

Jihova. The readers of all these Naga Bibles understand *Kibuba*, *Opvui*, and *Niepu* as the extended meaning of their *Tsungrem*, *Potsow*, and *Ukepenopfu* respectively. To these readers the combination of the term for their deity and its extension gets little attention without the proper name.

There are Old Testament translation projects among other Naga tribes where the praise names “Almighty”, “Creator”, and “Everlasting” are used as substitutes for *YHWH* “LORD”, but the problem of the proper name comes back to these projects too, because of the long use of the name *Jihova* as the proper name for God in the churches.

In order to handle this difficulty, it may be necessary to transliterate *YHWH* as *Yehowa* or *Jihova* in certain passages:

- (1) where the meaning of the name *YHWH* is explained, (such as Exo 3.14-16)
- (2) where there is a reference to what God’s name actually is (Exo 15.3; 33.19; 34.5-6; 39.30; Deut 28.58; Psa 68.4; Isa 42.8; Jer 16.21; 33.2; Amos 9.5-6)
- (3) where *YHWH* “LORD” is distinguished from other names of God (Exo 6.3).

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WHAT IS HIS NAME? Translation of divine names in some major North Indian languages

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The major North Indian languages, all being derived from Sanskrit, share many common linguistic features and vocabulary. Almost all these languages use common religious terms to mean the same thing. This is helpful in Bible translation because one language can borrow terms which have been used in the Bible in another language. However care must be taken in using such borrowings, because the same term may have different shades of meaning in different languages.

In this article I will limit myself to four languages: Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and Nepali. I include Nepali in North Indian languages because it is as much related to Sanskrit as the other three languages, and there are about three million Nepali speakers in North India. I have selected these four languages because the Bibles in them are immediately available to me.

The translation of “God” (*El*, *Elohim*)

There are three terms which can translate this divine name of the Bible. They are *Deva*, *Bhagwan*, and *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar*. All these names are Sanskrit terms and can be found in the Hindu scriptures. They are usually used as the titles of deities. *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* is sometimes used as a personal name as well.

In the Hindu pantheon there are hundreds of gods and goddesses, and each divine being has his or her personal name; for example, “Ram”,

“Krishna”, “Indra”, “Lakshmi”, “Savitri”, and so on. Hindus use *Bhagwan* while referring to Ram and Krishna: *Bhagwan Ram*, *Bhagwan Krishna*. Perhaps because of this close association of the term *Bhagwan* with Ram and Krishna, none of the Bible translators in any of the four languages I am considering has translated the word “God” by this term. Moreover *Bhagwan* has sexual overtones. Besides these four languages, no other North Indian language uses *Bhagwan* in the Bible. Even in hymns and prayers, this term is strictly forbidden.

Deva (*deus* in Latin, *theos* in Greek) is another term for a divine being. But this is not a personal name: it is a term to refer to any divine being, of which there are plenty in the Hindu pantheon. The term means “respectable or glorious being”, so it has a positive sense. In South Indian languages, which have borrowed many Sanskrit words, this term is used by Christians in prayers and hymns. However in North India Christians never use *Deva* to refer to the God of the Bible. Somehow *Deva* has acquired a negative meaning and is opposed to the God of the Christians (or of the Bible). Hindus use the term in a collective sense to mean all the gods; for example, *dev-gan* or *dev-devi* (*devi* is the feminine form of *dev*). They also use it for household gods such as *Istadeva*.

In Bible translation all the four languages use the term *deva* to translate “god” or “gods”, but they never use it for the God of Israel and of the Bible (Exo 15.11; Isa 44.17).

The last candidate for the divine name in North Indian languages is *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* (meaning “Supreme Ishwar”). This is a term used widely in Hindu scriptures in different senses. It is mainly used as a title, usually associated with the Hindu god “Siva”. But there are passages in some scriptures where *Ishwar* is used as a name of a personal god who is the maker or master of the universe (see for instance *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 6.7).

In Advaita philosophy (monism), Brahma is the absolute soul, pure being and thought, without qualities. But in the world where things happen there is a lower (relative) Brahman with qualities who is called *Ishwar*. It is this relative Brahman or *Ishwar* who creates the illusory world of phenomena. In popular belief *Ishwar* is regarded as a personal god who made the world, who punishes the evil and rewards the virtuous. And even though *Ishwar* as a title is closely associated with Siva the Destroyer in the Hindu trinity, it is often used to refer to a benevolent divine being whose characteristics came “sufficiently close to those which characterize the biblical God” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). Moreover Hindus who were asked to give the equivalent of “God” in Hindi and Nepali all agreed that *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* is the right equivalent.

All the four languages translate “God” (*El*, *Elohim*) by *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar*. Assamese and Bengali prefer *Ishwar*, Hindi and Nepali have *Param-Ishwar*. My guess is that other North Indian languages translate the divine name by the same two terms; however I still have to verify this. In my opinion *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* is an acceptable

rendering for God, even though there may be a possibility that some Hindus reading the Bible might associate the God of the Bible with Siva or Brahma the creator of the illusory world. The majority of North Indians, however, regard *Ishwar* as the name of a benevolent supreme divine being who is the creator of the universe.

