

# Bible Translation in the context of Scripture Engagement

Aloo Osotsi Mojola\*

## 1. Introduction:

For a long time the Bible Societies have placed an emphasis on the **Bible as the source and tool of mission** and the concomitant imperative to make it accessible.

We can see this in the “Hakone formula” formulated at a UBS council meeting held in May 1963 in Hakone, Japan.

**A Bible for every Christian home;**

**At least a New Testament for every Christian;**

**At least a portion for all who can read and for every new literate;**

**An opportunity for every church member to share in local Scripture distribution.** (see Edwin H. Robertson, **Taking the Word to the World 50 Years of the UBS**, p97)

This formula dramatically captured the vision of the Bible Societies to bring the Bible or part thereof within reach of everyone worldwide in a language each could understand and at a price each could afford. At various UBS world assemblies held every 8 years and recently after 4 years, this vision was reinforced by means of other captivating slogans. Here are a couple-Hakone, Japan 1963 & Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 1972 Assembly **God’s Word for a New Age.**

---

\* United Bible Societies, Nairobi, Kenya. Presentation to be given at the Korean Translation Workshop in Seoul, Korea, February 2003.

Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1980 Assembly **God Word :Open for All.**

Budapest, Hungary, 1988 Assembly **God's Word: Hope for All.**

Mississauga, Canada 1996 Assembly- **God's Word: Life for All.**

Midrand, South Africa 2000 Assembly- **God's Word: Light for the World.**

These slogans were carefully chosen to underscore the supreme importance and primacy of the Bible or God's Word in the life of all, everywhere. The dominant concern of the Bible Society movement since the beginning at least since the founding of the BFBS in 1804 has been the challenge to make God's Word available to all God's people everywhere. This is really the challenge of Christian mission. The need for Welsh Bibles dramatized by the popular Mary Jones story and captured in the memorable words "And if for Wales, why not for the Kingdom, and if for the Kingdom why not for the whole world" was one of the original impulses of this global mission. It goes without saying that without the rise of the modern missionary movement and the Gutenberg revolution, all with beginnings around the same time, the history of the Bible Society movement and the translation and availability of Bibles around the world would have been different. It is evident too that without the availability of the Bible, the history of the missionary movement and of Christian outreach would have been vastly different.

As is well known the original texts of the Bible employ languages very few can read and understand. Thus for example, the original text of the New Testament was originally written in the Koine Greek spoken at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, while the original texts of the Old Testament were originally written in the ancient Hebrew tongue, except for a few chapters in the books of Ezra (4.8-6.18, 7.12-26) and Daniel (2.46-7.28) which are in ancient Aramaic a cognate of ancient Hebrew. We can see from this that **availability** does not necessarily imply **accessibility**. The challenge of accessibility is the impetus behind the challenge of **translating** the Bible in **languages** people can understand, at a **price** each can afford, in appropriate **formats** or **media**. The history of Christian mission is inseparable from that of Bible translation in the various

languages of the world wherever churches have been planted. Without the important work of Bible translators, very few people would have access to the Bible. The vast majority of Bible readers can only gain access to the Bible in translation, that is, in a language they can understand. It is no exaggeration to say therefore that for most people the translated Bible is their only access to the Word of God. Some even forget that the revered King James Version/Authorized Version of the Bible in English is also a translation. Everyone is thus indebted to Bible translators for their faithful and indefatigable labours.

It should be noted here in passing that the Bible in translation has motivated the invention of alphabets and orthographic systems for languages that previously had no writing system at all. In the process through translation and the production of literary materials, Bible translation has made important contributions to the revitalization and even preservation of languages under threat. Similarly it has contributed to the emergence and development of national languages and literatures. Dictionaries, grammars, the dissemination of local knowledges as well as the transmission of cultural values and the spread of the new faith.

