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BIBLE TRANSLATION IN OUR NEW AGE

Dr William Smalley, UBS Translations Coordinator for Asia/South Pacific, gave a talk at the Translators' Institute in India in April 1969. His talk was later written for the Calcutta journal "Nabayan" whose Editor has given permission to reproduce it. Readers of "The Bible Translator" will have an opportunity here to catch a glimpse of the growing urgency which Dr Smalley so powerfully yet simply portrays. Ed.

The Old and the New

The Bible is a very ancient book, and the tradition of translating it into other languages is almost as ancient. Several hundred years before Christ, Jews were translating parts of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Aramaic language, which was the language which they spoke. Roughly two hundred years before Christ, various translations of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language were consolidated and revised in a translation which is today known as the Septuagint, one of the great translations of all time. The Septuagint was the Old Testament used by many of the Christians in New Testament times, and is frequently quoted in the New Testament which likewise was written in Greek.

About four hundred years after Christ, Jerome completed his translation of the Bible into Latin, a translation which has had an enormous influence upon Christianity and upon the whole western world because it became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for a long period of time. And then, in 1611 there was published the English Authorized Version, or King James Version, the most extensively used translation of the Bible into English. That translation is now over 350 years old.

India, likewise, has longstanding translations of the Scriptures. The first Bible published in an Indian language was the Tamil Bible in 1727, although that was not then published in one complete volume.

Bibles and Bible translation carry the connotation of the old and the venerable. I hear people say, "These new translations (referring to modern language English translations) are all right, I suppose, but I prefer the old King James." Older translations were often the translations through which the faith of individual Christians or groups of Christians was formed. Those Christians look on these translations therefore with love and reverence.

So what is new about translation, and what is the place of translation in our modern world? With so many important things to do these days, surely translating the Bible is no priority. We have had Bible translations for a long time. Why Bible translation in our new age?

The New Age

There are many reasons why the translation of the Bible is still a very active and very creative work. One reason is that this old world of ours is really very new. There are actually more people alive at this present moment than the accumulation of all the people who have died in all the ages of man's history. More people can see the world around them today than have ever seen all of the different ages previously. In terms of history the world is old, thousands of years old. In terms of humanity the world is new. All the previous generations are only a modest introduction to our present generation and the next.

I am not sure just what the population of the world was back in the days when the Septuagint translation was prepared a couple of hundred years before Christ. The population of Calcutta today, however, is possibly greater than the total world of that day.

It is only thirty years until the end of this millennium. The twenty-first century is only thirty years away. It will be here in the lifetime of most of the readers of this article, and if present trends continue the population of the world will have doubled again in that time.

Doubled! Calcutta, doubled. Bombay, doubled. India, doubled. China, with 1,600 million instead of its present 800 million.

The world is new. We are having to learn to live again, to live a different kind of life than people lived in the past. We are having to learn to live in crowded cities, to adjust to the abrasions of dense populations, to the interdependency of large cities where people cannot rely upon their own farming efforts to eat, but are dependent upon thousands of variables they cannot control and do not understand.

We are getting used to the idea of men walking on the moon, but also to a world where in New York City a few years ago someone in an electric power plant made a mistake and 50,000,000 people were suddenly without electricity for many hours. Some people were stuck in the elevators of apartment buildings twenty or thirty stories in height, unable to go up or down. Some were caught in crowded subway trains, unable to move forward or backward. New York City and several other great cities of the eastern seaboard ground to a standstill, unable to operate. The world is new.

Literacy is also new. When the Apostle Paul wrote his letters to the early churches, there were many people in those churches who could not read them.

They were read aloud to the congregations. Those churches were in the center of culture of the world at that time, but in those days literacy was for specialists, people with special education.

The same continued to be true in the Middle Ages. It was not until considerably after the invention of printing that books were available for everybody and that the concept of widespread schooling became standard in the western world.

The same lack of a prevalence of universal literacy is true of course of certain classes in India today. We all know, however, that this will not and cannot last long. The literacy revolution is upon us. It is intolerable to think of large populations unable to take part in what is considered to be one of modern man's inalienable rights, the right to read and write. Within a generation, India may well have joined the western world in eradicating illiteracy as a major factor in the nation's life.

But for the first time in the history of the world we have widespread literacy without education. People are learning to read and write, as well they should, but many of them are learning it as adults, without the educational processes of childhood in formal schools. They are gaining the skills of reading without learning the accumulated knowledge and attitudes of the educated class. What has been a prerogative of the upper classes and of the educated has become a right of the masses.

But on the other hand, scholarship likewise is new. Today in sixth grade science classes children study scientific phenomena and scientific achievements which were unknown when I was in university twenty-five years ago. In science and mathematics, and in some other phases of learning as well, my son in high school is studying on a level that would have been considered university level when I was in high school. If this were not so, young people simply could not learn to live in today's new world. They could not gain the education for it.

