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THE PORTRAIT OF JESUS IN THE BURMESE GOSPELS

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While I was growing up in Northeastern Burma (now known as Myanmar), I learned about Jesus first from a Jinghpaw New Testament. Then in high school I started using the Burmese Bible in religion classes. One disturbing discovery I made was that in the Burmese Bible (translated by Adoniram Judson in 1835), Jesus spoke to others as a superior spoke to inferiors. Jesus' words were like orders and commands for others to follow. I immediately felt a distance coming between Jesus and me. I had not experienced this distance when reading the Jinghpaw NT. I moved on to reading the English Bible when I started theological school and became oblivious to the question that had troubled me. With just a switch of language the problem seemed to have disappeared.

During the first few years of my work as a translation consultant, I worked with tribal languages in Thailand and Burma which did not present any problem like the one I found in Burmese. The luxury of a problem-free period, however, came to a speedy end as soon as the Thailand Bible Society decided to embark on the revision of the Thai (1971) Bible in 1996. Thai and Burmese are two of the Asian languages that use a system of honorific forms of speech that reflect at least three different levels of society. Each level has its distinct set of vocabulary.

This paper aims to demonstrate how the Burmese language used in Judson's translation of the Gospels affects the portrayal of Jesus. Secondly, it will consider what implications that may have on translation and Scripture engagement.

There are three distinct levels of speech with distinctive vocabulary in the Burmese language. The first level is *thaman tsaga*, which means Common language—the language of the common people. The second is *nan thung tsaga*, which means Royal language—the language used in the palace and used to communicate with and speak or write about royalty. The third is *phone gyi tsaga*, which means Buddhist Monk language—the language used among the Buddhist monks, used by lay persons to communicate with monks and to speak or write about them. For the purpose of this paper I will refer to the three as Common, Royal and Religious.

The three levels of language are represented by three classes of people. They are the common people, kings with their families, and monks. The three classes communicate across class lines by using the appropriate language level of their own and of their conversation partners. In the past the classes have had rather rigid borders. One becomes a member of the common people and of the royal family by birth, and of the community of monks by initiation into the Buddhist monkhood. Common people and royalty can become monks and remain with that class as long as they want. The famous member of the royalty who became a monk was Prince Siddhatha who was known as Gautama Buddha. A monk can lose his position only by expulsion or by voluntary abdication from the order. He then becomes a member of the common people and his language level will shift accordingly.

When the Burmese Bible was published in 1853, the three classes of people with their language levels existed in Burma. The last Burmese king, Thibaw Min, was overthrown by the British some years before the close of the 19th century. Since that time the Royal language has no longer been in active use. It has been kept alive in literary work, in history books and in the Christian Bible. For over a century Burma only had two levels of language, namely the Common and the Religious. Today the Royal and the Religious are considered as high Burmese studied by a cultured minority, used in monasteries and by common people to communicate with Buddhist monks.

The Common language provides the basic vocabulary and structure of the Burmese language. The Royal and the Religious share a large number of lexical items though they also have their own distinctive sets of vocabulary. The following example will help us in understanding the relationship among the three.

Common	Royal	Religious	English
<i>Mg Hla tamin tsa thee.</i>	<i>Shin Phayin tsadaw khaw taw moo thee.</i>	<i>Phoong Taw Gyi soon phung taw moo thee.</i>	Mg Hla, King, Monk eats rice.
<i>Mg Hla aik ne thee.</i>	<i>Shin Phayin tset taw khaw ne taw moo thee.</i>	<i>Phoong Taw Gyi chying ne taw moo thee.</i>	Mg Hla, King, Monk, is sleeping.
<i>Mg Hla pyaw thi ataing.</i>	<i>Shin Phayin ming taw moo thi ataing.</i>	<i>Phoong Taw Gyi ming taw moo thi ataing.</i>	According to what Mg Hla, King, Monk said

It is clear from the examples above that *taw moo* is a type of verb suffix that belongs to the Royal and the Religious. It is never used with the Common. The sentence ending particles are the same in all three. Besides what can be seen here, conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs, and some other features of the language are shared by all three. Distinctive terms are primarily found in verbs, nouns and pronouns. Even with verbs and nouns, the Royal and the Religious terms are often constructed from the Common words modified by the royal suffix *taw moo* for verbs and *taw* for nouns.

