

THE STORY OF THE YORUBA BIBLE

The Beginning

There is a vivid scene which is familiar to students of West African history. It is a slave-raid on the Yoruba town of Oṣogun in 1821, its destruction by burning, and the seizing of the able-bodied, among whom was the boy Ajayi. The story goes on to tell how, along with others, Ajayi was taken onto a slave-ship en route for Brazil or Cuba, but rescued by a naval vessel and finally put ashore a thousand miles from home at Freetown, as a free person. It was here that he grew up among Christians, and was baptized with the name Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

A less well-known scene, in which the remarkable Crowther also figures, is a quiet corner on the deck of a sailing-ship making its way from Bristol to Freetown twenty years later. Crowther is now returning from theological training and ordination in England, and, believing that his work will be the care of fellow-Yorubas in Sierra Leone, is putting into Yoruba Luke 1-3, and Acts 1 and 2. And this may be aptly called the beginning of the Yoruba Bible.

But he had hardly returned to Freetown when plans were made for a great missionary expedition from Sierra Leone to his own land of Yoruba (in what is now the Western Region of Nigeria). More extensive Bible translation was part of the preparation, and work was begun on Romans and on Proverbs. Crowther's party contained several other Yorubas and two European families. They arrived safely in 'Nigeria' and hoped to go straight up to his old home, but tribal warfare had broken out, and the expedition had to stay on the coast for a year and a half. It seemed a calamity at first, but Crowther turned it into great gain by devoting himself to the work of steady translation.

The party finally reached its objective (Crowther even found his mother, whom he had last seen twenty-five years before), and a base for the work was established.

The First Book

So it was that in 1850 came the first printed book in Yoruba, the Epistle to the Romans. This was followed by Luke, Acts, the Epistles of James and Peter, then by Genesis and Ecclesiastes. (How much we should like to know why Romans was done several years before a Gospel, and why Ecclesiastes was included at this early stage!)

Thirty-four years were to elapse before the whole Bible was translated, and certain features of this long period deserve attention.

1850-1884

First, virtually the whole time was one of intense disturbance throughout Yoruba country: tribal wars convulsed the life of the people. It is with this

background that the greatness of the achievement of Yoruba Bible translation is seen.

Secondly, almost all the translation and some of the editing and revision was done by Africans and not by expatriate missionaries. It would be interesting to know whether there has been any other case in modern Church history where, in a major language, nationals have carried the main burden of Bible translation. Four Germans, members of the Church Missionary Society, gave skilled help over long periods—Schön, Gollmer, Hinderer and Mann. But they were mainly concerned with editing, revision and proof-reading. The heaviest burden fell upon Crowther himself. Even when he was transferred to a different area and was later made a bishop, he continued to help, and, what was even more important, inspired other Yoruba church leaders to carry on what he had begun. Of these Yorubas, the Church today honours especially the names of Thomas King, James White, William Morgan, Samuel Pearce, D. O. Williams, T. B. Macaulay, and Nathaniel Johnson.

So, thanks to the faith and ability of Crowther and to the persistence and skill of his helpers, both African and German, a Yoruba Christian of 1884 could carry with him the whole Bible in his own language. To be accurate, he could only just carry it, since at that time it was in four volumes, one of them very large! It was not one book until 1900.

Emphasis on Revision

There was a third feature of the period under review, namely the insistence of Church leaders that regular revision should take place. Major revisions of all existing translation, or considerable parts, were carried out no less than eight times between 1850 and 1900. Then between 1915 and 1932 the New Testament was revised by a committee consisting of ten Yorubas (of whom eight were graduates) and one European.

An attempt should perhaps be made to discover what lay behind this emphasis on revision. There seem to have been four chief reasons.

First, many words and phrases in the early versions were in the Egba dialect, and this was natural since that was Crowther's own dialect. Over the years a form of Yoruba which was more acceptable in all parts of the country was gradually substituted. It is possible that this process of removing dialectal usages has even now not been completed.

Secondly, in the early days the choice, construction and spelling of Yoruba words to translate theological terms like 'grace' and 'hypocrisy' were in a sense experimental. Subsequent revision must always have been intended.

Thirdly, the Yoruba language itself was developing and changing.

Lastly, the English Revised Version appeared in 1881, its object being to amend the Authorized Version on which Crowther and his fellow-workers had very largely based the Yoruba Bible.

Of the above reasons for revision, the last two are still valid: the language still undergoes changes, and fresh translations and discoveries as to the meaning of Biblical language continue to be made available to revisers. It is therefore natural that since 1932 there has been a desire for further work to be done. The rest of this article concerns the two most recent of such projects,

(1) the 'corrected version' of 1964 prepared by the present writer under the guidance of a committee chaired by Bishop Seth Kale, and (2) the proposed new translation to be undertaken by another group.

The 1964 Version

This is not a new translation. Its aim has been limited to corrections of the following kind:

(1) Errors of punctuation, and misprints. Some of these did not appear in the earlier versions and have crept in since.

(2) Omission of verses and phrases.

(3) Old-fashioned words, and words which have recently changed their meanings.

