

# Reflections on the Bible Society Movement and Bible Translation: From Impact to Engagement

Philip A. Noss\*

*The way that the authors of scripture named God signifies their own life of communion with God in their particular historical situation, and their illumination by God's grace which makes their human words about God the vehicle of God's self-revelation.<sup>1)</sup>*

## 1. Introduction<sup>2)</sup>

In this paper we will very briefly trace the translation work of the Bible Society Movement, especially as it has moved from a primary emphasis on the communication of the Gospel in common language translations to the recognition of a need in our world today for active engagement with the Scriptures. The translated Bible has had a tremendous impact on the world as is evident from the very fact that the Christian church exists in all parts of the world. Lamin Sanneh, a theologian from the Gambia declares, "It is impossible to over-estimate the revolutionary impact of Christian translation".<sup>3)</sup> But the impact is not the same for new Christians as for mature Christians, or for newly established churches as for long-established churches. It is not the same in all parts of the world, or in all languages. Nevertheless, the translators and the churches that sponsor Scripture translation believe that the translated Word can and does bring about a response. Thus, we can state the hypothesis that the translation of the Biblical text is influential on a

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\* United Bible Societies Translation Services Coordinator

1) Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2000), 46.

2) I would express appreciation to Thomas Kaut, Becky Noss, Stephanie Uhlmann and Ernst Wendland for their contributions on linguistic data during the writing of this paper.

3) Lamin Sanneh, "Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation," Philip C. Stine, ed., *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: the Last 200 Years* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 17.

practical level in people's lives, and on a theoretical level in the discussion of Biblical truths and theology. In this paper we will consider briefly the role of Bible translators and the significance and impact of terms and expressions that they adopt in their work. We will take as an example God's self-revelation in the Bible through terms that are used for "God" and for his name. We will suggest that translators engage with the Scriptures as they carry out their task. As they use the structures of language they become participants in God's revelation of himself through his translated Word, and it is to this Divine revelation that readers and listeners are called into engagement through the Word.

## 2. The Bible Society Movement and Translation

The Bible Society Movement traces its roots back two centuries to a young girl named Mary Jones who lived in the land of Wales in Great Britain and who wanted a Bible of her very own in her own language. The story tells of how she earned and saved her pennies over several years until she had enough money to buy a Bible. She walked on the long journey to where a pastor lived from whom she thought she could buy a Bible, but none was available. The story ended happily, however, when she was able to obtain a Bible in the Welsh language. Mary Jones' experience gave birth to the Bible Society Movement in 1804, two hundred years ago this year.

For the scientific development of translation theory we go back to the work of Eugene Nida and his translation consultant colleagues in the United Bible Societies and to their peers in Wycliffe Bible Translators during the second half of the last century. They developed a theory that was known as Dynamic Equivalence that they spread throughout the world of Bible translation. It was based on principles of linguistic and communication theory. It affirmed the premise that everything that could be said in one language could be said in another.<sup>4)</sup> This approach to translation has influenced virtually every modern translation of the Bible.

The Bible Societies encouraged translations in the everyday level of language that was understood and spoken by the majority of the speakers of a given language.

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4) Nida and Taber's statement that "Anything that can be said in one language can be said in another," became an axiom for translators, to which they attached a condition, "unless the form is an essential element of the message". See also, Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), 4.

These came to be called “Common Language” (CL) versions.

Dynamic equivalence was easy to use and easy to abuse, as some translators happily created translations that were sometimes too dynamic. Eugene Nida and his colleague Jan de Waard undertook to restate their approach in a book that they called *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*.<sup>5)</sup> Functional equivalence replaced the earlier dynamic equivalence, and they describe it as follows:

...to employ a functionally equivalent set of forms which in so far as possible will match the meaning of the original source-language text.<sup>6)</sup>

Functional equivalence ... means thoroughly understanding not only the meaning of the source text but also the manner in which the intended receptors of a text were likely to understand it in the receptor language.<sup>7)</sup>

The emphasis was placed not only on communicating the message of the original language text, but on bringing about the same response on the part of the modern reader as the reader or the listener to the original text might have experienced.

The response of the reader or the listener to the text is not a mechanical one and it is not always a predictable one. Ernst-August Gutt of SIL and the Wycliffe Bible Translators in his work on “relevance theory” highlights and analyzes the psychological factors that are involved in communication and how these relate to translation.<sup>8)</sup> In *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*<sup>9)</sup> Timothy Wilt and colleagues of his in the United Bible Societies (UBS) spell out recent developments in several fields that have an influence on Bible translation today. Most notably, Wilt outlines in a formal way the various “frames” that inter-relate to determine the shape that a translation will take. The book also draws attention to an special application of the functional equivalence approach that is called Literary Functional Equivalence (LiFE) by Ernst Wendland.<sup>10)</sup>

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5) Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

6) *Ibid.*, 36.

