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BIBLE TRANSLATION IN TODAY'S WORLD

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A glance at the history of Bible translation in the world is indeed awe-inspiring, for by the end of 1964 the Scriptures had been translated at least in part in 1,232 languages, with 236 languages having entire Bibles and 289 more having New Testaments. However, the dynamic of the increase in translation during the centuries is perhaps even more significant. By the time of the invention of printing, some five hundred years ago, the Scriptures existed in only thirty-three languages in the world. Even at the time of the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, Scriptures existed in only seventy-two languages; but during the nineteenth century, the so-called 'missionary century', more than four hundred other languages received something of the Scriptures, and within the first half of the twentieth century more than five hundred languages had received some part of the Word of God. This growth in the number of new languages receiving the Scriptures is one of almost geometric proportion. At the present time there are translators working in at least two hundred languages in which nothing of the Bible has been printed.

The total number of languages which have received something of the Bible is not, however, as significant as the percentage of the world's population for which such Scriptures have been translated; for some part of the Bible exists in the languages of at least ninety-seven per cent of the world's population. This does not mean that the other three per cent do not deserve the Word of God, but these tribes which are as yet unreached represent a relatively small proportion of the total world population.

The difficulties of reaching this constituency are, of course, enormous, for there are at least a thousand different languages within this three per cent; and if one counts all the differences of dialect as well as some of the very small groups (including many which have less than one hundred speakers) it is quite possible to add another thousand languages.

Another significant way of viewing the development of Bible translation in today's world is to note the volume of work, particularly in connection with whole Bibles. At the present time projects for the revision or completion of the Bible involve more than one hundred languages. In most instances these represent the more important languages in the world, and in fact include fully eighty per cent of the world's population.

The Bible Societies are now engaged in a very careful analysis of the total work of translation and revision throughout the world, and it is hoped that within four months we may have a detailed picture of the present programme

of Bible translation and revision, as well as some more comprehensive and satisfactory analyses of what remains to be done. These data will be made available through the United Bible Societies.

Reasons for Revision

One of the most obvious reasons for revision of the Scriptures is the fact that languages are constantly changing. In fact, it is the general policy of the Bible Societies to undertake a revision of any new Bible within twenty years, and no Scripture is regarded as fully effective for more than fifty years, so rapid is the change which takes place in languages. This is particularly true in some of the newly developing areas of the world where the impact of social, political, economic and technological change has increased the rate of language development to an incredible degree, thus giving rise to insistent demands that the Scriptures be brought 'up-to-date' in terms of language usage.

Another important factor in prompting the revision of the Scriptures is a new concept of communication, for translation is not stringing words together. If a translation does not communicate the intended message, then it is not a translation but merely a conglomeration of verbal symbols. This does not mean any less concern for fidelity, but this fidelity is interpreted as it should be, in terms of faithfulness to the meaning of the message, not merely to its verbal form. Therefore, in a passage such as Rom. 1:17, it is not sufficient to translate literally 'the righteousness of God' when fully ninety-nine per cent of readers misinterpret this as being God's own personal quality of righteousness. In Paul's distinctive use of this phrase, it is certainly what God does in justifying people, or, as it may be translated, 'putting men into a right relationship with Himself'. It is what God does and not what He is which is clearly indicated in this passage. Accordingly, modern translators feel a compulsion to translate the meaning of a passage, not merely to reflect the grammatical or verbal structure of the original writings.

The third important reason for revision is the significance of new manuscript discoveries. The findings of Qumran have been a tremendous stimulus to Biblical research, but almost equally significant have been the discoveries of second-century papyri. For example, the Bodmer papyrus of the first fourteen chapters of John sheds so much light upon earlier problems. In John 7:52, for instance, traditional translations have been obviously faulty, for 'no prophet comes from Galilee' could scarcely be the meaning of this passage. In this recent Bodmer papyrus, however, there is one additional letter, namely *omicron*, the definite article, and this, of course, radically changes the meaning of the expression. The definite article makes the passage mean 'the prophet does not come from Galilee', and this, of course, is in line with prophetic interpretation.

