for the great gods, *atua*, was taken, and the singular *O le Atua* was employed to designate the Christian God. Today it can be said that in Samoa there is a nation-wide belief in God, creator, sustainer, just, loving and forgiving, whose character is to be seen in the words and acts of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it is not quite possible to say the words of Jan Struther's hymn, ' . . . though back into storyland giants have fled, and the knights are no more and the dragons are dead'. The *atua* have gone back into storyland, and *O le Atua* reigns supreme in heaven; yet the *situ* and the *saualii* are still with us on earth. Evidence for a lively interest in and apprehension of the spirits which appear both by day and by night in certain houses, at river crossings and elsewhere is directly available. Evidence of belief in the second, intermediate class of gods, among whom are the deified chiefs, is obtainable more indirectly, as the following incident makes clear.

In a discussion conducted through the columns of a Samoan newspaper, it was suggested that in the Legislative Assembly of the future independent State, the various parts of Samoan society should be represented. This meant giving the franchise not only to the titled chiefs, but to the untitled men and women (the large majority). One argument put forward in favour of such an extension of the franchise was that the various groups of representatives would act as checks one upon the other; since the nation is Christian, the writer assumed that the readers would agree that all men are sinners, and that a wise system of government would be one in which limits were set to the possible consequences of our sinful tendencies by the representation of the major sections of society within the Assembly. The fact that in the event the franchise was not extended, but remained restricted to the titled chiefs is no concern of this paper. However, one of the objections put to the plea for extension of the franchise is of great interest, for it was asserted in a subsequent contribution to the newspaper that the argument in favour of including untitled men and women in the Assembly rested on a fallacious assumption: that all men are sinners. Was it not widely known that the chiefs are not so, being 'earthly gods'? It is tempting to conclude that the writer was implying 'and if the Bible does not recognise this exception, so much the worse for the

Bible', but this would imply, wrongly, that the average Samoan reader views the New Testament as a whole, and sees each part in the context of the whole. Some undoubtedly do that, but the majority tend to regard it in the same light as their own store of proverbs, myths, sagas and history, that is, as a quarry from which to take a short saying or story in order to make a debating point, to furnish a graceful illustration in a speech of welcome, or to provide a short homily for a young person, a process familiar to us in our own country.

And yet, if anyone were to question whether in Samoa due account has yet been taken of the commandment 'You shall have no other gods before me', there would be genuine surprise, for it is not, and it probably never has been the established practice to make images. While the chiefs are normally treated with a respect almost amounting to worship, it must be remembered that their secular magisterial and organizing roles have always been more important than their religious roles. Indeed, the absence of an elaborate religious cult and the presence of a strong, sophisticated society structure built upon the prerogatives and duties of its several sections—this was one of the more interesting features of ancient Samoa.

#### **The translation of *ouranos*, heaven**

Reference has been made earlier to the belief that the spirits of the dead proceeded westwards to *Pulotu*, a great subterranean cavern. The word *Fafā* may have referred to the entrance to the way leading to Pulotu or have been a synonym for it, since many of the gods were said to dwell in the *Fafā* or in Pulotu, while others lived in the deep ocean, and still others dwelt in the fiery regions of the deep earth from which they sent up volcanic fire. The word *lagi* (sky) was associated less frequently with the gods, and not at all with the spirits of the dead.

It was correct, no doubt, to render the Greek *ouranos* by *lagi* (sky), but the change in spatial metaphor involved was not inconsiderable.

#### **The translation of *zoē aiōnios*, eternal life**

It will already have become apparent that the ancient religion of Samoa was much concerned with life after death, and it is not surprising therefore that when the Gospel passed into this new cultural medium, the part of the spectrum dealing with eternal life was broadened, and became most important. Moreover, it was consistent with the prevailing ideas that the interest should centre on the presumed fact of the after life and on its length, rather than on its characteristics and its quality. It is probable that the life of the departed, in Pulotu, was taken to be similar to that of the living in Samoa, and that earthly distinctions would prevail in Pulotu. Thus one tradition held that there were two openings into the *Fafā* (pictured as being localized at the westernmost point of the group), one being for the use of chiefs, and the other for all the rest, while a guardian *situ* ensured that there was no mixing.