7) *Ibid.*, 9.

8) Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000).

9) Timothy Wilt, *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2003).

Thus, the story of Bible translation in the Bible Societies and their sister organizations continues as essentially the same task with new insights surrounding and influencing it. Although this is to oversimplify, we may say that our perception of translation has moved from a transfer of the message from one language to another, to a more functional approach where the translated message should bring about the same response in the new recipient of the message as for the first recipient, to asking questions about “relevance” in seeking to communicate efficiently and effectively, and now most recently to looking at the structures and contexts that facilitate or hinder communication through the translation process.

At the same time, a similar development has been taking place in the UBS Fellowship. Today there are at least Scripture portions in nearly 2500 of the world’s more than 6000 living languages. Each year hundreds of millions of Bibles, New Testaments, Scripture portions and selections are distributed throughout the world, but is it enough to distribute products to the receptor? In May 2000 the UBS General Secretary at that time, the Rev. Fergus Macdonald, in his annual report entitled, “From First to Twenty-first: The Bible Societies and Scripture Engagement,” announced that “Scripture engagement is paramount because, unless Scripture engages with its audience, it fails to fulfil its purpose”.<sup>11)</sup> In June of the same year, the former UBS Translation Services Coordinator Basil Rebera called upon the Bible Societies to unite together in a common task of “bringing about an encounter in Scripture, of all people, with God in Christ, who, aided by the Holy Spirit, will be transformed by that encounter”.<sup>12)</sup>

In today’s post-colonial post-modern world, as well as in the most traditional communities, we as translators are called to translate the Bible in ways that will engage the readers and listeners with its Message of Good News.<sup>13)</sup> We may ask ourselves how the translator engages with the text, how the translated text engages

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10) Ibid., 179-230.

11) Unpublished annual report presented to the UBS Executive Committee at its 22-26 May 2000 meeting in Amman, Jordan.

12) Unpublished paper entitled “Postcolonial Challenges: Asia, Africa and Latin America” presented at the UBS Program Consultation in Bangkok, Thailand, June 5-9, 2000.

13) A UBS working group has adopted the following definition of Scripture Engagement:

Scripture Engagement is a concept that emphasizes making the Scriptures discoverable, accessible, and relevant, that is,

- Making the Bible recoverable and discoverable as sacred Scripture
- Making Scripture accessible as the place of life-enhancing and life-transforming encounter

the reader and listener, and how the church that receives the translation engages with the translated Scripture.

### 3. Translation and Sacred Text

Although there are many descriptions of translation, it is not easy to agree on a simple and accurate definition. A dictionary definition might begin with the verb “to translate” which is “to express or be capable of being expressed in another language or dialect”. Translation is then “the act of translating or the state of being translated,” and a translation is “something that is or has been translated”.<sup>14)</sup>

A more technical definition of translation may be found in a specialized reference work such as the *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*.<sup>15)</sup>:

In the broad sense, ‘translation’ refers to the process and result of transferring a text from the **source language** into the **target language**.

In the narrow sense, it refers to rendering a written text into another language as opposed to simultaneously **interpreting** spoken language.

Mildred Larson entitles her pedagogical work on translation, *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence*, and she defines translation as “transferring the **meaning** of the source language into the receptor language”.<sup>16)</sup> The title of Mona Baker’s textbook on translation, *In Other Words*<sup>17)</sup>, (also implies that a message is being expressed. In her introduction she refers to the “‘meaning’ of single words and expressions,” she speaks of “the role played by word order in structuring messages at text level,” and she describes “how texts are used in communicative situations”.<sup>18)</sup>

In his classic work *Toward a Science of Translating*, Eugene Nida, instead of providing a definition of translation, offered the following four basic requirements

14) *Collins English Dictionary*, 3rd. ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 1635-1636.

15) Hadumod Bussmann, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, Gregory P. Trauth and Kerstin Kazzazi, trans. and eds. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 495.

16) Mildred A. Larson, *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), 2.

17) Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A course book on translation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

18) *Ibid.*, 5.

of a translation<sup>19</sup>):

- Making sense
- Conveying the spirit and manner of the original
- Having a natural and easy form of expression
- Producing a similar response

These definitions and the qualities required of a translation all imply that something more than a text is involved in the process of translation. The text is the form, the signs, that contain or express a message that is being transferred from one code to another, that is, from one language to another. This was reflected in Nida's emphasis upon the distinction of content and form and his assertion that "correspondence in meaning must have priority over correspondence in style".<sup>20</sup> This distinction between content and form was the basic difference between functional equivalence translation and formal equivalence translation. The first emphasized the importance of the meaning; the second placed emphasis on keeping the same form in the translation as in the original text.

