

René Péter-Contesse (1934–2020)

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In the December 2020 issue of *The Bible Translator*, we noted the death of René Péter-Contesse on November 11, 2020, at the age of eighty-six. Here, three colleagues who knew him and worked with him offer tributes to this man who contributed so much to Bible translation in the twentieth century.

Brigitte Rabarijaona writes:

On the last Sunday of October 2006, after a service at the Temple de Rochefort (Switzerland) where I preached, a gentleman of imposing stature and a calm voice came towards me. It was René. He introduced himself and told me about his recent trip to Madagascar. And the more we talked, the more we realized that we had a common passion: Biblical Hebrew and the translation of the Bible. We quickly made an appointment to talk more about it.

Shortly afterwards, he came to see me at the restaurant of the University of Lausanne where I was doing some research. That was the beginning of a long series of meetings over a meal or a cup of coffee—meetings during which René talked with passion about his contribution to *La Bible en français courant* (the French common language version), the *Nouvelle Bible Segond*, the Translator's Handbooks, the journal *Le Sycamore*, and many other activities related to Bible translation, including a Hebrew Bible reading group which he regularly led. I was impressed and intimidated by his background, because I had joined the Bible translation team in Madagascar only a few months before we met.

But René immediately took me under his wing and became a sort of mentor to me. He introduced me to some of the people involved in Bible translation, including Jean-Claude Margot, and took me to visit the Swiss Bible Society. We met regularly in Lausanne, or in Areuse, at the Grandchamp Community of Sisters. Each time we met, we had a fascinating discussion about Biblical Hebrew and Bible translation.

A few years later I came back to Switzerland to do my PhD studies, and René was still there to support me. He came to see me regularly and told me about his latest findings in Biblical Hebrew and the articles he was writing, and I would talk to him about my research for my dissertation. Towards the

end of my research, René meticulously proofread my dissertation. He let nothing slip through, from my bad French wording to the spelling errors in Hebrew. He was so passionate that he could not let the slightest typographical error go by.

René was also present at my PhD thesis defense. He would not have missed it for anything in the world. And that day he said to me, “Well done, Brigitte! You did it, but know that this is not the end, it’s the beginning of a long journey.” And he was right. His journey has come to an end but I continue on mine, stronger because of what I have learned from him. He will remain a role model for me and I am grateful to have been able to journey with him in Bible translation.

Au revoir, René!

Brigitte Rabarijaona
UBS Global Translation Advisor

Phil Noss writes:

René Péter-Contesse was one of the unsung heroes to whom we in the Bible translation world, and especially within the United Bible Societies, owe so much. Writing in French, their contributions have not been widely known outside the francophone world. Also, they did not sing their own praises.

Dr. Péter-Contesse, of Swiss nationality, was an outstanding scholar of Hebrew language and biblical studies. He was a member of the team of five translators of the Old Testament in the French common language Bible published in 1982. He was the author or co-author of a number of UBS translation manuals in French on books of the Bible, among them, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Ruth, Daniel, Obadiah-Micah, and Jonah. He was an early author of articles for *The Bible Translator*, and more recently he was a member of the editorial board and contributor to the French translation journal, *Le Sycamore*.

René, as he was known to many, warmly received those who sought his help. He shared graciously of his knowledge, offering guidance to those of us in need. With utmost courtesy, he provided the most professional assistance in matters of Old Testament interpretation and Bible translation issues, with special concern for the work of Bible translators in francophone Africa.

We owe René Péter-Contesse, one of our senior brothers, a great debt of gratitude.

May God bless his memory among us.

Phil Noss
UBS Translation Services Coordinator, retired

Lynelle Zogbo writes:

With the death of René Péter-Contesse, I lost the last of my three wise men (the other two were Jean-Claude Margot and Theo Schneider)—three giants of men, Swiss scholars, who together devoted years of their retired life to the cause of Bible translation in francophone Africa, as they labored tirelessly on UBS Translator’s Handbooks in French.

René Péter-Contesse was a scholar’s scholar, an expert in Hebrew and a translator himself, responsible for many of the translations of Old Testament books in the common language version, *La Bible en français courant*. He also dedicated not years, but *decades*, of his life to writing Old Testament handbooks in French, whose main audience lived in Africa, a continent he only dreamed of visiting. His works include:

- *Manuel du traducteur pour le livre de Lévitique* (ABU, 1985)
- *Manuel du traducteur pour le livre de Daniel* (ABU, 1986)
- *Manuel du traducteur pour les livres d’Abdias et de Michée* (D. J. Clark, N. Mundhenk, and RPC, ABU, 1988)
- *Manuel du traducteur pour le livre de Ruth* (J. de Waard and E. A. Nida, adapted by RPC, 1990)
- *Le livre de Jonas, commentaire exégétique et linguistique* (B. F. Price, E. A. Nida, and RPC, ABU, 1997)
- *La Genèse, Manuel du traducteur* (W. Reyrburn, E. Fry, and RPC, ABU, 2005)
- *L’Exode, Manuel du traducteur* (to be published).

As can be seen, René liked to build on and adapt the work of men he admired, but he also did original work, including *Leviticus* and *Daniel*, which inspired UBS TC, John Ellington, to produce an English adaptation of these two volumes!

René, with his close friend Jean-Claude Margot, was a founding member of the editorial board of *Cahiers de Traduction*, a scholarly precursor to our present-day grassroots *Le Sycomore*, where they both served, each almost to their deaths, on the editorial committee. Along with his highly academic articles (my favorite being “Hand, Foot, Palm?”¹), René wrote many articles for *Le Sycomore* as he tried to anticipate the needs of translators in francophone Africa. Brilliant, yet humble, he would ask me, “Do you think this will really help the translators?”

¹ R. Péter-Contesse, “Main, pied, paume? Les noms des extrémités des membres en hébreu et en araméen biblique,” *Revue Biblique* 4 (1998): 481–91.

What we retain from working for over fifteen years with René was his “disponibilité,” as we say in French. He was ready to do the big jobs (authoring 1000-page volumes on one single book of the Bible), as well as the small (correcting my and others’ faulty French). He was in fact a terrible stickler as far as French was concerned, and I can remember several almost heated exchanges, as he told me that an expression I heard on French TV and used in my writing was not “real French.”

But combined with this academic rigor, René was such an incredibly warm, happy man, who loved life, his family, a good meal, and a good laugh.

We miss René greatly, and all three wise men, who were great friends, happily growing old together, who never stopped producing, not just in the prime of life, but well into a very fruitful old age.

Lynell Zogbo
Former Editor, UBS French handbooks and Le Sycomore