Verb	Noun
Pe ee – Pe taw moo ee – give	Che – che taw – foot
Htaing ee – htaing taw moo ee – sit	Tha – Tha taw – Son
Paing ee – paing taw moo ee – own	Myet Hna – Myet hna taw – face

Ways in which Jesus is portrayed in the Burmese Gospels

All three levels of the Burmese language were available as language resources for Adoniram Judson and his Burmese language assistants. The Royal language was appropriate when they translated the Old Testament. When Judson translated the NT he was confronted by the lack of vocabulary in the Common language with which to translate abstract and ethical concepts that were very important in the NT. He studied Pali, an ancient language related to Sanskrit. Buddhist teachings were introduced to Burma centuries before through the medium of Pali, and the learned monks taught the lay people from Pali texts. Judson made a Pali word list for a

dictionary and studied with learned Burmese teachers, discussing and checking with them the accuracy of his understanding of the terms. The text of the Burmese Bible clearly shows that Judson adopted many terms from the Buddhist sacred text to express those concepts that could not be expressed by the Common language.

In the Gospels, Jesus is described as the Son of God who was born of Mary by the work of the Spirit of God (Matt 1.21; Luke 1.35). He is the Word of God who became a human being (John 1.14). He is a descendant of King David according to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. According to the Synoptic Gospels, throughout Jesus' ministry all of his speech and deeds were those of an ordinary human being albeit filled with and empowered by the Spirit of God.

What happened to the humanity of Jesus as seen in the Gospels when they were translated into Burmese with its three distinct levels of language?

Since the three levels of the Burmese language represent three classes of people, the translator needed to assign Jesus to the class or classes to which he believed most suited. Once assigned, Jesus would have to speak the language of his class. Others would address him and speak of him in the language level appropriate to him. The problem was that Jesus could not be neatly assigned to one of the three Burmese social classes. He was called the Son of God, a descendant of King David, yet was born not in the palace but in the circumstances of poverty and grew up as a carpenter's son. What could a translator do? The selected passages below will show us how Judson and his language assistants dealt with this problem.

Infancy narrative

In the opening sentence of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ is presented as a royal or a divine person. It records Jesus' genealogy as a royal genealogy. The royal verb suffix is added to the word "descended" to show that Jesus came as a king. The Burmese text of Matt 1.1 reads as follows: "This is the list of the royal genealogy in which His Majesty Jesus Christ descended from Abraham and David."

In Matt 1.16 and Luke 2.33 the royal status of Jesus is highlighted when the text describes Mary as a king's mother by using the Royal noun suffix with the word mother (*may taw*). The point of describing Mary as the royal mother is to highlight the status of Jesus as a king or the divine Son.

In 1.17, the Royal and divine noun suffix *taw* shows that Jesus who was also called Christ (1.16) was both a king and divine. The language of royal birth was applied to the birth of Jesus in 1.18 and in Luke 2.11.

The human face of Jesus appears in the narrative of the angel's message to Joseph and what Joseph did in response (Matt 1.21-25). The angel told Joseph that Mary was going to give birth to a son, not a prince. Joseph named that son Jesus, or *Yeshu* in Burmese.

Likewise in Luke 2.6-7 the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is told simply using the Common language. Again in the description of the shepherds' visit to the baby Jesus, in the story of Jesus' circumcision, and in the narrative of the child Jesus' visit to Jerusalem, the human face of Jesus comes to the forefront. While the

royal suffixes are not entirely missing in them, they stand very much in the background.

The child Jesus is clearly depicted as a royal or a divine child in the story of the wise men, the story of the flight to Egypt, and the return to Nazareth in the second chapter of Matthew. The child is repeatedly referred to as *thoo nge taw* (the royal or divine child) in Matt 2.9,11, 13, 14, 20, 21. His mother is *may taw* in Matt 2.11, 13, 14, 20, 21.

The stories of Jesus

Jesus in the stories of his travels and deeds is depicted as a royal religious teacher who held the title of "divine Lord." The stories are replete with royal verb and noun suffixes. They are too numerous to document here. All the words and sayings of Jesus in the Burmese Gospels declare that the speaker is a king or a divine Lord (religious teacher).

The pronoun used for Jesus, however, is altogether a different matter. In Burmese it is common to use the title of an individual in the same way one uses simple pronouns. If someone is a teacher or bears the title of teacher, *saya*, that title can function as the 2nd or 3rd person pronoun. Especially in polite conversation, the honorific pronoun is preferred over the common pronouns. In the case of Jesus, the honorific pronoun is *Ko taw*, which means Lord. This term clearly has its root in the Religious language in Burmese. No ordinary persons are addressed or known by this pronoun because it is reserved for Buddhist monks, famous religious teachers, and in the case of Christianity, the Trinity.