(4) Variations in the spelling of the same word, or in the translation of the same basic word. These variations were natural since different men were at first assigned different books, and worked independently. The translator of Ezekiel was a notable individualist.

(5) Mistranslations. One interesting and puzzling group of mistranslations is the frequent rendering of 'impossible' by the word *şoro* ('difficult'), and 'necessary' by the word *ye* ('fitting').

(6) Very literal adherence to the A.V. Throughout the whole period under discussion the authority of the A.V. (and familiarity with it) was very great. This was true even after the R.V. had appeared, and even though many translators and revisers also used the Hebrew or Greek texts. Two instances of this must suffice, the first concerning paragraphing. The nineteenth-century editions of the A.V. contained no paragraphs after Acts 20, and the Yoruba Bible unfortunately followed this exactly, thus adding to the already formidable difficulty of the Epistles.

The second instance is the close following of the A.V. order of words. To give one example, the A.V. of 1 Sam. 18: 4 reads, 'Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword'. This order has been followed exactly and the words have been literally translated (including the phrase 'even to'), so that the result is not genuine Yoruba.

The Proposed New Translation

This new version will not be another revision, but, as the title suggests, a completely new translation, using all the aids which are now available. The magnitude of Crowther's work can only be fully assessed when we remember how few aids there were at that time, even for a scholar who, like Crowther, had studied Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Sanskrit!

Any really close study of the present Yoruba Bible by anyone competent to judge leads inevitably to the conclusion that a new translation is needed, and for two reasons in particular. One concerns vocabulary, the other style.

Vocabulary

Certain of the standard terms used throughout the Bible need to be reconsidered. If representatives of *all* Christian bodies could work together

on this, both in the cause of unity among Christians and also because all would have positive contributions to make in so difficult an undertaking, so much the better. The following are examples of words whose standard translation seems to present problems today:

Devil. This is translated by *esu* throughout. *Esu* is thought of as bringing evil, but also as giving protection. The birth of a child may be attributed to him, as the names given to some babies show, *Eṣubiyi* (*Esu* brought this forth), and *Eṣutoyin* (*Esu* is worthy of praise). The difficulty of using this name for 'The Devil' is obvious, for the Devil represents the totally evil force. Three possible alternatives have been suggested, *Eni bilisi* (the 'evil one'), as in 1 John 2: 14), *Eni buburu* (as in Eph. 6: 16), and *Satani* (as in Acts 26: 18).

Sabbath. This is always translated by *ojo-isimi* (literally the 'day of rest'). Confusion arises because *ojo-isimi* is now the normal word for 'Sunday', and there is special confusion, as may be imagined, in any conversation between a Seventh Day Adventist and others. Having the same word for 'Sabbath' and 'Sunday' entirely obscures the fact that the Christian Sunday is a festival of the New Age, a celebration of the Resurrection and not identical with the Jewish Sabbath. It is not practicable to suggest that a new word be used for 'Sunday', such as the Biblical and Quaker 'First Day', but a new translation of 'Sabbath' is possible. Since Yoruba already employs transliterations like *baptismu*, *serafu*, *sinagogu*, the suggestion of *Sabbatu* might be considered.

Paraclete (A.V. 'Comforter'), as in John 14: 26. Faithfulness to the A.V. led the translators to use *Olutunu* (literally 'the One who gives comfort and consolation'). But the word is so much richer than that suggests, as the following translations show: R.V. Margin, 'Advocate or Helper'; R.S.V., 'Counsellor'; Prof. N. H. Snaith, 'Convincer'. One of these suggestions may point the way to an adequate word: *Atinilehin* ('the One standing by'), *Oludamoran* ('the Adviser'), *Adaniloju* ('the One who makes us sure'), *Afunnilokun* ('the Strengthened').

Prophet and prophesy. Yoruba uses an Arabic-Hausa word for prophet, *woli*, and it seems a good word for the many-sided activities of a Hebrew prophet, e.g. as an ecstatic hermit, a visionary, a moral preacher, and a predictor of future events. But the verb 'prophesy' is translated in Yoruba by *soṭeṭe* ('predict') which confines the meaning and is inappropriate in passages like Mark 6: 4, John 4: 19, 1 Cor. 14. It may of course be that *soṭeṭe* has been used by Christians for so long that it has now drawn to itself the whole range of meaning in 'prophesy' for all readers, but this is improbable.

Principalities and powers (A.V.), Greek: *archai* and *exousiai*, i.e. cosmic spiritual forces of evil, against which a Christian fights, as in Eph. 6: 12. The traditional Yoruba of Eph. 6: 12 uses the words *ijoye* (the ordinary word for a village chief) and *olola* ('honourable people'). The 1964 version has made a temporary revision of this, but a new and adequate rendering of such important words is just what one hopes for from a completely new translation.