As we have noted, Eugene Nida stated that a translation should produce a similar response to the original text. If that is true, it is necessary to determine the type of text that is being translated, its original purpose, and the purpose for which it is being translated. Very often a broad distinction is made between translation of literary works and translation of technical works. The first are what is considered to be literature, and in today's world this may include publications such as advertisements and commercials as well as classic literary masterpieces. Technical works include legal briefs, medical writings, contracts, agreements of diverse sorts, and many other similar formal documents. The various types of text must be translated differently according to the needs for which they are being translated, and the translated product will differ significantly from one variety of text to the next.

However, Eugene Nida was writing primarily about a particular type of text, namely, sacred text. This is text that belongs to a community of faith. The communal repertoire comprises a canon that has been adopted by the community of believers for religious purposes. The text may be oral as in the case of the Sanskrit

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19) Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translatin* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 164.

20) *Ibid.*, 164.

Vedas of Hinduism, or it may be written as the Koran of Islam and the Bible of Christendom. Because the text has been adopted by a specific community, its interpretation is largely determined by the wishes of that community. In fact, the canon may have a long history of interpretation. The formal study of the text to determine its meaning is called “exegesis” which Nida and Taber defined as “reconstructing the communication event with all its implications”.<sup>21)</sup> What is discovered or reconstructed through good exegesis is considered to be the message that must be expressed and communicated through translation. If the finished translation is judged not to meet the needs and expectations of its users, it may meet with rejection.<sup>22)</sup>

The Bible can be translated as literature, because much of it takes the form of literary genres, myth, legend, allegory, poetry, and song, to name only some of the most prominent. Other parts of the Bible are technical text, for instance, the genealogies in Genesis and in Matthew and Luke, the lists of the exiled families of Israel that returned to Jerusalem in Ezra and Nehemiah, the ritual regulations in Leviticus, and the instructions and descriptions of building the ark in Genesis, the tabernacle in Exodus, the Temple in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and the New Temple in Ezekiel. These biblical texts must be translated according to the norms of their respective genres, taking into account what is appropriate in the receptor language and culture. But their significance today lies neither primarily in their literary character, nor in their detailed instructions. Nor are they translated especially to provide information and knowledge for modern-day readers and scholars about the world and culture of the Hebrews of the Old Testament or of the Jews of the New Testament, as is the case for many translations of ancient texts, for example, Buddhist texts that are translated from Tibetan.<sup>23)</sup>

The importance of a biblical text lies in its acceptance by the faith community as “the Word of God”. The motivation for its translation is found in the understanding of its Message by the Christian community. For translators of the Bible, de Waard and Nida affirm that the message is not only important as the text that they will

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21) Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 7.

22) Timothy Wilt refers to this as the organization frame of communication, and he uses the term “gatekeeping” for the basic organization need to control the content and quality of a product. See also, Timothy Wilt, *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, 47, 51. Exegetes and translation consultants are therefore gatekeepers in the translation of biblical text.

23) Doboomb Tulku, *Buddhist Translations: Problems and Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

translate, but because the message is the “Good News” and therefore it has a special purpose. “The role of the message provides the essential basis for a theology of translation,” they write.<sup>24)</sup> This is taken in terms of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, especially in the words, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (RSV). In the words of the Vietnam-born Catholic theologian, Father Peter Phan<sup>25)</sup>:

The implicit theological principle behind the translation of the Bible into the vernacular is the recognition that all cultures, and the languages in which they are embodied, are equally worthy in God’s eyes and therefore capable of bearing the divine message.

The model for translation, in this case oral and not written translation, occurred at the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles when those who had come together in Jerusalem from “every nation under heaven” heard the apostles speaking, and they declared, “We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:5, 11 RSV). Jesus Christ himself is the Logos, the Word who became Incarnate. So likewise, the biblical Word must be translated into other languages, undergoing its own reincarnation again and again.<sup>26)</sup>

The Bible is believed by the Christian community to be God’s revelation. If this is so, the translation of the Bible participates in the act of God’s revelation. As it is translated into new languages, the potential of the new language, its constraints and its possibilities provide further revelation of God through human language. Herein lies the significance and the unique impact of the translation of the Bible as sacred text.

#### 4. The Impact of Terms for God

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24) Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, 36.

25) Peter C. Phan, *In Our own Tongues: Perspectives on Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), 170.