Ko taw as the 3rd person singular pronoun appears abundantly in the words of the Gospel narrators. Sometimes it appears as an explicit subject of genitive absolute sentences (for example, Luke 5.17; Matt 5.1; 8.1; 9.1). *Ko taw* also appears as a term of address (vocative) in 2nd person singular form. In this case it appears together with another term of address. For instance, in John 11.21 Martha said, "Lord, if *you (my Lord)* were here, my brother would not have died." There are numerous instances of this supplementary 2nd person singular pronoun in the Burmese Gospels. The result is that Jesus is presented as Lord in every dialogue conversation except those with Jewish leaders and Pilate.

Ko taw as an honorific term from the Religious language, can refer either to a human person or to a divine being. When it is applied to Jesus it is no longer either-or but both-and. For the Burmese Christian the term means that Jesus is seen more as divine than human.

The teachings of Jesus

Jesus is presented as a divine teacher who is revered and surrounded by devoted disciples. The teacher-disciple relationship pattern reflects something of the pattern that is found in Buddhism between Buddha and his disciples or between a famous monk and his novice pupils. As a divine teacher, Jesus stands in a different class of people from the disciples and the general followers. He is the divine Lord (teacher) and they are the common people. This relationship is clearly shown in the pronouns that Jesus and the disciples use toward each other. Apart from the pronouns, Jesus in the Burmese Gospels uses the Common language in teaching the disciples and the multitude.

In the Burmese Gospels, Jesus consistently uses the self-reference pronoun *nga* (I) to address his audience and he refers to his audience as *thin du* (you). In responding to Jesus, the disciples and followers refer to themselves as *chyunnuk* or *chyun taw du*. They address Jesus as *Ko taw* (Lord) or *ashin phaya* (Lord God) or *thakin* (Master, owner). The disciples and followers never address Jesus with the simple pronoun “you.” The social gap between Jesus as the teacher and the disciples as learners cannot be bridged.

One further factor indicates the wide social gap between Jesus and the disciples and followers in Judson’s translation of the Burmese Gospels. That is, that with a few exceptions, the Greek word *didaskalos* (teacher) when used in reference to Jesus was not translated by the common term *Saya* but by *Ashin Phaya* which literally means “Lord God.” Fortunately this situation has been reversed in the modern common language Burmese translation.

Ashin Phaya is an honorific title that is only used to address a king, a highly respected monk, or in the case of Burmese Christianity, the divine teacher. What in the Greek text of the Gospels is a common term of address to a teacher has therefore gained a divine and unique quality in the Burmese translation.

Dialogue passages

The dialogue passages in the Burmese Gospels show a variety of pictures of Jesus. The dominant one however remains that of the divine Lord. We will examine these passages with special attention given to the use of honorific pronouns and language levels.

Jesus and his parents (Luke 2.48-50)

Jesus appears as an ordinary human child in this passage. The narrator however identifies Mary as *May Taw* which implies that she is the mother of royalty. The conversation between Jesus and his mother uses the Common language level using appropriate and respectful terms.

In Burmese, within each level of language there exists a hierarchy of honor with speech registers appropriate to each. People hold various positions in this hierarchy according to their age, generation, rank, and social position. Speaking inappropriate language in violation of this hierarchy of honor reveals the speaker’s cultural crudeness or intentional vulgarity. Thus it reveals the social position or the character of the speaker.

Mary called Jesus *Nga tha* (my son). It is appropriate for Mary to use *Nga* because she is higher than Jesus in the hierarchy by virtue of being his mother (age and generation). She also used the words *Nga du* (us) in reference to Joseph and herself in a way that is appropriate in parent-child conversation. In response to his parents, Jesus used *Mi Ba* (parents) to address his parents. *Mi Ba* here stands in place of “you.” This is a polite way of addressing persons who are older than the speaker. Jesus also used *Achyunnuk* to refer to himself when speaking to his parents. This is an appropriate pronoun. This perfect parent-child conversation highlights the ordinary human nature of Jesus.

Jesus and the Tempter (Satan) (Matthew 4.1-11)

Satan is shown to recognize Jesus as Lord when he addresses Jesus as *Ko taw*. At the same time he is rude to Jesus when he refers to himself by the term *Nga* (I). Jesus is presented as the (divine) Lord speaking with full authority.

Jesus and the demon-possessed (Mark 1.24-26)

Here Jesus is portrayed as an authoritative divine figure who exercised power over unclean spirits.

Jesus and Peter (John 21.15-19)

Jesus appears here as a divine teacher giving instruction to his disciples. All of the conversations between Jesus and his disciples conform to this pattern of relationship.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4.7-26)

The Samaritan woman changes her language level from the Common to the Royal and Religious as she discovers the real nature of Jesus. Jesus appears here as a divine revealer.