The Yoruba verb fé. This is used to translate at least 12 distinct Greek verbs: *mello*, as in Acts 16: 27, 'intend'; *epithumeo*, as in Heb. 6: 11, 'long for'; *chreian echo*, as in Heb. 5: 12, 'need'; *noseo*, as in 1 Tim. 6: 4, 'be morbidly keen'; *agapao*, as in 1 John 4: 7, 'love'; *phileo*, as in John 11: 3, 'be a friend of'; *thelo*, as in John 5: 6, 'want'; *boulomai*, as in John 18: 39, 'would like'; *mnesteuo*, as in Luke 1: 27, 'be betrothed to'; *pascho*, as in Gal. 5: 24, 'have passions'; *gunaika echo*, as in 1 Cor. 5: 1, 'take the wife' (of another man); *orego*, as in 1 Tim. 3: 1, 'reach after'. It is not suggested of course that each Greek word should be translated by a different Yoruba word, only that an opportunity should be taken to see whether a variety of Yoruba words could be used to indicate the differences in meaning.

The above are a few examples of the kind of vocabulary work that a new translation is likely to involve.

Style

A second area of work will probably be the use of a style which is felt by this generation to be genuine Yoruba rather than 'Bible Yoruba'. It is true that the cleavage between the Yoruba of the Bible and that of ordinary conversation is not as great as the cleavage between 'classical' and 'colloquial' in a Semitic language. This is partly because the Yoruba Bible played a big part in the development of the whole language. But factors such as the tendency to keep very closely to the A.V. have produced what some refer to as a 'Bible style'. The danger of this is simply that the lay and younger reader may feel, 'This is not *ours*: it is not for us'. One example of this is the treatment of 'And behold . . .' which begins so many verses in Old Testament narrative in the A.V. It is translated literally by *Si kiyesi i*. Even a young reader knows well what the words mean, but it is not a phrase which one would use today, for instance, in writing a story for radio.

Too great faithfulness to the A.V. has also led to many phrases, especially those genitives in the Epistles, being very obscure. Eph. 1: 18 (A.V.), for example, has, 'Know what is the hope of his calling', and the Yoruba translates this word for word. A new translation, guided by such versions as the N.E.B. (which gives, 'Know what is the hope *to which he calls you*'), could make the words live for everyone. It is in the Epistles that the N.E.B.—and J. B. Phillips—would be especially helpful models in the task of putting Greek into Yoruba.

In view of the particular difficulty of the Epistles in Yoruba, the new band of translators might earn the gratitude of many if they were to begin work by producing a new version of a short Epistle. It may be recalled that J. B. Phillips started his great work by circulating privately a translation of Colossians.

A Tribute

Whether or not the new translation proceeds along such lines as are sketched out above, its initiation will be a great event. It will on the one hand be a sign that the Church of today is not content to be known chiefly for those past heroes of whom this article has spoken. It is a Yoruba proverb which says, *A ki ike ago fun eḷeṣin ana*, 'Nobody shouts "Make way" for

someone who was riding a horse yesterday!' Yet it will be a remembering: for the faith and persistence it will need are just the qualities for which the remarkable Crowther is honoured. 1964 was the centenary of his consecration as the first African bishop of modern times. What finer way of honouring his memory could there be than to undertake the task of the revision of his great translation?

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THE MEANINGS OF A WORD

This article deals with the major problem of the translator and, by way of examples, with two particular words, the English word 'peculiar' and the Hebrew word *chesed*.

The nineteen-sixties will surely be called the Age of Translations. Many Bibles in many languages are being translated, and soon we shall have a whole long shelf of English versions. We know more about many languages than we did, and the study yearly grows more intensive and expert. As much as possible is being done to inform translators all the world over: there is this journal, for instance, the *Greek-English Diglot* sponsored by the British and Foreign Bible Society, the *Bible in Basic English*, of which a new edition with illustrations has just been printed. About the New Testament there is not much to be said here except this: to translate it without five eyes is asking for trouble. Apart from two eyes on the papers in front of him, the translator must keep an eye on the Septuagint and its equivalents for Hebrew words, another eye on Near-Eastern customs, and a third eye on Rabbinic tradition. Who, for instance, ever heard of anybody in Palestine in those times 'driving a straight furrow'? There is good Rabbinic warrant for recognizing 'rightly dividing' (2 Tim. 2: 15) as 'interpreting'. And again, with all apologies to great scholars of the past, does it really make sense to speak of 'New Testament Greek Grammar'? My answer is: Yes, so far as grammatical forms are concerned, No, so far as syntax is concerned. In the Mediterranean Greek of the first century A.D., every national would tend to speak with the idiom of his own first language. It is easy enough to detect which of the New Testament writers had Greek as his first language.

But behind all these problems is the greatest of them all: the actual meanings of a word. No word in any language, except an *ersatz* one such as Esperanto, has always the same meaning. This is true of Hebrew as of English.

Take, for example, the English word 'peculiar'. It can mean 'specially appreciated' (the after-dinner speaker who says, 'This is my peculiar privilege'), 'individual', 'queer' and even 'slightly mad'. How can one word come to mean so many things? The explanation lies in its etymological history, both in its origin and its development, and in the most important fact that much of the older meaning still survives alongside the developed meaning. You have to be prepared all the time for survivals of earlier meanings.