Bible Translation as Missions: The Work of World Bible Translation Center

Ken Berry
BIBLE TRANSLATION AS MISSIONS:  
THE WORK OF WORLD  
BIBLE TRANSLATION CENTER

BY KEN BERRY

Translation has always played an important role in the mission and expansion of the church, as well as its renewal. In the first generations of the church, as it moved out from its early predominantly Aramaic-speaking setting, its stories and traditions were translated into Greek. By the latter half of the second and third centuries, the church’s scriptures were being translated into Syriac, Latin, and Coptic. In the following centuries, as Christianity moved out from the Roman and Byzantine empires, missionaries like Ulfilas, Cyril, and Methodius translated the Bible into Gothic, Slavonic, and other languages. Vernacular translations of the Bible by Wycliffe, Luther, Tyndale, and others played a crucial role in the Protestant Reformation. Bible translation has also been an essential part of the modern missions movement, and one Bible translator, William Carey, has even been called the father of modern missions.

The work of Bible translation continues today. Only a small percentage of the world’s languages have the Bible available in its entirety. The fact that each language is constantly changing means that even in those languages where translations of the Bible already exist, new translations are needed for new generations of readers and hearers.

There are many organizations that are involved in Bible translation work around the world. Some, such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and Pioneer Bible Translators (which has ties with independent Christian Churches), focus on the many “minority” or tribal languages, whose speakers may number only a few thousand. Their task is especially challenging, as very often they must even create a written alphabet and teach speakers of the target language how to read. Some organizations focus on a particular region of the world, such as the Institute for Bible Translation, which works in non-Slavic languages in the former Soviet Union. Others, such as the United Bible Societies, are more comprehensive in scope and work in close cooperation with established churches in various countries. In recent years the Forum of Bible Agencies has been formed to meet regularly to inform member organizations of ongoing work, to share ideas, and to coordinate efforts as much as possible while preserving the autonomy of each organization.

World Bible Translation Center: History and Ongoing Work

World Bible Translation Center is a nonprofit organization founded in 1973 by the Hillcrest Church of Christ in Arlington, Texas. The ministry now operates under the oversight of the Richland Hills Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas, and a corporate board. The bulk of its financial support, however, comes from thousands of interested individuals and churches across the United States and, increasingly, around the world. We are currently involved in Bible translation projects and distribution in about thirty major languages around the...
world. Each of those languages has at least several million speakers, together totaling about three billion population—over half the world’s population.

WBTC’s first translation published was the English Version for the Deaf, now also known as the Easy-to-Read Version, which became the base text for the International Children’s Version and the New Century Version (published first by Sweet and now by NelsonWord). The release of WBTC’s Russian New Testament at the 1989 Moscow International Book Fair was another landmark event in the Center’s history. Ten thousand copies were distributed, and requests for an additional seventeen thousand copies were received. A few years later, the Russian Old Testament was completed. The total number of copies printed of our Russian New Testament and Bible exceeds two million.

The Center’s work has expanded greatly in the last ten years. India has been a major focus of our work. There we have produced and published translations of the complete Bible in five languages (Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Marathi) and New Testament translations in five more (Bengali, Malayalam, Awadhi, Gujarati, and Oriya). We have also published New Testament translations in Chinese, Ukrainian, and Serbian. At the time of this writing, our New Testament translations in Brazilian Portuguese, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Croatian are at the typesetting stage. We also have Old Testament projects nearing completion in Chinese, Ukrainian, Malayalam, and Serbian. The first draft of our Zulu New Testament has been completed. In the past two years, other projects have been started in Awadhi (OT), Bengali (OT), Gujarati (OT), Urdu, Punjabi, Nepali, Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Burmese. Our current plans for 1999 include launching new projects in Arabic, Indonesian, and Javanese.

Purpose and Mission

Our purpose is to provide contemporary idiomatic, or meaning-based, translations of the Bible in major languages, targeting especially “unchurched” people and the younger generation. The target audience generally does not read or has difficulty understanding existing translations written in a more difficult or archaic style. The target reading level for the translations varies depending on the general literacy rate and education level for the country or language concerned and on the nature of existing Bible translations. For example, our translations for India are aimed at a lower reading level (about third to fourth grade) than those for some eastern European countries (about sixth to seventh grade). However, even in advanced industrial countries with a long Christian tradition, there is a place for translations in simpler language. We were recently contacted by a German publisher who urged us to do a translation in German for children and new readers. Other Bible translation agencies in the United States and abroad are also responding to the need for this kind of translation, as seen in the Contemporary English Version and the New International Reader’s Version. It might also be noted that, unlike those organizations which have not traditionally placed a high priority on Old Testament translation (or perhaps have considered it economically unfeasible), WBTC is committed to translating complete Bibles.

