

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON SINHALESE BIBLE REVISION

### **An inescapable challenge**

Some of those who have answered the questionnaire, prepared for the U.B.S. Survey on the Place and Use of the Bible in Asia, have described one of the obstacles to Bible Study in these words: '*Obsolete and unintelligible language* often found in the current versions of the Bible.' This certainly constitutes a challenge to Bible Societies throughout Asia. In these countries facing rapid social change, it is of vital importance that the living Word of God should be made available to people in the living idioms of their countries.

The work of Bible revision in any language has a threefold significance: (1) It is necessary for the spiritual edification and growth of the indigenous Church. This point is all the more important now because more and more people will read the Word of God in the national languages. (2) It is also important as a way of preparing the ground for a more effective evangelistic weapon and an apologetic instrument. (3) Bible revision in these lands may be looked upon as a contribution of great literary importance to indigenous literature.

### **A matter of extreme urgency**

The publication of the Union Version of the Sinhalese Bible in 1938 was a great event for the Sinhalese Church in Ceylon. It amalgamated the Bible Society Version of 1910 and the Baptist Version of 1919, and gave the Ceylon Church one Sinhalese Bible. In the preparation of the Union Version a certain amount of revision, absolutely necessary for that purpose, was carried out. But strictly speaking, no revision of the Sinhalese Bible has been made for the last forty years. During these years, several powerful factors have been at work in bringing about notable and even revolutionary changes in the vocabulary, style, spelling, grammar and diction of the Sinhalese language.

In response to the growing demand from the churches and to the challenge of non-Christian public opinion, to both of which Bible Societies must always be sensitive, two important conferences were held at the Bible House in Colombo. A preliminary conference to consider the question of revising the Sinhalese Bible was held in 1959, under the chairmanship of the Most Rev. Lakdasa de Mel, now Metropolitan of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. This conference decided that the churches should be consulted about (a) the desirability and urgency of a new revision and (b) the need for a second conference of official representatives of the churches. This second conference was held in 1960 and was attended by representatives of all the major denominations of the Church, as well as of the Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists and the National Christian Council.

### **An almost impossible task**

Bible translation and revision throw up many problems. In recent years, both its greatness and its near impossibility have been increasingly recognized. It is because the task is great that there are problems in accomplishing it. The Rev. J. B. Phillips, in his preface to *Letters to Young Churches*, speaks of his experience as a translator of New Testament Epistles in these words:

‘Again and again the writer felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to turn the mains off.’

The tremendous power and vitality which resides in these documents must be transmitted by the translator, by using living words now current in Asia. We must seek to recreate the same emotions, in the minds of the readers of today, which the original writers evoked in the minds of their contemporaries. It is, therefore, a task on which we cannot embark without fear and trembling, lest we should adulterate the Word of God. One is conscious of an overwhelming responsibility in the task of translation and revision of the Scriptures.

### **Ideals of great translators**

Those who address themselves to Bible revision will soon gain a new sense of the complexity of their task. They will encounter unsuspected problems in the choice of right and adequate words to translate the key categories of the Bible. It is sometimes deeply disconcerting to discover that a word which has had a noble ancestry for centuries has suddenly deteriorated in the living language of today. One finds that nothing can be done to redeem its pristine purity. It is also revealed that a word which is highly respected and noble in Hindi would be quite unsuitable in Bengali or in Marathi or in Sinhalese or Tamil and vice versa, in spite of the common Sanskrit basis of these languages. Terms have not only different meanings in different areas, but sometimes carry just the opposite meaning in some areas. In the words of a great Biblical scholar, Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson, ‘Life is continually moving beyond the vocabulary which was evolved to describe it, continually putting new wine into old wineskins’.

A study of the aims of distinguished translators will illuminate the nature and complexity of our task, and will define what our objectives should be. Here are some instructive examples (the italics are mine):

#### *(a) King James Version.*

‘We have had to study this great Version (A.V.) carefully and minutely, line by line; and the longer we have been engaged upon it the more we have learned to admire *its simplicity, its dignity, its power, its happy turns of expression, its general accuracy, and, we must not fail to add, the music of its cadences, and the felicities of its rhythm.*’ (From R.V. Preface to the N.T., p. vii.)