26) Lamin Sanneh, a well-known theologian and missiologist from the Gambia writes of “the *logo* concept wherein any and all languages may confidently be adopted for God’s word”. See also, Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989), 209.

For those who accept that the Bible is God's revelation of himself, the terms that are chosen to refer to him will influence the people's understanding of the revelation through their language. The structure of the language, its vocabulary and its grammar, influence its impact through the perception and comprehension of the biblical truths that are expressed in the new language.<sup>27)</sup>

In any text there are key terms through which themes are developed and by which the narrative or the plot is carried forward to its climax and conclusion. This is as true of technical text as it is of literary text. Key terms may be the names of personages as well as places and objects that are important to the characters, or they may be descriptive or abstract terms or even verbs that are repeated in ways that significantly shape the message that is being communicated.

In the translation of sacred text key terms express concepts of primary importance to the community that considers the text to be sacred. Thus key biblical terms are central to the believers' understanding of the Christian faith. In order for the essential message of the Bible to be understood by a new receptor community, key terms must be translated accurately and meaningfully.<sup>28)</sup> These words may denote beings like gods and angels and cherubim, they may be objects like tabernacle and synagogue and cross, they may be concepts like sin and guilt and forgiveness and faith, or rituals like sacrifice and baptism. They may be technical objects like names of plants and trees, hyssop and cedars, for instance, or of precious stones like rubies and carnelian.

The word or expression that is used for "God" is a crucially important key term in the translation of the Bible. How to refer to the God of the Bible is a major challenge for translation. This is not only because it is a translation problem in its own right, but also because the term that is chosen to refer to God will have a very

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27) Miguel A. De La Torre expresses a similar idea when he writes, "To read the Bible in Spanish is to find different ways of understanding the Scriptures, ways that expand and challenge the normative interpretations of the dominant culture". See also, Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002), 25.

28) Although it does not use the expression "key terms", the document "*Liturgiam Authenticam: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publications of the Books of the Roman Liturgy*" emphasizes the importance of historical precedent and consistency in the translation of terms that have liturgical and theological importance for the Church; See also, "*Liturgiam Authenticam: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy*," (Rome: Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2001).

important effect on the theology of the new faith community.

Contrary to the tradition of Islam where the Arabic name *Allah* is always used, translators of the Bible have usually adopted a local word for “God” just as the translators of the Septuagint did in Greek.<sup>29)</sup> In Swahili the name for God is the ancient Bantu term, *Mungu*, in Zulu it is a descriptive term, *Nkulunkulu*, the “Great Great One”. In some languages the term for God is associated with features of nature, “Rain” among the Zime in Chad, and “Sun” among the Samba of Cameroon and Nigeria. In some cultures God may be referred to by a feminine name, for instance, *Masing* of the Mundang in Cameroon, *Yafray* of the Lame in Chad, and *Looa* of the Iraqw in Tanzania.

Clearly, the historical and cultural understanding of the term that is selected to render אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים of the Old Testament and θεός of the New Testament will contribute to the theological understanding of the translated Bible. John Mbiti quotes the final communiqué of the conference of African theologians in Accra in 1977 that affirms, “The Bible is the basic source of African theology, because it is the primary witness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ”.<sup>30)</sup> Thus, the theological perception of God is filtered both through the translated Bible and the teachings of the ancestors.

The Samba have two names for God, *Vanèb*, the creator God and *Yaama*, the sun. All that *Vanèb* has created is in dwelt by his presence, and this is called *Vanèb*’s child or children. *Yaama*, the sun, is the permanent dwelling place of *Vanèb*’s presence and is thus identified with *Vanèb* himself. The sun that shines upon all humankind provides light and guidance for life. Some Samba Christians refer to the God of the Bible as *Vanèb* while others call him *Yaama*. Bouba Bernard, a Samba academic, has suggested that *Yaama* may be identified with the Holy Spirit through whom Christians are led to faith in a similar way to how *Yaama* the sun leads to *Vanèb*. While proposing that *Yaama* may be theologized in terms of the Holy Spirit, he asks if both names could not refer to the God of the Old Testament who was known by many names.<sup>31)</sup>

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29) Cyrus the King of Persia at the time of the Exile in Babylon had the policy of using the titles of the gods of the people that he conquered. Undoubtedly this was good political practice. In Ezra 1:2 he refers to the God of Israel by the name YHWH and the title “God of heaven” that was usually used by the Israelites themselves to refer to their God thereby drawing attention to the fact that he was superior to all the other gods.

30) John Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 28.

31) Bernard, Bouba, “Is God Vanèb or Yaama?,” *Missiology* 1:1 (1973), 111.