Jesus and Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.40-44)

Simon the Pharisee addresses Jesus as Lord God, and he puts himself beneath Jesus by using the polite pronoun *achyunnuk*. In the Burmese Gospels, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes call Jesus *Ashin Phaya* and *Ko taw*. This is a clear translation error. In the Greek text these Jewish leaders called Jesus *didaskale* or rabbi; they did not address him as a divine teacher or Lord God as these titles imply in Burmese.

Jesus and the Chief Priests (Luke 22.67-69)

Jesus appears simply as an ordinary human in this interaction. The two parties are shown standing on equal footing, each using the superior *Nga* for himself and the subservient *Thin* (you) for the other party.

Jesus and Pilate (Luke 23.3-4)

Throughout the trial scene, the dialogue presents Jesus as an ordinary person.

Jesus in Prayer (John 17)

When addressing God, Jesus uses the intimate term *Apha* (Father) of the Common language level, but he uses the honorific pronoun *Ko taw* (you, Lord) of the Religious level. For self-reference, he uses *Achyunnuk* in the Common level but he uses *Nga du* when he refers to his unity with God. He also refers to himself several times as *Tha Taw* (I) and once uses the honorific verb suffix *kywa* (come). By doing this, Jesus is presented as being in the same "class" as God, and quite separate from his disciples and others. The honorific verb and noun suffixes that Jesus used in describing God's actions indicate that he is speaking of a divine being. Jesus is clearly presented as a separate class of being from the human companions.

These linguistic elements show how the portrayal of Jesus as an ordinary human figure is "hidden" in the Burmese Gospels. What dominates is his portrayal as a royal divine figure, someone who is different, who belongs to another class, is lofty or remote. There is no problem in this presentation if it reflects the original

text accurately. However, what we have in Judson's Burmese translation is clearly not the case; it is an unbalanced picture of Jesus. The question of the "Messianic Secret" which was so important in scholarly debates in the middle of the 20th century would hardly be raised intelligently on the basis of the Burmese Gospels. The human nature of Jesus is eclipsed by the divine nature. The doctrine of Incarnation which teaches that the Logos became a common human being is obscured by the constant ascription of royalty and divinity to the life and work of Jesus. What implication does this have for Bible translation?

Implications for translation

No translation is able to transfer the meaning of an original text with complete accuracy. In the case of Judson's Burmese translation, the "baggage" that came along with the target language has seriously affected the message. In placing Jesus with the Royal and Religious class, the social gap implied in the language affects the way Burmese readers see the relationship between Jesus and the disciples as well as between Jesus and themselves. From this use of language there comes a sense of remoteness in the relationship between Jesus and the readers of the Gospels. Jesus is regarded as lofty and morally perfect, who commands right precepts, but is rarely seen by the common people as one of them. From this background we can understand how difficult it is to speak of Jesus as "a friend of all believers."

The Burmese Good News NT that has been revised in recent years has recognized the problem and attempted to modify terms used. For instance, the term *Ashin Phaya* for Greek *didaskale* (teacher) has been changed to *Saya Tau*, a respectful term for a teacher. The earlier term has been downgraded slightly but still remains in the same language level and class. Any suggestion of further modifications in the use of language with respect of Jesus will arouse a great deal of protest from the Christians who have become used to the lofty language of the earliest translation. However it is clear that the integrity of the presentation of Jesus in the Gospels is at risk.

Readers of the Burmese Bible are no longer simply the ethnic Burmese Christians. Increasingly the larger number of Burmese Bible users are Burmese speakers coming from tribal language groups. Many of these people have less background in Buddhism so that terms in the Christian Bible that have their roots in the larger Burmese religious context will not be understood in the same way that the ethnic Burmese Christians understand them. Even such an important term as *Phaya* (God or gods) for most tribal Christians can mean only two things—an object of worship such as an idol, and pagodas and gods or God (spirit being). Monks and kings are not included in the term as they are for the ethnic Burmese Christians with stronger cultural ties to Buddhism. With the abolition of the monarchy, Royal language has lost its practical use over a century ago.

Today there are thousands of Burmese-speaking people outside Burma living in widely differing cultural settings. The language of the old Burmese Bible has become even more archaic for them. There are strong reasons why Burmese Bible translators and theologians need to seriously reexamine the current theological terms used in reference to God and Jesus in the Burmese Bible. They must rethink the level assigned linguistically to Jesus so that the two natures of Jesus Christ can

be presented in a way that conforms to the New Testament evidence. They must produce a version that will be meaningful and easily understandable to the Burmese-speaking Christians all over the world.