#### *(b) Revised Version.*

‘All endeavours to translate the Holy Scriptures into another tongue must fall short of their aim, when the obligation is imposed of producing a version *that shall be alike literal and idiomatic, faithful to each thought of the original, and yet, in the expression of it, harmonious and free.*’ (R.V. Preface to N.T., p. xiv.)

(c) *Revised Standard Version.*

This Version should 'embody the best results of modern scholarship as to the meaning of the Scriptures, and express this meaning in English diction which is designed for use in public and private worship and preserves those qualities which have given to the King James Version a supreme place in English literature'. (R.S.V. Preface, p. vi.)

(d) *Moffatt.*

'A real translation is in the main an interpretation, and . . . its effectiveness depends largely upon the extent to which the interpreter has been able to see the original and to convey his impressions of what he has seen. . . . The ideal of a translator is to let his readers enjoy part of the pleasure which the original once afforded to its audience in some far-off century.' (Preface O.T., p. vii.)

(e) *Weymouth.*

The aim should be to consider 'how we can with some approach to probability suppose that the inspired writer himself would have expressed his thoughts, had he been writing in our age and country'. (Preface, p. v.)

(f) *Goodspeed.*

'The aim of the present translation has been to present the meaning of the different books as faithfully as possible, without bias or prejudice, in English of the same kind as the Greek of the original, so that they may be continuously and understandingly read.' (Preface, p. vi.)

(g) *The Authentic New Testament.*

'What I have attempted is to recapture in the idiom of today and with the use of our ampler vocabulary, the nuances and flavour of an age that has long gone from us and is alien to most of us. . . . I have not had an eye to modern theological requirements.' (Author's Preface, pp. ix-x.)

(h) *E. V. Rieu.*

'This sense of awe is natural to anyone who undertakes the translation of these precious documents. It has made me feel that the meaning, not the idiom, of the originals is sacrosanct. . . . The translator must blend the old wine with the new in such a manner that the skins hold both.' (Introduction to the Four Gospels, pp. xi and xiv, Penguin Classics.)

(i) *J. B. Phillips.*

The essential principles of translation: '(1) the first is simply that it must not sound like a translation. (2) The second test: that a translator does his work with the least possible obtrusion of his own personality. (3) The third and final test is that of being able to produce in the hearts and minds of his readers an effect equivalent to that produced by the author upon his original readers.' (Translator's Foreword in the N.T. in Modern English, p. ix.)

(j) *New English Bible (New Testament).*

This translation 'was undertaken with the object of providing English readers, whether familiar with the Bible or not, with a faithful rendering of the best available Greek text into the current speech of our own time, and a rendering which should harvest the gains of recent biblical scholarship. . . . In doing our work, we have constantly striven to follow our instructions and render the Greek, as we understood it, into the English of the present day,

that is, into the natural vocabulary, constructions and *rhythms of contemporary speech*. *We have sought to avoid archaism, jargon, and all that is either stilted or slipshod.*' (Introduction to the N.E.B.)

These aims of the translators are most illuminating and challenging.

### **Some unresolved dilemmas**

Let us now consider some problems connected with Bible revision. In this work we encounter the perennial problem of how we should handle ancient myths, metaphors and images from other cultures than our own, and Hebrew and Greek idioms. We are always on the look-out for current phrases to translate classical ones.

(a) It is necessary to guard against certain dangers. In the B.F.B.S. Report 1958, p. 13, the Rev. W. J. Culshaw, Translations Secretary of the Bible Society of India and Ceylon, drew attention to some of these dangers in these words:

'We cannot ignore the debate going on around us, but must seek to learn from it. Equally, *we have to guard against premature conclusions concerning language trends, and from plunging into an arena where emotion is often more powerful than logic*. In all this work we are conscious of the need for humble dependence on the guidance of God.'

(b) There is always the question of style and diction. It is not so easy to combine literary elegance with simplicity of expression, although both are necessary. It is amazing how rapidly the Sinhalese language and its style and diction are undergoing change at the present time. Our journalists, authors, poets and novelists are all moving in search of a vigorous modern style, free from highly involved sentences and heavy Sanskritic terms. In the contemporary movements of Sinhalese literature there seem to be two main streams at work: (1) A movement marked by a simple, vigorous style, turning away from the highly classical traditional style, and (2) a fairly powerful literary school with a tendency to go several centuries back seeking 'purity' of style. It is clear, however, that this second backward-looking tendency has its dangers, while the search for a new style of vitality combined with simplicity will have a very good influence.