[According to UBS records as at December 31, 2001, of the 2000 or so languages spoken in Africa at least 641 had a part or the whole Bible in translation. Of these 149 had the Bible, 279 had the New Testament and 213 had a portion (usually single biblical books, such as a Gospel) in translation. Globally of the 6000 or so languages spoken in the world, 2287 had at least a part or the whole of the Bible in translation. Of these 392 had the Bible, 1012 had the New Testament and 883 a portion in translation. If we turn to Bible distribution figures around the same time (i.e between November 1, 2000 and October 31, 2001) representing the Scripture Distribution by the Bible Societies and Bible Society offices (which form the United Bible Societies) excluding distribution figures by other publishers we have the following: In Africa 2,909,882 Bibles, 564,481 New Testaments, 1,375,838 Portions, 844,541 New Reader Portions (translations at a simple to read language level), 6,771,878 Selections (smaller pieces of the biblical text) and 192,751 New Reader

Selections were distributed. In Kenya during the same period 164,535 Bibles, 9,739 New Testaments, 13,485 Portions, 15,843 New Reader Portions and 233,858 Selections were distributed. Worldwide 23,210,404 Bibles, 19,029,747 New Testaments, 20,397,962 Portions, 12,084,008 New Reader Portions, 443,436,778 Selections and 37,396,552 New Reader Selections were distributed during the same period. From the above statistics it is clear that the consumption/availability of Bibles in Africa is fairly high. There are of course still so many who have no access to the Bible in any language or in any format.]

The task remains unfinished. Yet it has increasingly become clear that the challenge is not merely that of **availability** or of **accessibility** but of Bible use, of obedience to its eternal and ever relevant message and doing or living out of its message in everyday life. The challenge is to have the message of the Bible, God's Word, penetrate and transform every human institution, every community, every family and the every day life of every individual - to the praise and glory of God. The starting point therefore is the use to which the Bible is put.

## 2. The Place and Use of the Bible:

Until very recently the Bible Societies have expressed their common task as consisting in promoting "the widest possible effective distribution of the Holy Scriptures in a language which can be easily understood and is faithful to the original texts, without doctrinal note or comment, at an affordable price and appropriate format."

Bibles have been made available in various formats to meet several tastes, or in various media to cater to various needs. For example, for the blind the Braille format of the Bible is available in numerous languages. For non readers, preliterates, illiterates or those who prefer the audio medium, the Bible is now available in a number of languages on cassette or CD, while for those who prefer the audio visual media or film, the Bible is now increasingly being put to this form the Jesus Film or the

Visual Bible now available on video or DVD are just two of many examples of the Bible in this media form.

These innovations may all be interpreted as attempts to make the Bible available and accessible in convenient, appropriate and usable formats as part of the task of “achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures...” The **big question** still remains whether when these products reach their intended or target audiences they are put to good use or to their intended use? Do they also end up in some obscure corner or displayed in some conspicuous location in homes left to gather dust or to be merely enjoyed by the eye?

At the Mississauga World Assembly, September 26-October 3, 1996, (see UBS Bulletin 178/179,(1997)) one of the key international speakers, Dr Melba Maggay of the Philippines, a lecturer in cross-cultural communication reminded the audience that:

“the major problem confronting many countries today is not the Bible’s **accessibility** but its **significance**, its perceived **relevance** to contemporary life. That biblical literacy is going down even among churchgoing people is indicative of the need to get the Bible read, presented in a form that can compete with the daily newspaper in its potential for attracting readership. This means that national Bible societies should work at producing texts that are not only **digestible** but also speak quite pointedly and prophetically to relevant social issues or major culture themes that need to be addressed from the Word”

(UBS Bulletin,178/179:36)

Another key speaker, Bishop Ole Christian Kvarme of Norway, addressing the challenge of the global village, identified:

“..two basic challenges- the **accessibility of the Bible, and its significance and relevance for contemporary life**” (ibid.45).

