

WESLEY J. CULSHAW

## PACIFIC SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION— A NEW PHASE

*This article first appeared in The Pacific Journal of Theology in September 1965. In two earlier issues (in 1962 and 1963) the Rev. H. K. Moulton had given an outline of the history of Scripture translation in the Pacific and described some aspects of the contemporary scene. Since that material appeared there have been some developments which merit attention, and in this article Mr Culshaw takes account of recent events in the area in order to see the true significance of these developments. Ed.*

In New Guinea the period since the end of World War II has been an age of discovery. The last geographical frontiers have been crossed and our knowledge of the interior of the island has been greatly increased. The penetration of Christian activity into the Highlands has been accompanied by a rapid growth of the Church in new and densely-populated areas. The complex language situation adds greatly to the difficulty of communicating the Gospel. Ten years ago a survey reported just over 500 languages in Australian Papua and New Guinea. The latest survey speaks of over 700 languages. And lest someone should immediately raise the question of whether we are talking about languages or dialects, let it be said that the figures quoted have been calculated by competent observers who are accustomed to choosing their words with care. It is indeed difficult for anyone without first-hand experience of the region to understand the implications of this fact.

Before the war mission activity was confined almost entirely to the coastal regions. There, too, many small language communities were found; indeed in the coastal region the language communities tend to be much smaller than they are in the Highlands. Most missions adopted the policy of encouraging one particular language in each region as a *lingua franca* for church purposes. This policy has been pursued until the present time and one is inclined to comment that the Church has made a virtue of necessity. It is undeniable that the policy has been productive of much good. People of different language groups were brought together, albeit under the umbrella of one particular denomination.

The common language was taught in schools. It suited a more leisurely age than that in which we live, relying on long-term results in a relatively static situation. The advance of recent years into areas of greater population has compelled a diversity of approach to the language question. In the Highlands the local languages are in no danger of being superseded in the foreseeable future. The drive for schoolteaching to be done through the medium of English, and the rapid headway being made by one particular common language (Pidgin) without a great deal of official encouragement,

do not solve the problem of training mass movement Christians now. Most of the missions have come to see that an intensive programme of adult education in the vernacular is a necessity for the health of the Church, and greatly increased Scripture translation is a natural result.

Many new missions are at work in New Guinea and the greatest increase is among those who represent the vigorous evangelical zeal of theologically conservative groups in western countries. In New Guinea the most striking manifestation of this new thrust is the advent of the organization known sometimes by the name of Wycliffe Bible Translators and at other times by the name of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. They entered New Guinea in the early 1950s and their number continues to increase. They are by no means the only representatives of a revitalized evangelical conservatism. Other interdenominational missions, such as the Unevangelized Fields Mission and the South Seas Evangelical Mission, have extended their outreach. These bodies and certain others have combined in the recent establishment of a Bible Training Institute in the Highlands. While they display certain differences of emphasis among themselves, they are one in a common emphasis on the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, and Scripture translation is accorded a high place in their planning and activities. It is also worthy of note that while the theological and Biblical preparation of the workers follows traditional lines, they are wide open to the insights made available by the study of the developing social sciences of social and cultural anthropology, as well as linguistics. These are not seen so much as academic disciplines but approached along pragmatic lines. The valuable magazine *Practical Anthropology*, issued six times a year, is widely read and exercises an increasing influence. The editor is a member of the staff of the Translations Department of the American Bible Society, and indeed this whole approach owes most to American scholarship. In addition, many missionaries apart from those connected with the Wycliffe Bible Translators, attend the linguistic summer schools conducted by that organization.

The growing interest of the Roman Catholic Church in the Bible, and especially in the vernacular, can no longer be ignored. Although the germ of this development can be traced back to the nineteenth century it has received a powerful impetus through the Vatican Council decree which permits a greater use of the vernacular in the liturgy. The simultaneous emergence of a more friendly attitude towards those who are now called 'separated brethren' has made it inevitable that Roman Catholic missionaries should seek co-operation with Protestants in the realm of Scripture translation; they openly acknowledge that they have lagged far behind in this particular field. Thus it has come about that a very large measure of friendly and fruitful co-operation has been achieved in Samoa, while the prospects for similar co-operation in Fiji appear to be bright. The case of the Tongan Bible is instructive. After many years during which two Bibles have been in use among Protestants, a small committee—of which one member is a Roman Catholic scholar—is at work on producing a new version. The local authorities of the Roman Catholic Church requested the revisers to adopt their spelling of four words, pointing out that they would adopt the 'Protestant' spelling in some hundred cases. Three of the four were proper names:

Jesus Christ, Joseph and Mary. The fourth word was 'grace'. In every instance, these are 'foreign' words but whereas the Protestants have derived the transliterated form through English, the Roman Catholics have based their usage on Latin. (It must be acknowledged that in the case of the proper names the Latin forms are nearer to the originals than the English.) The revision committee, having obtained the agreement of the Annual Conference of the Free Wesleyan Church, the largest religious body in Tonga, has agreed to the request. The committee contains representatives of the Tongan Government, Seventh Day Adventists and Anglicans, in addition to the official representatives of the Free Wesleyans and Roman Catholics.

Each of these major developments is part of a worldwide movement; the crossing of the last geographical frontiers, the strong missionary witness of the sects during a period when it is comparatively weak at the local levels of the historic churches, and dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. We mention also the renewed emphasis on mission and unity in those churches linked with the World Council of Churches which has led towards the formation of a Pacific Council of Churches and the implementing of plans for co-operative work in the training of the ministry. Before long this will result in a greater number of nationals who are able to read the Scriptures in the original languages.

The Bible Societies have to be sensitive to the new climate. As publishers of 'missionary versions' of the Scriptures they have always maintained close touch with translators. Since the formation of the United Bible Societies in 1946 they have worked increasingly in co-operation with one another. An impressive and growing array of publications under the general heading of 'Helps for Translators' is one visible result. *The Bible Translator* is now widely known and valued, not only by those directly engaged in Bible translation. The books of Dr E. A. Nida, Translations Secretary of the American Bible Society, and the *Translators' Translation*, a Greek-English Diglot version of the New Testament sponsored by the British and Foreign Bible Society, have, each in their own way, been very influential.

Another Bible Society activity is the holding of Translators' Institutes or training courses. To date they have been conducted in various parts of Africa, South America, South-East Asia and in New Guinea (at Lae, 1964). Hitherto they have been mainly concentrated on helping translators at work in little-known tribal languages. The training given is practical although some attention is paid to the theory of translation.

One of the aims of an Institute is to help translators to understand and interpret their sources. The expansion of translation work has outstripped the knowledge of Greek—not to mention Hebrew—at the command of actual or potential translators. It is inevitable that for most missionary translators today the major source language is English. It is also true that though formerly the normal missionary translator was a man or woman of considerable seniority with a long residence in the area behind him, the typical translator today is comparatively young. It certainly could not be otherwise in the New Guinea Highlands where the oldest mission stations are less than twenty years old. At the Institutes we seek to develop in the translators a keen sense of how they can benefit from the findings of Biblical

scholars. In not a few cases they return to their work with a strong desire to keep up, or in some cases to begin, the study of Greek. Honest exegesis and textual criticism become not only obligatory but exciting when their relevance to translation is made clear.

At the Institutes considerable attention is also paid to the importance of evaluating properly the relationship between linguistics, anthropology and psychology in their bearing on translation. It is not difficult to demonstrate the relevance of linguistics to people who are working in little-known languages; but this must be balanced by an appreciation of the role of language in the culture of a people. Only so can we understand how language is so deeply involved in the emotional responses of people who are not only being offered the message of the Gospel but who are being subjected to a great variety of outside pressures. Not least, translators are helped to examine their own presuppositions, to discern the difference between convictions and prejudices, and to separate theological from non-theological judgements.

The course at Lae continued for five weeks. It was attended by over forty translators and more than thirty translation helpers drawn from fifteen different missions, proving to be a stimulating experience for all who participated. It was not intended by the Bible Societies to be an isolated event but to fall into place as part of a programme of continuing aid to translators. In pursuance of this aim the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1963 appointed a Translations Adviser for the South Pacific and the present writer is the first holder of the position.<sup>1</sup> His main duty is to help translators in their task, to stimulate their questions and to make available for them the kind of expert advice which they need. We believe that the appointment has shown the need for this particular form of ministry and it is the desire of the Bible Society to continue it as long as it may be needed.

<sup>1</sup> Mr Culshaw is now taking up a new post—see Editorial, p. 53. *Ed.*