At the same time, in many of the fields of knowledge which are so important to today's new world, it is the younger scholars who are making a large percentage of the significant new contributions. For the first time in the history of mankind the old are learning from the young. The traditional processes of society have changed. No longer is it true that as a man grows older in life, he gains both in wisdom and knowledge so that younger people coming along look to him. Today, as men grow older in the world of scholarship, they grow obsolete unless they are unusually gifted, unusually brilliant, and work unusually hard to keep up.

Sometimes the young are neither graceful nor gracious teachers. They may be harsh and impatient. But the world and its development is geared to what they know. The world is learning from them, not so much from their elders.

In the field of linguistics I belong to an older generation even though I am only forty-six. I constantly learn from younger scholars. It is a great struggle not to become obsolete, not to lose track of the developments that have taken place since I left the university. It is possible for a person to graduate from the best university in the world with a Ph.D. and high honors in a scientific field, and to be completely out of date in his scientific knowledge

within five years if he is not constantly reading, constantly developing in his thinking.

The church, furthermore, is becoming new. I am not speaking primarily of the Protestant church, although in Latin America, in Indonesia, and in certain other parts of the world we see the Protestant church also becoming new and spreading with life and force throughout populations where it was non-existent or where it was stagnant.

But primarily and very significantly it is the Roman Catholic Church which is becoming new in this decade. With its new emphasis upon the Bible for every man, the Bible to be read and used, the Bible to be translated and distributed, the Roman Catholic Church is becoming new. It is becoming new in its liturgy in the vernacular languages. It is becoming new in the intense activity that it is giving to translation work, to the preparation of teaching aids and study guides for its members. It is appealing to the Bible Societies for help and cooperation in the translation and distribution of the Scriptures in many languages where both Roman Catholics and Protestants are working. It is saying, in effect, "We are behind the times. For all of these years we have neglected a very important aspect of Christian life. We must catch up!" It is saying also, to the Bible Societies, "Will you work with us in doing this? Work with us in making it possible for Roman Catholics to have the Scriptures in the same widespread and inexpensive fashion that Protestants have had them for so long?"

The Bible Societies in a New Age

But what of the Bible Societies? Are they also new or do they belong to the past? Are they suited more to slower times, to a less complicated age? Do they have their place in this new age? Are they up to the population explosion, to the literacy explosion? Are they ready to learn from youth? Ready to make the Scriptures available to Roman Catholics also?

The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded over 150 years ago to make Scriptures available to people at a price they could afford to pay without divisive and diversionary note or comment. Even in England in those days Bibles were not readily available. Today it remains true in most parts of the world that without the Bible Societies, Scriptures would not exist. Or if they did exist, it would be only in extremely expensive editions which people could not afford to buy. The Bible Society movement which has spread all over the world is a cooperative effort, a joint project of Protestants of many denominations to make Scriptures available regardless of theological viewpoint and theological background. By uniting together, the Scriptures could be produced in larger quantities, at lower prices, and in better quality than would have been possible if all the Christian groups produced their own Bibles.

In the early days of the American Bible Society, it is reported that so strong was the feeling of theological difference between members of various denominations that it was impossible even to have prayer at Bible Society meetings. We have come a long way since then in the United Bible Societies in our fellowship around our common concern for the Scriptures regardless of other theological differences.

However, now that Roman Catholic interest in the Scriptures is increasing so rapidly we face much the same suspicious spirit in some circles again. Several missions and churches, for example, have refused to have their Bible translators participate with Roman Catholics in the same Bible-Society-organized Translators Institutes. These Institutes are one-month-long programs for the training of translators of the Scriptures. In one case, after I remonstrated with the leader of a mission because they were not wanting to have their translators attend, he replied, "All right; they can attend, but they cannot have fellowship with Roman Catholics!"

This is no new situation for the Bible Societies, to be involved in the translation and production of Scriptures where the translators and the users of those Scriptures are strongly in theological disagreement. If Protestant supporters of the Bible Societies are to keep stepping forward in the new world, they will have to realize that the Protestants who have been blaming the Catholics for keeping the Scriptures from their laymen for so many years should be the last ones now to try to keep the Scriptures from the Roman Catholics.

The Bible Societies' relation to translations going on all over the world has deepened and intensified through the years. In earlier days the Bible Societies simply published manuscripts of translations prepared far away by missionaries and local Christians on the spot, with no direct contact with the translation process as such. This is no longer true. All over the world the Bible Societies have highly trained specialists who are consultants to translators, training them in the principles of translation, observing their work, helping to expedite it, making sure that the best possible translation is done under the circumstances. In trying to keep up with this new world, the Bible Societies have entered into the field of translation in an intense and deeply involved way.