Since we are making translations especially with non-Christians in mind, we do not expect that our translations will often replace the standard or traditional translations in the public worship and preaching of churches. Nor do we expect that they will be the only translations that believers will ever want or need. We are convinced that translations such as ours can play a valuable role in mission work and evangelism, and we receive numerous letters from grateful readers who say they are reading the Bible with pleasure and understanding like never before.

The Translation Process

In order to obtain a contemporary, readable style, we use translators who are fluent in both their mother tongues and English. Translators need to be effective communicators but may come from a variety of backgrounds: professional translators, writers, poets, journalists, editors, professors, teachers, and ministers. A translation team, usually consisting of an editor and three to six translators, is led through a training course in translation principles. WBTC has over one hundred translators and related personnel working around the world.

The translators work from WBTC’s Hebrew/English and Greek/English “segments,” which divide the text into basic thought units and provide a fairly literal rendering or
representation of the Hebrew or Greek text, along with many explanatory notes and alternate translations. The segments are designed to give greater access to the form and meaning of the original languages than a normal English translation would.

Once a first-draft translation of each book is completed, it is edited with stylistic considerations in mind. Then another person translates the revised draft back into English. This "back-translation" is sent to a Greek or Hebrew specialist, who evaluates the content in detail for faithfulness to the sense of the original. A complete back-translation evaluation is made, not simply a spot check of certain passages. In some cases, such as Spanish, the back-translation stage may be skipped if we have a Greek or Hebrew evaluator who is also fluent in the target language. Lists of problems, questions, and suggested corrections and improvements for each book are then forwarded to the translators and editor, who make the necessary revisions. Later, the editor and a biblical language specialist meet to go over the lists of corrections, confirming that needed corrections were made and resolving any remaining questions or problems.

There are currently three full-time staff members in our Fort Worth office who do Greek and Hebrew evaluation work, but we have regularly contracted with a number of outside consultants as well. The latter have included professors at the University of Illinois, Rhodes College, Pepperdine University, Abilene Christian University, David Lipscomb University, Oklahoma Christian University, the Institute for Christian Studies, Milligan College, Lincoln Christian Seminary, Great Lakes Christian College, and Southwestern Baptist Seminary, as well as graduate students at Harvard, Duke, Notre Dame, Fuller, and Abilene Christian, and other capable linguists in the United States and abroad.

Our translation process also includes testing the translation for readability and for linguistic and cultural suitability among native speakers of the target language. After the field testing and revision, the text undergoes careful proofreading and editing to prepare it for typesetting, final proofreading, printing, and mass distribution.

**Printing and Distribution**

WBTC does not have its own printing equipment; this allows the flexibility of purchasing printing anywhere in the world, wherever it is most economical. Many different avenues are used in distribution: churches, other missions or evangelistic organizations, Christian broadcasters, bookstores, missionaries, and other individuals. Many copies are distributed at no cost or sold at a subsidized price. More are purchased or paid for by churches and ministries, who then distribute the texts themselves. Others are sold through publishers or bookstores, or directly to individuals. Income from sales is used to pay for the costs of reprinting. In 1998 over a half million of WBTC's Bibles and New Testaments were distributed or sold worldwide. We are now beginning to make our texts available for downloading from our website.

Bible translation is challenging, demanding work, but it is exciting to see the transforming impact it can have on people's lives. Our work is made possible only by the grace of God and the prayers and gifts of our many supporters, such as our Translation Sponsors, who make regular monthly contributions, and those who include WBTC in their wills. We receive contributions in many different ways—it is even possible to support WBTC through buying groceries at certain supermarkets. For more information about WBTC, its translations, and how you might be involved in making them available to people around the world, contact us at World Bible Translation Center, P.O. Box 820648, Fort Worth, TX 76182; 1-888-54-BIBLE; www.wbtc.com.

Ken Berry has worked as a Greek and Hebrew specialist with WBTC since 1991.