New exegetical insights are also significant for revisers of the Scripture. In a passage such as Rom. 8:28, a rendering such as 'all things work together for good to those who love God' has generally been rejected in preference for a rendering such as 'in all things the Spirit works together for good with those who love God'. The suggestion for this interpretation is implied

in certain manuscripts which have *theos* (God) as the subject of the verb, but the preferred manuscripts are even more satisfactorily interpreted as having 'Spirit' as the subject of the verb, for this is the logical subject supplied by the context, in which the activity of the Spirit of God is clearly indicated.

In the case of certain more subtle details, exegetical insight has also helped to clarify the meanings of many expressions. For example, 'the baptism of repentance' (Mark 1:4) may in many languages be rendered more accurately as 'to repent and be baptized', for the verbal transform of this Greek nominal expression is 'repent and be baptized'. Similarly 'the obedience of faith' (Rom. 1:5) is not 'obedience to the faith' (as a body of doctrine) but 'faith and obedience' or, in its verbal form, 'to believe and obey'. Likewise, exegetes have convincingly shown that in Rom. 1:17 it is not adequate to translate 'the just shall live by faith'. Rather, a preferred rendering would be, 'he who through faith is just shall live', for the theme of Romans, as well as of Galatians, is justification by faith, not living by faith.

Perhaps an even more significant factor in present-day translation is a recognition of quite a new concept of dialects. The Bible Societies in the past have given great attention to various geographical dialects, for they recognized the problems involved in different forms of language. With urbanization, however, and the general stratification of society, there have grown up socio-economic dialects which represent various levels of speech. As a result, it is no longer possible for us to think merely in terms of 'one nation, one language, one Bible', but people must be reached on various socio-economic levels with a form of language which will speak to them with greatest effectiveness. It is for this reason that in several important languages the Bible Societies are preparing the Scriptures on three levels: (1) a traditional translation or revision which often meets the needs of the typically middle-class Protestant constituency; (2) a translation designed particularly for a more highly educated constituency; (3) a translation in a simple, straightforward form of language which will speak with effectiveness to the masses. The message is, of course, the same, but the linguistic form of the presentation is designed to make it as meaningful as possible to the recipients.

New Factors in Bible Translation

Probably one of the most significant new factors in the urgency for Bible translation and revision is the development of mass literacy in our present world, since for the first time in history there are millions upon millions of people who are able to read and write. Only in the ancient Greek and Roman world was there anything even comparable to this type of development in literacy. In the ancient Mediterranean area, literacy was relatively widespread for it was demanded by the needs of government and commerce; but for most of the history of the world literacy and literature have been the distinctive features of a small élite, who as government officials, priests, men of learning or the rich, have had both the opportunity and the need for such 'esoteric learning'. However, in our present world the technological

demands of civilization make it necessary for common people to be able to read instructions. Moreover, political forces find it both necessary and advantageous to promote literacy in order to guarantee greater control and a more loyal response. Such an increase in literacy has inevitably accentuated the struggle for the minds of men, and it has heightened the importance of the printed page. For this reason more effective translations and more widespread distribution of the Work of God has become an imperative for the Church.

In today's world the national translator, that is to say, the man who is translating the Scriptures into his own mother tongue, is increasingly more important in the total task of preparing adequate forms of the Scriptures. The history of Bible translation can be roughly summarized in terms of four major periods: (1) the developments in the early Church; (2) transformations springing from the Reformation; (3) numerous translations of the missionary period; and (4) the new epoch of translation, in which earlier missionary translations are being supplanted by those done by well-qualified nationals.

It is estimated that twenty-five years ago probably seventy-five per cent of translation work was either directed by or done principally by missionaries. In fact, it is interesting to note that the outstanding Chinese translation of the Bible called the Union Version and known as *Kuoyü* was directed entirely by missionaries, and even the names of several of the Chinese associates are not known. This situation, of course, has been radically changed in almost all parts of the world, so that at the present time at least fifty per cent of Bible translation is being done by nationals, and this, of course, includes the vast majority of principal translations done in major languages. Within twenty-five years, we can quite safely estimate that at least eighty per cent of translations will be done by nationals.