Needs in a New Age

The purpose of this involvement is to respond to the need for Scriptures in our present new age. The need is now! It is present! In the past it has taken ten to twenty-five years to complete the translation of a Bible. Some translations have gone on for as long as fifty years. This is intolerable in our modern world. Think back twenty-five years ago. Think ahead twenty-five years. The changes of the past twenty-five years will be augmented ten times in the next twenty-five years. If we start today to translate for the people of our generation, in twenty-five years' time an entirely new generation will be present.

Why does it take us so long to translate the Bible? When new and important books in the political, scientific or literary field come out in the western world, they are often translated into Asian languages within a year's time. After the death of John F. Kennedy there were translations of books about his life published all over Asia in Asian languages within just a few months after they appeared in English. Why does it take us so long to translate the Bible? Of course the Bible is a very much bigger book than some of these others, and its translation is sometimes done with much more care.

The fact remains, however, that if the Bible Societies are going to keep up

with the new world, translation procedures are going to have to change so that translation can be done quickly. The world will not wait. Time-consuming procedures, committee structures with members who can only spend a few days a year on the task—these and many other luxuries of the past are simply not going to hold up under the pressures of the new world.

Another increasing realization is coming to the Bible Societies, and being passed along to their constituencies. It is the realization that translations are for people, ordinary people, not for scholars. Biblical scholars have other sources to which they can turn for the Scriptures and information about the Scriptures. Many of them can read the Scriptures in the original languages. Translations are for the typical people of the language into which they are made. Translations are for literates without education. They are also for the developing educated classes whose background is in the traditional culture of their land and whose knowledge of the culture of Biblical times reflected in the Scriptures is very remote. Translations are going to have to be simple enough, straightforward enough for people to read.

This means, of course, that in most of the major languages of the world more than one translation of the Bible is needed. A new literate without education is not able to read a translation on the same literary level as the member of an educated class. Old Bible Society slogans of "One language, one Bible" are obsolete. Translations are for people, and the type of translation should reflect people's needs.

It is in the very nature of Bible translation, of course, that translations must be faithful to the meaning of the Scripture. That is the framework within which they are done. But if the meaning of the Scriptures cannot be expressed within the language and style of the new world in which we live, our Bible will not be for people.

There is a great deal of resistance within some churches to some of these changes. People do not like to have their Bibles changed. They do not sense the difference between changing the language of the translation (so that it speaks forcefully to modern man) and tampering with the Scriptures. They do not really realize and accept the fact that the Scriptures came originally in Hebrew and Greek, and that their own familiar versions are translations in the first place. They equate what is familiar with the literal word of God.

But if translations do not change from our older patterns we are finished. Slowly but surely the irrelevancy of the Bible Societies will become more and more apparent as the world changes faster and faster. It is only as we do God's will in this new age that we have any excuse for being.

Some time ago I was travelling in a border region of an Asian country when I heard that there were some refugees who had just come across the border. I went out to see them and found that they were about 120 members of a tribe living across the border, villagers who had left their homeland and had been fleeing for over twenty days to come into a country where they would have greater political and economic freedom.

They brought with them only what they could carry. They had some clothes, blankets, a few chickens, some pots and pans. Nothing but what they could carry on their backs. Their loads were increased by small children. One mother gave birth during the time of the migration.

At one point, as my interpreter was talking with them, I wandered through their camp with shelters made of bamboo and banana leaves and noticed in one of these shelters a stack of four black books. This was an arresting sight. These were tribal people who lived far from government schools. They are not people whom one would expect to be educated or to read or write. Furthermore, these four books would add appreciably to the weight of what they had to carry in their migration.

I opened the top book. It was a New Testament in their language. A New Testament published by the the British and Foreign Bible Society. I knew the leading translator. We had been in school together.

I opened the second book. It was a hymn book. It had been prepared by a Committee, the leader of which was the wife of the translator of the New Testament.

Two New Testaments. Two hymn books.

I asked to whom these books belonged, and their owners were pointed out. I asked if I could take their pictures. As they were posing, sitting on the ground with their open New Testaments and their open hymn books, I noticed that all of the other adults in this group of migrants had gone to their shelters to get their New Testaments and their hymn books to bring them and join the group.

I told them I knew the missionaries who had worked on these two volumes. Their leaders had studied as students under those missionaries in the Bible School. We sang a hymn together in Christian fellowship.

And Tomorrow

But what about thirty years from now? When the world's population will have doubled again, when if present trends continue, people will have to flee even more frequently than they do today, what about them? Will fleeing people ever carry their Bibles with them? It largely depends upon the Bible Societies. Not simply on the Bible Societies' supplying the Bibles for them, but it depends on whether or not the Bible Societies have kept up with the new world, and have translations suitable for the new age. It depends on whether we have been good and faithful servants in making the changes, leading in the changes which are needed and which will continue to be needed in translating for the new age, so that God's Word can be clearly read in a new generation and under new circumstances.

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