The “tetragrammaton” *YHWH*

The earlier versions of the Bible in Assamese, Hindi, and Nepali have varying forms of transliteration of the name *YHWH*. Assamese has *Jihowa* whereas the Hindi transcription is *Yahowa*. Nepali has two forms: the earliest version is *Yahowa*; but when the Psalms were revised in the early sixties, the revisers modified the earlier form to *Yahwe*.

I do not have the earlier editions of the Bengali Bible. The 1960 edition translates *YHWH* as *Sadaprabhu* “Eternal Lord”. This is very interesting, because while the other languages were still using the transliterated forms of *YHWH*, Bengali decided to use a different strategy to render this name. It appears that only in the late sixties was transliteration of *YHWH* gradually abandoned in the other three languages. The Assamese Bible (old version) printed in 1980 still continues with the transliteration of *YHWH*, but the Hindi and Nepali revised editions have translated *YHWH* by *Prabhu* and *Paramprabhu* respectively.

The main stem in this translation is *Prabhu*. Hindi uses this without any modification. The Catholic translation of the Bible published in 1965 also uses *Prabhu*. Bengali, in its edition of 1960 and all later editions, adds a prefix to the main stem to give *Sadaprabhu* meaning “Eternal Lord”. The Nepali Bible, in the revised edition of 1978, uses *Param* as the prefix so as to get *Paramprabhu* meaning “Supreme Lord”. Both Bengali and Nepali have adopted a similar strategy to enhance the significance of the meaning of the English rendering of “the LORD”. In the writing of Indian languages there is no capitalization of letters, so adding a prefix is an alternative device to bring into focus the importance or significance of a term or title.

Prabhu means simply “Lord”. It was a term of respect when an ordinary person spoke to his master, to high officials, or to kings. The practice of using this title to address a person of high status is gradually dying out; however in the villages *prabhu* is still used as a term of respect. *Prabhu* is also used as a descriptive title to refer to a deity, but never as a name. In any case there is a growing tendency nowadays to use this title only for a deity: so *Prabhu* can be an appropriate rendering of the name *YHWH* in North Indian languages. However as there are still areas where *prabhu* is used as a term of respect to address a person of high status, I am of the view that in order to bring out the significance of the title in Bible translation some kind of marker like the prefix in Bengali and Nepali is necessary, which can then be used only in the case of the name *YHWH*.

Not all Christians are happy with this solution however. There was a reaction when *Yahwe* was replaced by *Paramprabhu* in the Nepali Bible. And there are some groups of Hindi-speaking Christians who are not pleased with the revised Hindi rendering of *YHWH*. There are two reasons

for this. The first reason is an emotional one: the readers have been so used to reading and hearing the transliteration that they have come to attach some kind of sacred significance to it. They have become so emotionally attached to it that no amount of argument can make them change their minds.

The second reason for the demand has to do with the relationship between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours, and is particularly valid in the context of India. As some Nepali Christians told me, they are often asked by Hindus for the name of the Christian God. The Hindus claim that all Hindu gods and goddesses have a personal name such as Ram, Krishna, Brahma, Bisnu, Savitri; and when they know the names of gods and goddesses they can relate themselves to the deities. The Christians cannot tell the Hindus that the name of the Christian God is *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* because the name is borrowed from Hindu religion. Moreover *Ishwar* or *Param-Ishwar* is used to translate "God" (*El, Elohim*), and the translation of the name *YHWH, Prabhu* or *Paramprabhu* is not a personal name but a title. The Hindus are not interested in the title of God; they want to know the personal name of God, and unless they know the name they cannot relate themselves to the one who bears it.

On the face of it this is a genuine problem. But even here the demand for using the transliteration of *YHWH* is basically an emotional one. Even if we agree to retain the transliteration in the Nepali Old Testament, Christians cannot use it for the name of their God in answer to the queries of the Hindus. But they are so used to hearing and reading the transliteration of *YHWH* that they want to convince themselves that they can satisfy the Hindus by giving this name as the name of the Christian God. However *YHWH* is not the name of the Christian God in the first place; and nor would a Hindu be satisfied, because this is a new word with no meaning. But if we use *Sadaprabhu* or *Paramprabhu*, there is at least some meaning to it which tells the Hindu something about the God of the Old Testament.

Having said all that, however, and having argued in favour of translating the name *YHWH* by *Sadaprabhu* or *Paramprabhu*, I must concede that in the light of recent studies the rendering of *YHWH* by "the LORD" or *Paramprabhu* in every instance may not be adequate, and a new approach may become necessary. That means that the last word has not been said on the question of rendering the "Tetragrammaton" *YHWH* in North Indian (and other) languages.

NOTES

Translating *YHWH*: experience in Thailand and Micronesia

Most translation projects in the Asia Pacific region with which I have consulted have fairly long Christian traditions. This means that they have fixed religious vocabulary; and until recently they have all made the decision to translate the Hebrew name *YHWH* as well as the term *Adonai* with the equivalent of "Lord" in English.