Now the Greek *zoē aiōnios* has been rendered into Samoan by the words

*ola* (life) *e faavavau*. The word *faavavau* meant *the end of time*, and the expression *e faavavau* could mean and is normally taken to mean *to the end of time*. The message about eternal life so communicated was readily accommodated to prevailing ideas, but since *aïōnios* means more than *everlasting*, there was some loss of richness. Eternal life is life with a new quality, properly pertaining to the age to come, and it is everlasting in virtue of having that new quality; this was not adequately communicated. In the recent revision, the *e* in front of *faavavau* was dropped, so making *faavavau* a qualifier of life; the change corresponding fairly closely to that made by going from *everlasting* life to *eternal life* in the English language.

### The translation of words associated with the second person of the Trinity

The words *Jesus Christ* have been transliterated from the Greek. *Kurios*, *Lord*, is rendered by *O le Alii*, *alii* being the name for the class of chiefs. The rendering of *Huios*, *son* presents some problems. In the phrase *Son of God*, since God is the Chief of chiefs as it were, the special word for the chief's son, *alo*, is used of Christ, but in the phrase *Son of man*, since *alo* cannot be used of men in general, the general word for son is employed, *atalii*. The revisers found that in Rom. 8: 23 and Gal. 4: 5, where Paul wrote of *adoption of sons*, another word, *tama* had been employed for sons. Now *tama* commonly means *children*, and in these passages it means adopted children; the practice of adopting children is very common in the large group families in Samoa. But this did not secure the point being made by Paul, that, whether Jew or Gentile, the saints have become true sons and heirs, and so *tama* was dropped, and *atalii* substituted.

It will be seen from the foregoing paragraph how the choice of words available in Samoan to express one noun in Greek poses some delicate problems for the translator. The same applies in the case of other parts of speech; where a choice has to be made between an *elite* form and an ordinary popular one. Let us consider for instance the verb *to come* which can be used indiscriminately in Greek and English of all persons and of God. It is not so in Samoan; of the coming of the highest chief, the word *afio* is used. So, when the crowd greets Jesus as a King riding into Jerusalem, crying 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord', *afio* is used. But in 'Jesus came into Galilee' (Mark 1: 14) and all other statements of a like kind, *maliu* is employed; that is, a form strictly applicable to chiefs of lesser rank, and, out of politeness, to people generally. No chief, however, would use *afio* or *maliu* of himself; their use is restricted to employment by others when they wish to show their respect to him. Of himself, he would use the word *sau* which is used also in speaking of the coming of an untitled man. So Jesus, in John 12: 46, says 'I have come as light into the world', and the word for *come* is the common *sau*. This is surely correct, but we may be less happy about the use of *sau* in the rendering of 'When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne', for the picture evoked by these words of Jesus is that of the Son of man as a king, sitting in judgment.

## The believer and the Redeemer

### *The ancient religious rituals*

Before dealing with some aspects of the relation between the believer and the Redeemer, it will be necessary to digress into a brief description of the ancient religious rituals of Samoa.<sup>1</sup>

‘It would seem that there were three kinds of religious ritual in Samoa: Meditation, while seated; Sacred Offering; and Submission. The holy things used often in these rituals were Kava,<sup>2</sup> Food and Fine Mats.

‘1. *Meditation*. Here there is no apparent activity; the participants simply sit and pray silently to a personal god or to a national god for the success of some work in hand, a fishing expedition, a game or a war: activities in which others are engaged.