He posed the question: “**How can the Bible penetrate and transform the culture of tomorrow?**” (p49). He talked of the need of

“**providing necessary helps which stimulate the oral and visual**

**communication of the biblical text as well as interaction with the biblical story”**

At the Midrand World Assembly, October 10-14, 2000, (see UBS Bulletin 192/193 (2001)), the above UBS mission statement was slightly modified to read:

**“achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures in languages and media which meet the needs of people worldwide in translations that are faithful to the Scripture texts in their original languages, and which communicate the biblical message at prices people can afford and of helping people interact with the Word of God”.**

The last line which speaks of “helping people to interact with the Word of God” is what is really new. This addition has in mind the idea of encouraging people to **engage** with the Word of God, or **encounter** the Word of God. Distribution of Bibles is seen as important but not enough. Accessibility too is admitted to be important but not enough. Bibles have already been translated in a number of languages, and are made available through Bible Society channels as well as that of other agencies. Indeed many people everywhere, including Africa, now have a Bible or even several Bibles in their homes; and in translations in languages they can understand. In many homes or private family libraries, Bibles slowly gather dust and are hardly opened for family or personal Bible reading or study. The question of availability is important but for reasons of encounter or engagement and transformation.

Some representatives of the UBS at a meeting held in 2001 understood the idea of **Scripture engagement or encounter** to emphasize **“making the Scriptures discoverable, accessible, and relevant,”** i.e. **“recoverable and discoverable as sacred Scripture”** and **“accessible as the place of life enhancing and life transforming encounter”** as well as relevant to people in their real life situations and experiences. There is a clear need in our present circumstances for people to acknowledge, to affirm, to celebrate once again the Holy Scriptures as God’s Word, to

recognize and accept the power and authority of the Holy Scriptures, to turn to them as God's Word, as inspired and as relevant to the needs of today, as speaking relevantly to contemporary issues that affect the everyday life of individuals and of diverse communities in our midst and around the world. The Church needs to affirm its belief in the liberative and transformative power of Scripture and its indispensability to the life of the believer and of the church.

There is no doubt that the Bible squarely belongs within the confines of the Church. The Bible is the possession of the Church and serves the Church. This is the very reason why the Bible Societies cannot but continually seek to carry out their task in "partnership and co-operation with all Christian churches and with church related organizations". It is impossible to do it otherwise. The Bible is the foundation document of the Church, its guiding document, its compass point. Without this living Word there would be no reliable basis for Christian identity, no sure basis for the moral and doctrinal teaching of the Church. No sure foundation for Christian mission and outreach.

The Bible has from the very beginning played a key role in the history of the church as well as in the daily life and work of Christian communities throughout the ages. It is inextricably linked to church growth and the expansion of the church and to periods of growth and renewal. In times of crisis, war, tyranny, persecution the Bible has been the one indispensable book believers as well as those on the margins of the Christian faith community turn to. It has proved itself many times over to be a source of encouragement, comfort, hope, courage, etc.

The role of the Bible in evangelism is widely recognized. No evangelist would dream of sharing the Gospel without their Bible or any referenceto its authoritative message. No street preacher, house to house evangelist, church preacher or communicator of the Word of life would dare do so without their Bible. It is like going to do battle without one's weapons. As Arthur Mitchell Chirgwin, a former General Secretary of the London Missionary Society and former UBS Research Secretary observed regarding evangelism "Again and again, and in country after country, the line of

church expansion has been that there was first a Bible, then a convert, then a Church. In cases without number the Bible begins the process. It is the main factor first of all in winning the individual to Christ, and then in his hands, it becomes the main means of bringing a worshipping community into existence". Moreover for Chirgwin: "The Bible more than anything else, brings a man to a decision. It seems to be able to do what private conversation, preaching, and personal counseling often fail to do. It supplies something which pierces through a man's defence and gets right home to his heart and conscience."

David Barrett, a former Anglican chaplain at the University of Nairobi in the late 60s and early 70s, makes a similar point in an article: "The Spread of the Bible and the Growth of the Church in Africa" (UBS Bulletin, 1982, No.128/129:5-18) in which he has African Christianity especially in mind. There he writes as follows: "The role of vernacular translations of the Christian Scriptures in this growth of organized Christianity has been very marked. The Scriptures have motivated the planting of Christianity in Africa at every stage; they have directly caused its expansion in countless regions; they have produced the strong and mature churches which we now observe in most parts of the continent, and they have nurtured them throughout" (p6).

The role and function of the Bible in revitalizing worship and liturgy is well acknowledged in most churches. In fact lively worship and liturgy draws heavily from it. It plays a key role in fostering close christian fellowships through common Bible study, reflection and mediation.