The solutions that have been found for the choice of God's name in cultures where it is a name for a female deity have tended to focus on the translation problem of making a feminine name represent the male God of the Old Testament. In the Mundang language the name of the feminine deity was retained without severe grammatical inconvenience because the language does not have grammatical gender. The third person pronoun is neutral referring to both male and female. Accordingly, *Masing* could be presented to the Christian community as the masculine God of the Bible, we are told.<sup>32)</sup>

The neighboring Lame, also called P'évé, speak a language that has grammatical gender. To refer to *Yafray* "Mother of the heavens", the female deity of Lame tradition, through the use of masculine grammatical markers would be just as unacceptable as attributing masculine attributes and deeds to her. *Ifray*, the simple form of the divine name, was used in tradition to refer to the one who gave birth to a son and a daughter thereby creating human beings. The solution that was finally arrived at in the translation of the New Testament retains the short form of the name, it uses feminine pronouns, and it avoids explicit reference to "Our Father," saying instead, "We are your children".<sup>33)</sup>

In Tanzania the Iraqw name for God is the feminine *Looa*. It was she who created the world, it is she who gives life to all, and she is called "the Mother of all". *Looa* possesses many of the characteristics of the God of the Old Testament. She is merciful, she is the sun, the source of light, and it is to her that all Iraqw pray for care and protection. In contrast to *Looa*, the masculine deity in Iraqw belief is the devil, the cause of evil, the one who must be placated.<sup>34)</sup> The translators decided to borrow the Swahili name for God because they felt "that Looa's 'femininity' is incompatible with Yahweh's believed 'masculinity'".<sup>35)</sup>

Many theologians through history have observed that God is portrayed in the Bible not only with masculine qualities, but with feminine qualities as well. They have noted that the feminine traits of compassion and mercy are demonstrated by

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32) Venberg, Rodney, "The Problem of a Female Deity in Translation," *The Bible Translator* 22:2 (1971), 68.

33) *Ibid.*, 70.

34) Aloo Osotsi Mojola, "A 'Female' God in East Africa - or the problem of Translating God's Name among the Iraqw of Mbulu, Tanzania," *Current Trends in Scripture Translation: UBS Bulletin* 170/171 (1994), 89.

35) *Ibid.*, 87.

God again and again in his covenant relationship with his people.<sup>36</sup> In Isaiah 42:14 the prophet uses the image of the woman in labor, in 46:3 he uses the metaphor of a mother carrying her children from the womb, in 49:15 he uses the metaphor of the nursing mother, and in 66:13 we find the image of a mother comforting her child. In the New Testament Jesus compares himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). Could not and should not African names for God be used by translators where they would be the right name culturally and where they would enhance our understanding of the God of the Bible, we might ask.

Rose Teteki Abbey, an ordained Presbyterian minister from Ghana, cites the example of *Ataa Naa Nyonmo*, “the Father Mother God” of the Gã people in Ghana. This name, she observes, “implies and stresses the maleness and femaleness of God”.<sup>37</sup> She argues that God is neither a man nor a woman, that these are only images to help us understand God and our relationship with God better.<sup>38</sup> She maintains that though the Gã image of a Father Mother God has been adopted by Gã Christians, “the etymology has had little impact on their image of God”.<sup>39</sup> Though the expression that was adopted in translation could have enriched their understanding of God, it has not done so, she says. For this loss she indicts the church, pointing to the predominantly patriarchal stance of church leaders.<sup>40</sup>

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36) Early church fathers recognized the feminine attributes of God. Clement spoke of the motherly nature of God’s love, and St. Gregory of Palamas recognized Christ’s tenderness and care like that of a mother for her children. See also, Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2000), 53.

37) Rose Teteki Abbey, “Rediscovering Ataa Naa Nyonmo - The Father Mother God,” Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, eds., *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 141.

38) The Cuban American theologian Miguel De La Torre writes, “God is both male and female, and thus God is neither male nor female”. See also, Miguel De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 86.

39) *Ibid.*, 141.

40) Although the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye recognizes that in some African cultures masculine features are attributed to God, and in others feminine features are attributed, she concludes that generally “most African men and women would say that the gender of God is irrelevant to their theology and spirituality”. However, she adds that both Christianity and Islam have established a patriarchal God, with the result that “Women struggle to understand God”. See also, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 43.

## 5. “What is his name?”

No greater example of the impact of the words of Scripture and of engagement with Scripture can be found than in the story Moses and the burning bush in the Book of Exodus. Moses had been given instructions to carry out a mission in Egypt and he wanted to know the authority under which he would present himself to the Israelites. He knew that he was being sent by God who was speaking to him through the burning bush and who had identified himself in the words, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). However, Moses wanted to know God’s identity by his name, and he asked what he should say if the people asked, “What is his name?” (Exodus 3:14).

