THE PROCESS OF BIBLE TRANSLATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

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August 26, 2013
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**Introduction**

In 1917, twenty-one-year-old Cameron Townsend sailed from San Francisco, California to San Antonio, Guatemala as a missionary to the Guatemalan people. He began studying Spanish with his co-workers, determined to begin evangelizing and translating Scripture for the Guatemalans. He often traveled to various villages with his team and distributed Gospel tracts in Spanish to the indigenous people living there. One particular day, Townsend, attempting to utilize the Spanish he had learned, offered a tract to a Kaqchikel man who indignantly took the document. The unexpected question the man asked Townsend next, however, filled Townsend with new vision for the future of Bible translation. The man glanced at the tract before looking into Townsend’s eyes. “If your God is so great,” the man asked, “Why doesn’t he speak my language?”

The language to which the man was referring is Kaqchikel, an indigenous Mesoamerican language completely unrelated to Spanish. Most Kaqchikel people did understand Spanish (in the area Townsend worked to complete the translation), however Spanish was not their mother-tongue language. (“Mother tongue” as used here is the first language an individual is raised to speak, a language one’s mother speaks to them. It is a language that takes no additional thought or necessary translation to understand and communicate.) A Bible in Spanish would not permeate their hearts like a Bible in Kaqchikel. Thus, Townsend began a translating work with a vision to see every nation on earth with a translation of Scripture in their mother-tongue language.

His work continues today, as thousands upon thousands of missionaries have traveled to the utmost parts of the earth to reach the unreached. Many go with the purpose of evangelization,

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as there are still many people groups today that have not heard the Gospel message before. There are others, however, who travel to those unreached people groups to study their language and culture. These teams will live among the people, study the language structure and context of spoken word, determine whether or not the people have a written language, and begin Bible translation projects based upon the conditions they find. The process of Bible translation is completely dependent upon these conditions. Three major aspects of Bible translation translators must study, apply, and remain constantly aware of are linguistics, contextualization, and their role as translators. The translators' most important task is to create a translation of Scripture that remains both accurate to the original text and within the boundaries of each culture. The people will not truly understand the Word of God unless it is written in a language, style, and context they understand.

Depending on those conditions, the missionary team may conduct most of the work, translating the Bible themselves before distributing it among the people. This is referred to as the traditional method of Bible translation. Missionary teams may also utilize the cluster method, entering a community of people with the primary purpose of training a small group of leaders to translate Scripture for themselves with little help from the missionary team by the end of the project. Thus, the medium by which Scripture is translated can vary depending on the people's desire or lifestyle. Translating Bible stories to be passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth has been a growing method in the last few decades of translation history. This up-and-coming method, storytelling, transcends all cultural boundaries.

By whichever method necessary, the Word of God wants to be translated. It can be duplicated into every culture's context. It wants to reach the very corners of the earth with its message of hope and salvation and truth. Without this message, nations will perish. Therefore,
translators must *go*, take Scripture with them, study the target culture, and provide that people with a Word they will truly understand. The process can be long and laborious, with countless obstacles and issues with semantics, syntax, cultural barriers, the translators' own influence in the work, and the people's reception of the final product. All of these aspects of translation will be discussed, as they are very complex issues that both translators and their translations face. The three major methods in which Scripture is translated, the traditional, cluster, and storytelling methods, will be outlined as well, giving insight into the overall structure of the translation process and revealing the uniqueness of each individual culture.

**Literature Review**

The following literature review presents the issues and aspects of Bible translation aforementioned. It will briefly explore the history of Bible translation, revealing the many issues existent during the times John Wycliffe and William Tyndale translated Scripture into the languages of the laymen for the first time. The review then addresses literature relevant to argument over the accuracy of some Scripture translations and reasons people rejected a particular translation. Literature presenting issues with lexicon and accuracy translators face in the present day will also be considered.