### 3. Bible Translation for Scripture Engagement:

Perhaps the idea of Scripture Engagement is not all that new. It could be argued that Nida's dynamic equivalent translation theory rests on some idea of Scripture encounter or engagement. Nida's early experiences and work in translation were based on extensive work and collaboration with missionaries in non-Christian lands. Thus his 1947 text **Bible Translating**

**an Analysis of Principles and Procedures with special reference to aboriginal languages** opens with the sentence “This book has been prepared to assist missionaries...”(p1) and is well known missionaries of all people are expected to place encounter with the message of the Bible at the top of their agenda. Nida’s involvement in Bible translation was certainly driven by missiological and missionary concerns, namely to make the message of the Bible available to people everywhere with the aim of winning them to the Christian cause. This is what moved Nida. At page 21 he writes: “In many instances missionaries have fallen into the habit of using a specialized vocabulary and the people at the mission station have learned to mimic it to perfection, so that the translation may seem perfectly understandable to this small group but quite inadequate for more extensive distribution and use. Non-Christians may not understand all of the Bible, but it should make some sense to them. The real test of the translation is its intelligibility to the non-Christian, who should be reached by its message”. Nida was concerned about the effects of the translation and about its being understood by all, especially the non-Christian. Similarly Nida was concerned that the Bible should serve the entire church and not just some section of it. He preferred that in cases where there was groups differed “an interpretation not contradictory to the exegetical position of any Christian constituency on the field”(p22) was to be preferred. At the same page 21 of the above book he wrote: “The Bible is the heritage of the entire church and should not be made the means of propagandizing one’s own special theories of interpretation”. The reasoning behind this may be the possibility that it provides for a wider acceptance of the new translation and hence likely to have more impact. Nida’s theory of translation was developed with these aims in mind.

“Dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information. In fact one of the most essential and yet often neglected elements is the expressive factor, for people must also feel as well as understand what is said.” (Nida and Taber 1969:25). In fact for Nida “ultimately the adequacy of the translation must be judged in terms of the way people respond to it” (ibid.24) The point here is that the

translation was to be such that it evoked a response, feedback, or in modern jargon engagement or encounter.

It is the zeal and concern to make the Good News of Jesus accessible to all that is the motivation behind the modern Bible Society movement. Mission and evangelism were the watchwords at the center of this movement, of which we are a part. We cannot therefore understand Nida for example, without understanding his missiological agenda. Nida placed linguistic science at the service of the Gospel and of Bible translation. In the contemporary period, Bible translators no doubt face the same challenge. A leading translation scholar, Douglas Robinson (1991:225-226) calls Nida a subversive, in the sense that he set out to dethrone the popularity of Bible versions which did not any longer make sense to the ordinary person, versions whose words may be English but the grammar is not, “and the sense is quite lacking”(Nida 1964.20-21), versions such as the American Standard Version. Robinson writes as follows:

“One of the best-publicized recent subversions of the KJV/RSV hegemony was Today’s English Version in the mid-sixties best publicized because one of its prime movers was the prolific and persuasive Eugene Nida, translation consultant to the United Bible Societies and the foremost theorist of sense-for-sense and response-for-response Bible translation in our day. It may seem strange to call ‘subversive’ a man who upholds the Bible translation principles of Jerome and Luther but in fact he is as subversive as Jerome and Luther, who similarly burst upon a scene dominated by rigidly fixed expectations and smashed them” (op.cit.p225).

Robinson notes that these fixed expectations and the conviction of some conservative readers that there is one and only one correct Bible translation or version which “they read, or were read to out of, in their childhood” (ibid.), and which is perhaps memorized, tends to become a “nostalgic locus of emotional stability and security”. This kind of translation ceases to communicate. It becomes a tranquilizer. Hence writes Robinson:

“Obviously if the translator wants to *reach* his or her TL reader, to be the instrument not of anesthesia but of conversion, a vehicle not of spiritual death but of awakening, rebirth, new life, there has to be something striking in the translation, something to catch the reader’s attention which is to say, something subversive. To convert, one must subvert. This is obviously true if one is speaking to nonbelievers; but it is also true if one is speaking to believers who are staid in their ways. Wake up, you Pharisees!” (op.cit.226)

Robinson concludes by correctly noting that Nida “directs the Bible Society’s subversion at the average Bible reader, the ordinary reader, the fourth-grade reader for whom newspapers are written”(ibid.).