This is a common and ordinary question that each language asks in its own way. Some cultures ask for one’s name as though it were an object and would translate, “*What* is his name?” while other cultures directly associate the name with the person and would ask very politely, “*Who* is his name?” In some languages the possessive pronoun “his” may reflect the social status of the person being referred to; in others, the question itself may be formed in such a way as to indicate the honor that must be attributed to the one to whom the question is being asked. The form of the verb may require the translator to indicate whether there is permanence or temporariness in the situation. These are formal characteristics of language that reflect cultural distinctions and that are routine matters for the translator to treat.

The answer to Moses’ question, however, offers a series of problems to the translator. Implicit in the text is God’s reply, “My name is...”. Some translators may state this explicitly, even though the Hebrew text does not include this statement. The apparent answer to Moses’ question is given in three Hebrew words that some translations transliterate, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh” (Tanakh). Most versions attempt to translate the meaning of the Hebrew construction as RSV has done, “I AM WHO I AM” in which the relative pronoun “who” renders the Hebrew relative pronoun *’asher*. This response is, however, not the name but apparently the explanation for the name that occurs in the following verse where Moses is instructed to tell the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you” (RSV).

For translators encountering this text today, the UBS *Handbook on Exodus* provides the following information<sup>41</sup>):

**I AM WHO I AM** is not the name; it is an intentional play on the word **I AM**, the word on which the name *YHWH* in verse 15 is based. This roundabout reply is not as difficult to translate as it is to understand. Various attempts have been made to translate it...

The word for **I AM** (אֲנִי) is the verb “to be” in the first person singular; the name *YHWH* (probably pronounced “Yehweh”) is an early form of this same verb in the third person singular. The significance of the name is thus established, but its precise meaning is not clear; it may be expressed in a variety of ways.

The translator is given an explanation by the Handbook, but is warned that the precise meaning of the text is not easy to understand. The translator is thus faced with two tasks, first, to determine what should be expressed, and secondly, how this should be expressed in the receptor language. The translator’s problem is both how to refer to the person and how to render the state or quality represented by the Hebrew verb form that is translated in RSV as “I AM”. The same questions of honorific pronoun and of permanence or temporariness may be raised as were encountered in the question, “What is his name?” But there is a feature of the Hebrew verb that, from the perspective of many languages, appears to constitute ambiguity. What is the tense of the verb “to be”? The English “I AM” is present time, but the Hebrew verb does not specify time. The Hebrew verb system is not a tense system, but a system that focuses on aspect, whether the action is completed or not. The verb form אֲנִי is an imperfect form, that is, it represents an event or state as not completed.<sup>42)</sup>

The very first translators in the history of Bible translation encountered this problem. The Septuagint translators expressed the meaning of the Hebrew with the Greek sentence ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν meaning “I am the one being,” The word “being” is a present participle meaning, “I am the one who is”. Thus the translation, because of the structure of the Greek language, makes the meaning more explicit, at the same time reducing the apparent ambiguity or scope of the Hebrew. The Greek focuses on

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41) Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 68.

42) The Hebrew verb form is a qal imperfect that, according to John Durham, refers to “active being”. He offers the rendering “I am being that I am being” or “I am the Is-ing One”. See also, John Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 39.

the person by inserting an independent first person pronoun,<sup>43)</sup> while emphasizing the timelessness of God's nature.

The theological significance of this Greek translation may be observed in the New Testament book of the Apocalypse where the Apostle John identifies the source of the Letters to the Seven Churches as “the one who is and who was and who is to come” (Apoc. 1:4, 8 RSV). The Greek structure of this phrase imitates and repeats the Septuagint translation in Exodus 3:14 ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, literally, “the one being and the one who was and the one who is coming”.<sup>44)</sup> This is perhaps the fullest expression of the meaning of the Hebrew clause אֲדֹנָי אֲשֶׁר אֲדֹנָי. Through the form of the translation as required by its Greek linguistic structure, the identity of God has been further revealed.

The Vulgate of Jerome, the Latin translation that became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for a thousand years, translates very closely to the Hebrew in its rendering, *Ego sum qui sum*, literally, “I am who I am”. In the first clause the first person pronoun is stated with the verb “to be” in the first person, while in the relative clause the person is left implicit in the verb form. However, the translation restricts the meaning to a present time that does not necessarily have open-ended timeless implications as the Hebrew does, and as its Greek rendering does.