(c) Alongside these movements, we must also reckon with the Asian attitude of great reverence for Holy Scriptures. We have to appreciate the view that these Scriptures, being the greatest literary and spiritual heritage of the nation, must be expressed in a reverent, dignified and elevated style. How can these demands be reconciled with simplicity of style and a language which is readily understood by the common people?

(d) One of the biggest problems we have to face in Bible revision is concerned with our vocabulary and our theological terms. We have felt for some time that the Sinhalese equivalents for some of the key Biblical categories are unsuitable and inadequate. There is also a growing impression that wherever possible we should endeavour to use terms taken from the Buddhist religious vocabulary. There are three types of Buddhist terms in this area: (1) Buddhist technical terms pure and simple, (2) Sinhalese terms which carry Buddhist overtones, and (3) neutral terms into which we may hope to pour Christian content and meaning.

As illustrations of the first category of terms, the following words might be mentioned:

*deva* = heavenly beings (literally 'radiant ones')

*papaya* = sin

*atmaya* = ego, personality, spirit

These terms have been used in the Bible but are found to be inadequate.

As examples of the second category of words, carrying Buddhist overtones, the following might be given:

*damsak pavathvima* = preaching (literally the phrase means, 'setting in motion the wheel of doctrine')

*divya loka* = world of the gods, heavens

*deva-duta* = divine messengers, angels

The following terms illustrate the third category:

*sabhawa* = assembly, society, church

*paschattapa* = repentance

*kamawa* = forgiveness

*dharmishtakama* = righteousness

*anugrahaya* = grace

It has been pointed out that in some of the key Biblical terms, such as mercy, sin and hope, no precise equivalent can be found in any language. But this is not surprising, because they are peculiarly Christian concepts which distinguish the Christian faith from every other faith.

As mentioned above, we have already made use of words belonging to all the three categories. But we are also conscious of their inadequacy and unsuitability. The question is being raised whether we should not make a serious endeavour to employ non-Christian terms from Buddhist and Hindu literature to convey some of the great key categories of our faith, such as: God, *logos*, faith, *kosmos* and *agapē*. This is a task which is fraught with danger, and yet a task which must be attempted. The Christian Church of today in Asia must take the same kind of daring step which the early Church took in communicating the Gospel to the Graeco-Roman world. The author of the fourth gospel is an inspiring example in this venture. It is a venture full of risks and yet they are risks well worth taking.

The Sinhalese Revision Committee in Ceylon have decided not to ignore the fundamental problem of key Biblical terms. They have already given some attention to the consideration of different terms for God. Two members of the Committee have presented stimulating papers sponsoring two new terms for God. One is *Asankhatayano*, meaning 'The Infinite One'. And the other is *Nirvanayano*, meaning 'The Transcendent', 'The Beyond'. These two papers give evidence of the Committee's determination to come to grips with Buddhist thought and to seek religious and philosophical terms from the non-Christian vocabulary. Whether these new terms will be ultimately acceptable or not, this effort is a most commendable one.

### Other problems in Sinhalese revision

(1) We have to reckon with the linguistic conservatism of the Church. There are many in our churches who prefer familiar phrases and an accustomed

vocabulary, quite regardless of scholarship, accuracy and precision as well as new literary trends.

What is the answer to this problem? There is no simple answer and no quick method of dealing with it. We must always look forward to the time when a new generation of readers will arise and it is for them that we are primarily catering now. But of course it is necessary to carry the more conservative elements in our churches with us too. The members of our Revision Committee, whose unanimous opinion must be secured for any *radical* changes in vocabulary and style, will be our valuable allies.

(2) We must insist on our freedom to depart from Greek and Hebrew idioms, and to carry the same ideas in the living idioms of the receptor language.

(3) Semantics, dealing with the nature and meaning of language, are very important. We have to remember how theological structures have been built on certain terms over the years and how, in some cases, they have had an undue influence on theological thinking. It has been pointed out how the translation of the Hebrew word '*almah*, which means a marriageable young woman, whether virgin or not, is being hotly debated by translators since the publication of the R.S.V.

(4) There is the problem of forecasting how a particular language in Asia will have shaped itself in ten or fifteen years' time. It is very important to try to do so, although we find it to be an almost impossible task.