The leaders of the Bible Society movement meeting at Midrand in 2000 did not therefore actually introduce a new idea. Their aim was to intensify this idea, to diversify it, to find ways of implementing it in the diversity of situations where the Bible Society is actively involved.

The Direction from Midrand commits members to advancing and enhancing the common task in a world “in which around 300 million people speak languages which lack any published portion of God’s Word, one half of the world is functionally non-literate, a majority of the citizens are classed by the United Nations as ‘absolutely poor’ and millions are subject to the pressures of religious fundamentalisms or tempted by the powerful voices of a revived paganism” and moreover where “many Scriptures already distributed are often inadequately used. In this context those at Midrand committed themselves to:

▷**Produce scriptures in a format that will encourage people to read or otherwise encounter God’s Word** with special attention to groups concerned with specific issues (such as youth, family and poverty) and situations (such as AIDS and natural disasters) and available in all formats, including non-print media.

▷**Create new products that encourage people to understand and engage personally with Scripture**

▷ **Look for ways in which we can work with others in holistic programs**, serving the whole person, recognizing our unique contribution of bringing the Word of life and Hope to people in need.

▷ **Develop appropriate biblical materials for non literate people and new readers.**

#### 4. The Challenges on the Road Ahead:

Contemporary Bible translators are not treading an entirely new path. It is clear that Eugene Nida and his colleagues have cleared the path and laid a firm foundation for the challenges of today. It is true that there have been developments in the field of translation studies which are bound to contribute to a clearer understanding of the translation task, process, tools, techniques, etc. The emphases made at Midrand regarding interconfessional cooperation and sharing of resources (skills, gift, insight, experience and finance), strategic partnerships, encouragement of positive change in the domains of governance and leadership structures, funding frameworks, application of new technologies, instruments for evaluating effectiveness and relevance, etc. should hopefully make a difference in meeting the enormous challenge.

The **Direction from Midrand** makes it clear that the task ahead is not only unfinished but has expanded, greatly diversified and become much more complex, requiring a greater sensitivity and expertise. Midrand has recognized the great diversity and pluralism in the audiences we deal with. During the Nida era the aim was to produce common language translations in all major languages. Presently the emphases is on recognizing the many unmet and urgent Scripture needs out there. These in turn call for a diversity of texts or translations in relevant media and formats answering to the perceived needs. For example Scriptures created specifically for liturgical use, evangelistic use, pedagogical/educational use in churches, seminaries, colleges, schools, etc are recognized in many situations as a need. Scriptures intended for specific audiences such as youth, children,

people of diverse religious/cultural traditions, theological students, pastors, etc will need to be considered in response to audience and market demand. In addition a variety of study helps for readers will need to be considered to help readers understand better the source text cultures such as those that provide explanations of key terms, obscure customs and practices, historical backgrounds to places, events, geographical backgrounds to places, itineraries, battles, etc, biographical backgrounds to persons, etc.

A number of key decisions will become necessary at the beginning of any translation or product development planning exercise. For example it will become necessary to decide on the primary skopos/brief/expected function and use of any such product, decide on the primary intended audience for such a product (eg youth, women, children, non-christian, average person, etc., decide on the language level and type, dialect, medium to be used print, non-print, audio, audio visual, multi media, etc. The confessional status of the product may also become an issue. The preference is for interconfessional products but there will certainly be room for products whose primary target audience are from a single confession or a few confessions sharing certain characteristics. Clearly it will now no longer be possible for translators to commence any translation effort without thinking through these issues and making certain choices.

The challenges ahead are tough and call for a greater commitment, professionalism and higher level skills from translators. Translators are however not on their own. Their work is a ministry of the Church and done from that context. With adequate support and availability of necessary resources from the churches the burden will be made lighter. In the final analysis the work is God's and He will see to it.