As the Handbook observes, various attempts to translate the Hebrew clause have been made (please see examples in Appendix). Many versions insert a footnote commenting that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain and that various translations are possible. The King James Version translates the Hebrew relative pronoun as an impersonal “that” in its rendering I AM THAT I AM. RSV's I AM WHO I AM is possibly the translation that is most common; however, it adds a footnote that offers two alternatives, I AM WHAT I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I

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43) Hebrew also possesses independent pronouns, but the independent first person pronoun does not occur in this text.

44) In Greek there is no imperfect participle, but the author creates one to parallel the present participle of “to be” and the present participle of “to come” with its present and future implications. A forced literal translation of ὁ ἦν would be “the one was-ing”. This construction follows a preposition “from” that normally requires a genitive, but here it is nominative. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* observes that the author's formula “is designed to preserve the sanctity of self-designation”. See also, Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 398.

WILL BE. The Good News Bible offers a slight variation, “I will be who I will be”.

The German Common Language translation of 1991 translates *Ich bin der Ich-bin-da* meaning “I am the I-am-there,” that is, “I am the I-exist”. The 1997 version renders it *Ich bin da* simply “I exist”. The emphasis in these CL translations is on God’s existence, which is another way of understanding the timeless nature of God that is implicit in the Hebrew original.

Both Hebrew and the Indo-European languages express the state of “being” by means of verbs, but some languages do not have a verb “to be” and other languages that do have an equivalent verb may nevertheless express the notion of “being” without using a verb. In this case how can the description God gave Moses of himself be expressed?

The Gbaya language of Cameroon and the Central African Republic uses four different constructions to express “to be”. To be a person or an object is different from being described or being located or being counted. In God’s reply to Moses he describes himself in relation to himself. “I am the one who is” can be stated in Gbaya, but the sentence cannot end without a conclusion. A special form for “being” must link the subject and what follows in the predicate. It cannot simply end with the equivalent of “I am”. Therefore, the Gbaya translation has said, “I am the one who is present,” that is, “the one who exists”. This is similar in meaning to the German CL translations, though it uses different grammatical form. By making this statement, God is drawing attention to his existence and to his presence, by implication, in a way that differs from the existence of the created universe. It is permanent and awesome.<sup>45)</sup>

Bantu languages possess a verb “to be” that also means “to become”, but in this context they may use a non-verbal construction. The Chichewa form *NDILIPO* meaning “I AM HERE/PRESENT” is, in Ernst Wendland’s words, a “mysterious” and “timeless utterance”.<sup>46)</sup> It emphasizes God’s being and his immediate presence, and like the Gbaya rendering above, it sets God apart in a unique category of presence and existence that is all his own. The Gbaya and Chichewa translations

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45) Gbaya and many other African oral traditions frequently use plays on words and double-entendres in names similarly to the command in Exodus 3:15, “Tell them that “I AM” has sent you”.

46) Personal communication of October 28, 2004. See also, Ernst Wendland, “The Case for *CHAUTA*,” *The Bible Translator* 43:4 (1992), 432-433. The Chichewa construction is composed of the emphatic form of the first person prefix plus the verb “to be” and the locative enclitic.

therefore draw out and highlight special aspects of the statement of the Hebrew words that is constrained by the lexicon and grammar of the Hebrew language.

Languages are never fully equivalent and translations never perfectly match the original or each other. R.S. Sugirtharajah is a Sri Lankan theologian who writes from a post-colonial perspective. He makes the following statement<sup>47)</sup>:

In the process of translating, non-biblical languages should be allowed to interrogate and even radically disrupt biblical languages. Biblical languages must be willing to be affected by the ‘other’ rather than merely affecting the ‘other’”.

In translation there is clearly mutual disruption between biblical and non-biblical languages as has been illustrated through the examples cited above, but the issue is more profound than linguistics alone. It is confessional because it relates to the community’s understanding of the Word of God. We recognize that no language can completely express and reveal who God is; nevertheless, as the Orthodox theologian Emmanuel Clapsis has written, “The totality of the many names by which we address God provides, through their own specificity, some glimpses of God’s glory”.<sup>48)</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The story of Bible translation from the very first translation in Egypt two centuries before the birth of Christ to present-day translation projects with the latest computer software and media equipment has been and continues to be the expression of the revelation of God to humanity and the communication of his Message to humankind for encounter and engagement. For reasons known only to himself, God chose to use language, the human means of communication, first in the oral mode and then in the written mode. Since the experience of the disciples at the first Pentecost, people have been hearing of the great and marvelous deeds of God in their own languages. The languages are God’s gift to them, his Word is his gift to

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47) R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172-173.

48) Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation*, 46.

them, and that Word expressed in their language is his revelation to them. This is not to affirm with Augustine that the Holy Spirit inspires translators to say different things in the translation than in the original text, but it is to claim that the work of the translator is more than merely translating equivalent words, it is more than providing a framework for local theologizing - it is to participate through their "human words" in "God's self-revelation" and in the revelation of his saving deeds on behalf of his people.

\* Keyword

functional equivalence, Bible Society Movement, Bible translation, model for translation, terms for God.

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**Appendix\***

**“What is his name?”**

<b>Hebrew</b>	היהה רשא היהה
<b>Septuagint</b>	ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν
<b>Vulgate</b>	Ego sum qui sum
<b>King James 1611</b>	I AM THAT I AM
<b>Knox 44</b>	I am the God who IS
<b>RSV 52</b>	I AM WHO I AM
<b>Amplified 65</b>	I AM WHO I AM <i>and</i> WHAT I AM, <i>and</i> I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE
<b>English CL 76</b>	I am who I am
<b>Tanakh 85</b>	Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh
<b>New Living 96</b>	I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS
<b>The Street Bible 03</b>	I am who I am and I will be who I will be
<b>Louis Segond 68</b>	Je suis qui je suis (I am who I am)
<b>French CL 82</b>	JE SUIS QUI JE SUIS (I am who I am)
<b>Chouraqui 85</b>	Èhiè <i>ashèr</i> èhiè! Je serai qui je serai
<b>Bayard 01</b>	<i>Ehyeh asher ehyeh</i> , “Je serai: je suis” (I will be: I am)
<b>Luther 84</b>	Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde (I am the one that I am)
<b>Zurich Bible 42</b>	Ich bin, der ich bin. (I am, who I am)
<b>German CL 91</b>	Ich bin der Ich-bin-da
<b>German CL 97</b>	Ich bin da (I exist)
<b>Reina-Valera 60</b>	YO SOY EL QUE SOY (I am who I am)
<b>Spanish CL 79</b>	YO SOY EL QUE SOY (I am who I am)

<b>Chichewa CL 94</b>	NDILIPO (I am here/present)
<b>Fulfulde CL 95</b>	Min woni mo ngonmi (I am the one who I am)
<b>Gbaya CL 95</b>	Mi nε Wi nε āā sεnε (I am the One who is present/exists)
<b>Haitian CL 98</b>	Sa m ye a se sa m ye (That which I am is what I am)
<b>Sango Prot 66</b>	Mbi yeke so mbi yeke (I am this I am)
<b>Sango RC 82</b>	Mbi yeke lo so mbi yeke (I am the one who I am)
<b>Swahili Roehl 37</b>	Nitakuwa niliyekuwa (I will be the one who I was)
Swahili Union 66	MIMI NIKO AMBAYE NIKO (I am present/exist the one who I exist)
<b>Swahili CL 95</b>	MIMI NDIYE NILIYE (I am the one who I am)
<b>Tok Pisin CL 89</b>	Mi Yet Mi Stap Olsem (I still am like this)

\* Note: “CL” after a name or a language indicates that the version is a common language translation according to the principles of dynamic/functional equivalence.

<Abstract>

## 성서공회운동의 시작과 성서번역의 현황

필립 노스

(세계성서공회연합회 번역총책임자)

성서공회는 성경 원문의 정신과 뜻을 번역문의 언어로 자연스러운 말이 되도록 그리고 똑같은 반응을 얻을 수 있도록 노력해왔다. 그런데 단지 성경만을 번역하고자 하지 않고 성경의 메시지 속으로 들어가 실천할 수 있도록 돕고자 계속해서 노력하고 있다. 곧 약 200년전 영국의 어느 시골에 살던 소녀의 이야기에서 시작한 성서공회는 지금도 효과적으로 말씀을 옮기고자 또 그 말씀대로 살아가는 세상을 지향하고자 노력한다.

성경 번역을 말할 때 하나님의 이름이나 호칭을 옮기는 문제는 각 나라의 신학과 밀접한 관련이 있다. 각 나라의 성경 번역가들이 채택한 하나님의 이름이나 호칭은 단순한 번역이 아닌 토착화의 일환이라고 말할 수 있다. 아프리카의 여러 나라에서 진행된 몇몇 성경 번역을 예로 들어도 이 사실은 분명하다. 각 나라의 토속신의 이름이나 호칭을 받아들여 성경의 하나님의 이름이나 호칭으로 사용하는 예는 얼마든지 있기 때문이다. 이렇게 성경 번역은 각 나라의 신학을 형성하는 데에도 크나큰 역할을 했다.

(유연희)