

IS YOUR BIBLE DISFIGURED? TRANSLITERATING BIBLICAL NAMES

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Just as white Europeans brought the plague of smallpox to millions of people in the third world, so European missionaries brought another disease to Africa. However unlike smallpox, which leaves ugly scars on the skin of those people who survive it, this other disease leaves ugly blemishes on the pages of the Bible.

And what is this other disease I am referring to? Well, I mean the non-African sounds and sound combinations that have been introduced into African Bibles in the process of transliterating Biblical names. You can pick up almost any of the existing Bibles in the Bantu languages of my area and find its pages pockmarked with ugly foreign sounds and sound patterns. In fact the more idiomatic and the more natural the language of the translation, the more these non-vernacular spellings of names stand out as disfiguring blemishes that spoil the beauty of the Word of God in the African language.

Another important fact about this disease is that it has so many varieties. Some of the varieties seem to have arisen from the differences in the languages of origin of the first missionaries, while others seem to be linked to the particular church groups from which the missionaries came. An example of the variety of transliterations that can occur is seen in the name Cyrus. German missionaries to East Africa transliterated the name into Kiswahili as *Kiro* from German *Cyrus*; the Portuguese missionaries to Mozambique rendered it as Kirese in Chivenda after Portuguese *Ciro*; the Afrikaans missionaries from South Africa to Malawi and Eastern Zambia introduced it as *Koresi* into Chichewa; while the English and Scottish missionaries to Zambia, Malawi and Rhodesia rendered it as *Koreshe* into Chibemba, *Koreshi* into Chishona, *Syrus* into Chitumbuka after English *Cyrus*, and American missionaries rendered it *Sailosi* in Chitonga.

As we have already suggested, there are even denominational variations in spelling. For example, in Chichewa the Protestants introduced the transliteration *Koresi* while the Roman Catholics following the Latin used *Kirusi*.

Lest somebody feel that this paper contains the ideas of a racist, let me hasten to add that even if white missionaries had not brought this disease to Africa, Africans themselves probably would have introduced it. For example: African Independent churches without any overseas missionary connections are widely using *profeta*, *porofita* and *profita* to label their prophets.

The difficulties

There seem to be three main reasons for the problems in transliteration in the past:

- There were sound differences between African languages and the languages of the missionaries (and of course also with the original languages of Greek and Hebrew as well).
- The names were spoken orally long before a writing system was developed, and the early pronunciation of the missionaries became the basis for the Africans' pronunciation and later writing.

- The pronunciations of many names were fixed long before a regular system of adjusting sound between the two languages was developed.

As we seek to develop good systems for transliteration today, we have to recognize that there are variations between the sound systems of African languages and the Biblical languages, and we need to work out rules for making adjustments in spelling which allow for these variations. The variations between African languages and the Biblical languages are of the following kinds:

- (a) The original languages have certain sounds which are not found in African languages, for example the th, ph, ch, ts sounds in Greek, and various consonant sounds in Hebrew.
- (b) Biblical languages use sound combinations that are unknown in many African languages. African languages do have consonant clusters like mb, nk, pw, tw, ty, mw; but they do not use combinations like br, pl, sk, st, tr, skr, and others. Likewise with the vowels, African languages do have combinations of vowels like ao, ea, ia, ai; but they do not have combinations with “glided” vowels (oa, aia, uia, iai, and others) and must generally insert a w or y sound to reproduce these combinations.
- (c) Biblical languages can have closed syllables, that is syllables that end with a consonant. African languages in my area usually require a final vowel. For example English Elim must become *Elimu*, and Ephrath must become *Efrate* or *Efurate*.

Steps to take

There are a number of steps that can be taken to produce a good and consistent system for spelling proper names, and to avoid the disease which has raged in the past.

1. We should study the sounds and sound patterns of the original languages, and see where they differ from those of our own languages.
2. We can then work out a set of simple adjustments that we can make wherever there are problems with the sound of names. These will indicate which sounds should be substituted for unknown sounds in the Biblical languages. And they will give us the adjustments that can be made for different sound patterns. (For instance adding a final vowel where this is required, and introducing extra vowels where this is necessary to break up difficult consonant clusters.)
3. We should follow our rules for adjustment consistently. However, where the rules would produce names which have other unacceptable meanings, we may adjust them to a slightly different form. (For instance the name *Nowa*, “Noah”, is a word which means to have sexual intercourse in one language I know, and so it has been adjusted to *Nowe*. In most languages of my area *Loto*, “Lot”, means “dream”, and so this is adjusted to *Loti*.)
4. There are some pairs of names which only differ slightly in the original languages (for examples *Eliezar* and *Eliezer*). This should be noted and separate forms should be developed wherever possible.

Many of the modern popular language translations are making the adjustments necessary to make Biblical names fit the sound patterns of African languages. In the table that follows some of the better kind of adjustments made in some of these translations are given.

<i>English</i>	<i>Chishona</i>	<i>Chitonga</i>	<i>Chichewa</i>
Ephraim	Efraimi	Efulemu	Efraimu
Ephrath	Efrati	Efulata/i	Efrati
Joshua	Joshua	Josyuwa	Yoswa
Beer-sheba	Beeri-sheba	Bdiiyasyaba	Beereseba
Abel	Aberi	Abela	Abele
Aiah	Aja	Aya	Aia
Abigail	Abigairi	Abbigelo	Abigaiyeli
Abinoam	Abinoami	Abinoyamu	Abinoamu
Aharhel	Ahareri	Ahaheli	Ahareli
Aiath	Aiati	Ayati	Aiati
Conaniah	Konania	Konaniya	Konaniya
Abiezer	Abiezeri	Abiezeza	Abiezero
Cyrene	Kurini	Sailini	Kurene
Deuel	Deueri	Dyuweli	Deyueli
Gershom	Gereshomi	Gesyomu	Gerisomu
Hymenaeus	Himenio	Haimenyusi	Humenayo
Jahzeel	Jazeeri	Jazela	Yazeli
Joiada	Joyada	Johoiada	Yoyada
Zeruiah	Zeruya	Zeluliya	Zeruya

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PUNCTUATION

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When we write something in any language, we have certain rules for writing or spelling the words of the language. When we want to put these words together in sentences, we will usually have to put other marks on the page as well, to help the reader know how the words fit together. These other marks, which include things like commas and periods (or full stops), are what we mean by punctuation. In order to write correctly, we need to know the rules for writing words (this is called the spelling system, or the orthography) and we also need to know the rules for punctuation.

Since parts of the Bible are among the first books printed in many languages, the people who do the Bible translation may have to work out the spelling system for the language. While they are working this out, it is important for them to also think about what punctuation should be used in the language. This article is intended to help people to make decisions about punctuation. The comments made here are intended for languages which use the kinds of letters used by English, French, Spanish, and many other languages (often called Roman letters). These comments may also be useful for people working with other alphabets, but nothing more will be said about them.