‘The rite is preceded by a kavaceremony. The use of kava is permitted only to titled heads of families (chiefs and orators) who meet in the house of the high chief or in a special place on the village green. The positions in which the participants sit are designated, and each man knows his place and the duties which go with it. First of all there is the exchange of greetings—*afio mai* and *maluu mai* (different ways of saying *you have come* or *you are present*, the choice of expression depending on the status of the person addressed); to the expression is attached the title or series of titles held by the person addressed. One orator will lead this exchange of greetings and another will display the kava sticks and order their appropriate allocation. Then follow speeches by other orators, consisting of expressions of praise and thanksgiving and the recapitulation of some of the historical landmarks in the life of the village and nation: *the great mornings* as they are called. Reference may also be made in the speeches to matters of concern and to hopes for the future, “that the heavens may be clear”. When the speeches are concluded and while the kava drink which has been prepared by the untitled men is being strained, one of the orators calls out while the rest of the company claps; then the kava drink is distributed in a coconut-shell cup, strictly in the order demanded by the relative priorities of the titles of those present; first the cup for the high chief, and so on down the ranks. This is the occasion for the expression by the individual of praise and thanks and prayers to the gods, while the cup is held in the hand. First some of the kava is poured out as a libation to the god, with thanks and prayers to him, and then the rest is drunk.

‘2. *Sacred Offering*. The kava ritual is followed by the sacred offering of presents, especially of food. When the young men and others outside the kava ring hear the clapping for the kava, they prepare at once to bring in the offering of food. Those outside are now permitted to approach to witness the distribution and to receive their portions. The priestly orators supervise this and announce it with loud voices. To this day, the portion allotted to the chiefs and the portions allotted to other persons are things well known. In

<sup>1</sup> This account is translated from a description given by the late K. T. Faletoese, a Samoan orator who entered the Christian ministry.

<sup>2</sup> Kava: a drink made from certain roots, widely used on ceremonial occasions in Polynesia.

the case of an animal, the high chief receives the rib-cut, his brother chiefs receive saddle-cuts; women receive cuts from the underside; the head goes to the untitled men and trotters to the children. There may be others present to whom further portions are given, but everything left belongs to the priestly orators. Neither the orators nor anyone else present eats until a special coconut has been cracked, as a sign that the high chief has eaten. As to the remnants from the chief's meal, it is forbidden for his wife or his children to eat these (lest they die, it is said); and such remnants are returned to the priestly orators for their consumption. This ritual is normally held in the morning and again in the afternoon. The most important aspects are the speeches themselves and the food. No function will gain approval unless there is food enough and to spare.

'3. *Submission*. The rite of submission applies in cases of grave sin which demands an extreme punishment: offences such as murder, adultery or disrespectful behaviour towards a chief. Submission is made in expectation of forgiveness. The rite is normally enacted at dawn. The prisoner and his family, or even his whole village bow down in silence before the house of the chief or other offended party. The prisoner heads the group and is covered with a fine mat, offered as his ransom. In other words, he submits himself completely to the authority of those whom he has offended. Many such submissions have been successfully offered and received. Those inside the house will come out, and bring into it those offering submission. The priestly orators speak sweetly and all join in a meal. The fine mat is accepted, while the prisoner is set free and forgiven. He no longer goes in fear of retribution for his sin.'

### **The relation between the believer and the Redeemer**

If now we turn to the relation between the believer and the Redeemer, we notice at once that the word *togiola*, literally *the price of one's life*, was the word used to denote the fine mat with which the sinner covered himself in the rite of Submission. The acceptance of the *togiola* set free the prisoner. It was inevitable that *togiola* should render *lutron*, ransom, as in Matt. 20: 28, 'even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. However, the same word, *togiola* (ransom) was used to render *apolutrōsis*, (the action of buying back and making free a slave), as in Eph. 1: 7 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace'. The Samoan has the word *togiola* (ransom) where the English has *redemption*, and so the focus of attention is on him who is substituted for us, rather than on the activity by which we are set free. This tendency is strengthened by the way in which the Greek *huper* (for), is translated in passages like 1 Cor. 15: 3 'Christ died *for* our sins' by words which mean 'in place of' or 'as a substitute for' (our sins). The result is that the Samoan New Testament lends unusually large support for a substitutionary doctrine of our atonement. When it is recognized that such a doctrine had a greater vogue in the mid-nineteenth century than it has now, it is not improper to suggest that here is a case of double reinforcement of a communicated element: the substitutionary element

is reinforced both by the theological outlook of the sending churches and also by the religious outlook of the receiving culture. In the recent revision *huper* (for) was retranslated, by a word that is as broad as the English word 'for', but while it would have been possible to render *apolutrōsis* by a word meaning 'to set free', it was felt that a certain loss of richness would outweigh the advantages of a change.