(5) Translation and revision involves the crossing of cultural frontiers of two peoples, two environments and two ages. What is highly acceptable in one may be quite inappropriate in the other. What is readily understood in one may sound completely alien and incomprehensible in the other.

### **Guiding principles and procedure**

In Sinhalese Bible revision we may find it difficult to state our objective with great precision, but it would be necessary to have some indication of the kind of revision we are aiming at. It should be recognized, however, that the objective will become clearer as the work goes along. We feel that our primary need is to produce a kind of work somewhere between the *Revised Standard Version* and *The New English Bible*.

The following principles have been suggested:

(1) Scrutinize every Sanskrit form to see if it is making a positive contribution to clarity and precision. Where a *thadbhawa* (= derived from Sanskrit) word is found to be more expressive, generally prefer it to the Sanskrit term. Where two or more synonymous *thadbhawa* terms are available, current usage should determine our choice.

(2) Preference should be given to current terms, even if they do not convey *everything* we need. The coinage of new Sanskrit terms must be undertaken only in rare cases, as this practice may appear to create an impression of artificiality.

(3) Where possible, use new words which have recently passed into circulation and which have freshness and respectability, in place of archaic forms which, however time-honoured, may seem to lack vitality.

(4) Where we have a rich and vivid picture enshrined in the original, try

to preserve it by using, if necessary, two or three words in Sinhalese for the one Greek or Hebrew word. A good example of this is found in Sinhalese for the Greek word *apokaradokia* (Rom. 8: 19), meaning 'gazing eagerly as if with outstretched neck' (Weymouth).

(5) Critically evaluate contemporary literary movements and trends, making use of the best features in each. It is best not to identify ourselves too closely with any one literary school.

Some thought must be given to the question of the literary standards to be pursued in our work. In the literary world of Ceylon, at the present time, several trends are discernible. While they all can teach us something, none of them, separately, can give us adequate help for our task. There is a sense in which we must form our own style and our own standards.

The only sure guide seems to be that we should search for a style that is dignified, fresh and forceful. It is also to be remembered that we are not writing only for intellectuals.

### Some conclusions

In the light of what has been said, we might arrive at the following conclusions:

(1) The Bible Societies in Asia ought to be very much alive to revolutionary changes now taking place in the literary world of each country. There is the impact of English literature through many translations of English Classics into national languages. In a recent book list of a well-known publisher in Colombo, there were 80 translations of well-known English Classics, such as Dickens, Oliver Goldsmith, William Shakespeare, Bacon's Essays, R. L. Stevenson, etc.

(2) In Ceylon a team of outstanding Buddhist scholars, some of whom have been trained in the universities of the West, have undertaken a new Sinhalese translation of the Tripitakas (Corpus of Buddhist Scriptures). Four volumes are already out and these indicate the kind of language and diction in which they seek to give their Scripture to Sinhalese readers. Those who are engaged in revision and translation work should study the works of Buddhist scholars, not necessarily to imitate them, but to learn from them.

(3) Regional conferences of Bible translators and revisers should be organized in different countries to discuss matters of Biblical terms and vocabulary. The writer of this article had the privilege of attending such a conference organized by the B.S.I.C. at Jabalpur in India, in October 1960. It was very stimulating and profitable. From the discussions there, the following suggestions emerged:

(a) We should not attempt to invent terms for God. The best word available may be imperfect and sub-Christian, but wherever possible it should be used and purified. Avoid using the name Jehovah unless its use is already strongly entrenched in the language.

(b) Avoid reading theology into terms where none is intended. Here is, however, a paradox: too much theology will distort and too little theology will impoverish.

(c) It is sometimes desirable to take a colourless word with no overtones from other religions and to baptize it into Christian meaning.

(d) The history of a word is less important than its current use. Therefore the guiding principle for the selection of terms must be contemporary usage rather than etymological meaning.

(e) When the need arises to use a foreign word, such as the Greek *ekklēsia*, we should not merely tolerate it but give it full 'citizenship rights' in the receptor language.

(f) It was suggested that word studies should be published from time to time in the Indian Journal of Theology.

(4) The revision of the Bible is a perpetual necessity. Theological Seminaries must be alive to this fact, and should make their contribution in training those who are especially gifted for this task. Among their students they should be on the look-out for those who have linguistic and other gifts, and give them the requisite special training. *It may be that there are special people whom the Lord of the Church is calling to a very special sphere of service in Asia, in communicating the Word of God to our contemporaries.*