One must not presume that such a change in translation procedure is an immediate and evident condemnation of missionary work in the field of translation. In actual fact some missionaries produced outstanding translations, but it is evident that any well-qualified translator who is rendering a text into his mother tongue can do a much more satisfactory job than one who is required to translate something into a foreign language. It is, of course, possible for anyone to master the syntactic or grammatical structure of a foreign language within a few years, but it takes almost a lifetime to master the subtle lexical structure of a language and to become fully familiar with the idiomatic qualities of speech. It is for this reason that churches are increasingly turning to national translators to prepare for them those texts which will speak most effectively to the hearts and minds of the believers.

Another significant factor in translation work is the greatly increased interest of missions in the task of Bible translating. This is particularly true for many small neglected languages, and in this area such missions as the Wycliffe Bible Translators, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the New Tribes Mission, and the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade have all become very much involved. The Wycliffe Bible Translators are at present working in some three hundred different languages, being widely known in the field as the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This organization is not only carrying on translation work in

many remote areas of the world, especially with smaller tribes, but has likewise stimulated interest in translation and particularly the linguistic phases of such work among missionaries and missions.

At the same time, many missions representing more established work have become concerned for literature and literacy, and hence are assigning more and more personnel and funds to various phases of translation and revision, and the preparation of Christian literature.

The rapid development of national Bible Societies in various parts of the world, for example, in Indonesia, the Philippines, Mexico, Nigeria and Ghana, has likewise greatly stimulated concern for more effective translations and revisions of the Scripture. In several instances people in newly developing countries have felt justifiably critical of what has been regarded as former neglect, and it is understandable that such Societies should rightly insist on more attention being paid to their legitimate demands for better translations and revisions of the Bible.

The Response of the Bible Societies

Faced with the tremendous developments in the field of translation and the new factors emerging in this important phase of Bible Society work, those Bible Societies which have had major responsibilities for the translational phase of the programme are trying to meet the challenge of the situation on two levels. First, all translation work has been placed on a joint or co-operative basis. That is to say, there is joint planning and budgeting of translation work throughout the world. Certain divisions of responsibility have been made for what may be called 'editorial supervision', but old-fashioned territorial divisions have been eliminated, and increasingly the Bible Societies are trying to make available to translators everywhere the best type of advice from those most qualified by experience and training to help in the complex problems of communication. Increasingly, of course, this assistance in translation is being channelled through the Translations Committee of the United Bible Societies.

The second phase of Bible Society response to the need for assistance in translation is the series of helps which are provided to translators in the field. Perhaps the most strategically important help at the present time is the training programme, including institutes, seminars, conferences, consultations, in which those experienced in the problems of translation and revision meet with translators in the field to discuss various problems and the most effective solutions to the difficulties. In addition to such conferences there are fourteen translation consultants, who are generally located in strategic areas throughout the world so as to give on-the-spot help on a wide range of translation and revision problems, from difficulties of setting up an alphabet in a so-called primitive language, to complications in organizing a committee for the revision of the Old Testament.

Another phase of Bible Society help consists in the training of national translators, not only through special institutes and seminars, but through scholarship programmes designed to prepare translators to do a more effective piece of work in their own languages.

In addition there is a programme for the training of translation consultants, both foreign and nationals, who are given special preparation in the field of linguistic and Biblical studies so that they may not only, as in some instances, translate the Scriptures into their mother tongue, but also be available to help others in the technical phases of this work.

A very important aspect of Bible Society help consists in publishing (*a*) background materials in the field of linguistics and anthropology; (*b*) translators' handbooks on various books of the Bible; (*c*) books and articles on the theory and practice of Bible translation and the science of communication; (*d*) tools prepared for the use of translators, for example, a new text of the Greek New Testament; and (*e*) materials for adaptation by translators, for example, section headings, reference systems, concordance models, tables of weights and measures, maps and illustrations. All of these helps are made available free to translators throughout the world.

At the present time a programme of publications, which will take at least twenty years to complete, is now in progress, including seven strategically necessary books, of which one is a complete dictionary of New Testament vocabulary, presenting not only clear analyses of the meaning of the Greek words, but comprehensive treatments of the particular problems involved in finding equivalents in other languages.

Despite the rapidly developing programme of helps for translators and the enlarged field assistance, the demands from the field are increasing at such a rate that the resources of the Bible Societies, in terms of both personnel and finance, are rapidly being outstripped.