In order to achieve a balanced portrait of Jesus' human and divine nature in the Burmese translation of the Gospels the following steps will be helpful for the translators to take:

- The Pharisees' address of Jesus as *ashin Phaya* (Lord God/god) should be replaced by *Saya* (teacher). The term *Saya* represents the true meaning and spirit of the Greek word *didaskalon* and the Hebrew word *Rabbi*. It also maintains a good mix of respect and friendly relationship between the teacher and those he teaches. Most importantly it signifies that Jesus was recognized by the people of his time as a wholly human teacher albeit an extraordinary one. This historical memory should be kept alive so that later generations of believers may be helped to gain a more accurate portrait of Christ.

- Satan's address of Jesus as *ashin Phaya* (Lord, God/god) should be replaced by *achin Yeshu* (Jesus Fellow) or a term that is equivalent to it. Jesus called Satan *achin Satan* (Satan Fellow). It is indeed strange to see Satan more polite to Jesus calling him "Lord, God" while Jesus calls Satan somewhat bluntly "Satan Fellow" in the Burmese Gospels. The confrontations between Jesus and Satan should all be corrected with this point in mind. Interestingly this will also decrease the number of times that Jesus is presented as "Lord, God" in the Gospels.

- When translating the titles of Jesus in Burmese, translators must pay close attention to the status of the person speaking to him. If that person is a stranger, their use of the title *kurion* may mean "sir" rather than "Lord." There may also be occasions where Burmese supplies the title where there was none in the original (for example, Mark 1.40).

- Translators should pay close attention to the pre-resurrection and post-resurrection titles by which the disciples and close associates of Jesus addressed him. This is a sound internal principle given by the Gospels themselves (Mark 9.9-10; Luke 9.45; Matt 17.9; John 12.16). Though there is a great deal of controversy regarding the exact point at which the disciples began to understand the divinity of Jesus the Christ during his life and ministry, there is agreement that his divinity is finally recognized following the resurrection. The more openly divine titles such as "my Lord and my God" (John 20.28) belong to the post-resurrection confessional statement. The use of this principle will enable the Burmese translation to correct some of the imbalance caused by the earlier translation.

- Changing time-honored terms and honorific pronouns is by no means an easy task. Translators should develop a list of important theological terms in the three levels of Burmese language, namely, *Thaman tsaga*, *nan thung tsaga*, and *phone gyi tsaga*. In addition to this, they should prepare a list of pronouns used in relation to God and Jesus. The material they prepare may be used as background resources together with consultants' advice on the use of honorific terms. The sponsoring Bible Society should call a consultative committee of the Burmese Bible Revision Project to address these issues. Major terminological changes, changes in the pronoun system affecting the Godhead and the saints can only be

effectively done in consultation with the leaders of all the Burmese-speaking churches.

V. VOINOV

PRONOMINAL THEOLOGY IN TRANSLATING THE GOSPELS

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In many of the languages into which the NT is being translated or re-translated today, a grammatical distinction is made between the so-called T and V pronouns (and) of 2nd person address. This applies also to the corresponding verbal and affixed forms. The difference in social connotation signaled by these pronouns can be expressed simply in terms of two main contrasting features:

- a) the V-form (from French *vous*) signals inequality or distance between the speaker and addressee in terms of social hierarchy or power. Thus it is the form used for polite address. The T-form (from French *tu*) indicates social/power equality.
- b) the V-form signals personal distance (unfamiliarity or coldness), while the T-form indicates greater closeness (familiarity or intimacy) between speaker and addressee.

Languages which make this specific distinction are numerous and widespread. They include Indo-European languages and Turkic languages. In some languages, the distinction is limited to different forms for addressing individuals, while in others there also exist separate T- and V-forms for addressing groups of people. In the Greek text of the NT, however, there is only one 2nd person singular pronoun, *su*, that fulfills all of these functions for the singular address, whereas the pronoun *humeis* does the same for the true plural address. In other words, there is no distinction between T- and V-forms in ancient Greek.

An excellent article written by Ronald Ross and published in the Bible Translator several years ago ("Marking Interpersonal Relationships in *Today's Spanish Version*," *BTP* 44 (1993), 217-231) points out that most Bible translations into the Spanish language, which has a formal T/V distinction, completely avoid using the V-form. However, as Ross indicates, *Today's Spanish Version* is an exception. Yet even this translation is not consistent in the Gospels, in that it almost never uses the V-form when Jesus is conversing with someone.

The present article first examines some possible objections to using both T- and V-forms in Bible translations into languages that normally make this distinction; it also offers responses to these objections. Then it looks at one example of how T- and V-forms were applied in a limited corpus, namely address situations involving Jesus, using data from the translation of the Gospels into Tuvín, a Turkic language of south Siberia.