**Bible Translation’s History in Brief**

The 1853 issue of *The Catholic Layman*, Clyde Weber Votaw in “Martyrs for the English Bible,” and Su Fang Ng’s “Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy” discuss the struggle between the Protestant church and the Church of England regarding rights to translate Scripture into German and English, the language of the laymen. According to Su Fang Ng, the completion of
the Wycliffite Bible and William Tyndale’s Translation frame this particular time in history.2 The Catholic Layman expressed the Catholic view that Protestant Bibles detracted from Scripture’s authority and holiness.3 Votaw similarly writes that the Church of England strongly opposed Bible translation because the English and German languages were believed to be vulgar and barbaric. The Church had exclusive authority over the Latin translation of Scripture; only the priests were permitted to read and interpret the Bible.4 John Wycliffe and William Tyndale contested the supreme ruling that the Vulgate Bible in Latin was the original most authoritative text. Tyndale argued, “The Christian believer [should] take an active part in reading and interpreting...the reader of the English translation is no passive recipient.”5 William Tyndale was burned at the stake for his efforts to translate the Bible into English. Others were martyred for reading and distributing the William Tyndale Bible to their congregations, all serious offenses against the Pope.6 Ironically, later translators used the Protestant Bible to complete new revisions of Catholic translations7 because it had not needed revision for 240 years.

Thus began worldwide efforts to translate Scripture into every language. Bible translation is a long, laborious process. The following literature will outline several issues encountered in areas pertaining to linguistics, in the process of contextualizing Scripture into the target culture, in the translators themselves and how a target society perceives them, and in several modes of translation.

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5 Ng, “Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy.”
6 Votaw, “Martyrs for the English Bible.”
7 “Is the Protestant Bible a Corrupt and Mutilated Translation of the Holy Scriptures?”
Early Translation Process

Henry Smith and Leonard Greenspoon both describe the translation process as it occurred in the early 20th century. Henry Smith outlines aspects of Old Testament study that were occurring around the world in early 1900. His survey includes the creation of Greek and Hebrew lexicons, the overseeing of research and excavations in Palestine to further understand biblical geography, and the publication of countless books focused on OT studies for students and teachers. Greenspoon provides a firsthand look at the strenuous process and many issues that translators must endure to finish a work. Issues may be as important as misplaced lines in a text. Other less expected problems occur such as the issue of semantics and chauvinism, or arrangement of words on the title page.

Linguistic Aspects of Bible Translation

Eugene Nida describes the translation process that incorporates the foundation work earlier translators have created (those Smith and Greenspoon describe in their articles). A translator must be able to break down specific word meaning in the original work while still capturing the same ideas and themes the author intended. After the Scripture’s meaning, ideas, and themes of the original work are established, one can translate the work into the target language. Similarly, Jacques Derrida and Lawrence Venuti define a “relevant” translation as a

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"good" translation, or a translation that feels right and appropriate and opportune. A relevant translation in many cases is economic. In works Derrida translates, he chooses as few as one word that best represents and mirrors many of the original words and phrases used.  

Jerome Neyrey presents a specific example of the linguistic process in Bible translation. He specifically discusses the difference in antiquity between "thanks" and "praise," in ancient Greek culture, there was not yet a concept of "thanks." The gods were praised and exalted. He organizes this argument into three points to consider: first, it is important to understand the basic cultural values and implications of "praise" and "honor." Second, these same terms should be discussed in relation to mortal-Immortal relationship. Third, whether or not reciprocity exists once benefaction is received should be examined.  

Andrie du Toit, similarly, states that translations should be as accurate as possible, even more so when translating Scripture. "That sense should be determined by linguistic means, which naturally includes contextual, cultural, and socio-historical insights."

On an Apache reservation in San Carlos, two-dozen missions and churches each take a slightly different view of the role of Apache language and culture in religious practice. In David Samuels's exploration of the translation practices of Phillip Goode, a San Carlos Apache interpreter, and of early Lutheran missionaries on the reservation, it is argued that Bible translation is a key factor in shifting ideas about language as a purely referential system on the