It is interesting to discover that even a translation that is very close to the Greek may lead to doctrinal difficulties because of assumptions about the significance of word order in a sentence. For example, the words of John the Baptist in Mark 1: 15 'repent, and believe in the gospel' have been interpreted by many Samoan preachers to mean that *first* men must *repent* and then they must *believe*, as if men do the first in their own strength and, having done so, make an act of belief afterwards. Yet the turning away from sin and the turning toward God are aspects of the one process. The favourite parable, that of the Prodigal Son, is understood as the son's return to his father unaided. What tends to be overlooked is the fact that while he was in the far country the son remembered the father he already knew and consequently retraced his steps to his father who came out to meet him. Again, one can probably see the influence of the rite of Submission, where the sinner walks with his mat to the house of the offended party.

## Conclusion

In the recent revision of the Samoan Scriptures, it came to be felt that the existing version erred on the side of being over-literal, a common fault in an early version. For example where the disciples, afraid that the boat would be swamped, cried out 'Save, Lord; we are perishing', which represents three words in the Greek (Matt. 8: 25), the literal Samoan translation ran to a cumbersome fifteen words, whereas Samoan fishermen in similar situations speak more briefly and pungently.

Apart from isolated instances like the foregoing, it was decided to make certain general adjustments designed to reduce the sense of unfamiliarity. Thus, units of time, distance and weight were expressed in local measures, yielding for example, 'nine in the morning' rather than 'the third hour of the day'. On the other hand since money changes its value continuously monetary units remained as transliterations of the Greek words.

There is some evidence that words specially coined for the purposes of Bible translation have been restricted to religious discourse while synonyms are used for secular purposes. Thus the Greek *lampas* (lamp) because *lamepa* in the Samoan Bible, while the ancient word for an oil lamp, *moli*, gained wide currency in secular use. Since its meaning now covers what *lampas* denoted, it has replaced *lamepa* in the Samoan Bible.

In the case of *stauros*, a cross, a transliteration, *satauro* is used in the Samoan New Testament, and in religious discourse, but another transliteration from the English word *cross* is in secular use, as in the expression Red Cross.

Of particular interest in this connection is the rendering of *wine* and *bread*,

substances which were unknown in Samoa in the days when the New Testament was translated. The transliteration from the Greek *oinos* gave *unaina* for which there is no secular synonym. It is perhaps relevant that apart from its use in Church worship wine has been little used or known among the people. On the other hand, the transliteration from the Greek *artos* gave *areto* (bread). However, bread has been used increasingly by the people for ordinary meals and is never then called *areto*, but *falaoa*, the form derived from the chief ingredient, flour. Thus, much of the point of Jesus' words 'I am the bread of life' is lost, since *areto* connotes the special Biblical substance met only at Communion and not the very staff of life which it was to the people of Palestine.

Other means of maintaining a faithful translation which yet speaks directly to the present generation include the dropping of obsolete words, adjustments where words have changed their meanings and the introduction of new words that have come into use during the last hundred years. One decision which may have to be faced if Samoan continues as a living language for a further half-century will be whether to change from the kind of language spoken in church, at school, and on the radio to that which is spoken in the village and the market place, for they differ increasingly. The most obvious difference is that the 'official' language uses the letter 't' as in *tasi*, (one) while the 'popular' language uses 'k', as in *kasi* (one). However, there are idiomatic differences as well. Most Samoans switch readily from one form to the other, and it is difficult for a European to assess the effect of having the Bible written in a form of language read easily enough by the people and yet rarely spoken by them. At present however, it appears to be the fact that most thoughtful Samoans see no need for a change in the written language.

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