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12 Jerome H. Neyrey, "Lost in Translation: Did It Matter If Christians 'Thanked' God or 'Gave God Glory'?" (Catholic Biblical Association of America, January 2009).
reservation.¹⁴ In 1982, Jonathan Benthall interviewed William R. Merrifield, a senior cultural anthropologist at Wycliffe Bible Translators/Summer Institute of Linguistics. In regards to a translation project occurring among the Chinantecs (a Southern Mexican Native American group), he asked Merrifield if missionaries were introducing foreign Protestant work ethic into Chinantec culture, to which Merrifield replied Wycliffe missionaries were not intentionally incorporating European values into the Chinantec indigenous culture.¹⁵ In each instance, the question of missionary influence on language and culture appears to be a significant issue in regards to the contextualization of Scripture. Melvin and Carol Ember, authors of *Human Culture: Highlights of Cultural Anthropology*, argue that this ethnocentrism and cultural relativism exists in every culture. The Embers recount Westerners’ early exploration of cultures in the East and their shock and disgust at what they found. Many did not question the reasons for other peoples’ behaviors and beliefs, therefore the cultural barrier between the people groups remained.¹⁶

Contextualization

John Newton, Ralph Harlow, and William Adrian stress the importance of not only translating Scripture into the Mother Tongue language of the target-group, but also contextualizing the Gospel, giving the people a relevant and meaningful translation. Newton presents the foundation of Bible Translation: every nation has to hear the message of Jesus

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Christ, and the only way they can know is through God’s Word in their native language. Many like Newton, Harlow also returns to the core purpose of translating Scripture. In some societies there are not concepts of God’s love or God as spirit, Harlow argues, so translators must create the concepts that relate to the society as well as accurately bringing the Bible to light. Adrian presents American thought that the West, in the early stages of missionary and Bible translation work overseas, forced its view of Scripture upon developing people groups as a form of imperialism. Lamin Sanneh, however, states, “Christianity belongs to all cultures and ‘is not intrinsically a religion of cultural uniformity.’” Translating the Bible into the native tongue provided opportunity for the people to relate the Bible to their culture, free of Western influence.

Jonathan Benthill and Birgit Meyer present questions and evidence of translators’ unconscious—or otherwise—influence on a target culture when undergoing the translation process. Benthill questions Merrifield in regards to missionaries unconsciously introducing the foreign concept of Protestant work ethic in the Native American communities, to which Merrifield replies, “We want these societies to have the Scriptures available to them, and to make for themselves inferences about how to incorporate Christian living into their cultures.” Meyer, however, presents evidence revealing an extreme case in which missionaries wished not to deny a people group’s culture, but to lock them up in it. “The NMG (Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft, a German missions organization) used the notion of the nation as a means

20 “The Summer Institute of Linguistics.”
to exert power, to assert the superiority of the West and to control converts' exposure to foreign ideas...its linguistic and ethnographic studies...were devoted to turning 'scattered Ewe tribes' into one 'people.'"²¹

"Mother Tongue Blog" is a web site designed to provide translation principles and spread cultural awareness about the vast differences between individual people groups around the world. The administration, referred to as "admin" on bylines, is comprised of several men and women studying language and areas under anthropology. They provide multiple examples of excerpts or words and phrases contextualized and translated into multiple cultures. The examples give the viewer a firsthand look at how truly unique cultures really are, and how important the work of contextualization within Bible translation is.²²

Role of the Translator

This particular missionary influence brings the discussion to the issues present in translation with the translators themselves. In Kendrick Grobel's "Charles Thomson, First American N. T. Translator: An Appraisal" and Gerald Larue's "Another Chapter in the History of Bible Translation," the translators themselves are targeted as persons guilty of destroying the validity of translated Scripture. Grobel argues Charles Thomson's personal life clearly permeated his translation—his experience with law and natural passiveness showed through his style of writing in certain areas of Scripture. Grobel believes America should take pride in its involvement in early Bible translation, despite the fact Thomson's version ceased to be

published\textsuperscript{23}, according to David Ross, Bible translation in the United States did not draw significant attention until the early 1930s, nor did education with a focus on linguistics and cross-cultural study become priority until the Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics (or GIAL) was founded in the late 90s.\textsuperscript{24} Anti-Jewish and anti-Communist sentiments existed in the U.S., tinting people's views of many translators, as seen in Larue's "Another Chapter in the History of Bible Translation." The accusation that the Revised Standard Version was a Communist Bible became a great concern; many critics believed men who worked to translate it were affiliated with the Soviet Union. Harry Orlinsky, a non-Christian Jewish scholar chosen to work on the translation of the Old Testament, was also harshly criticized, accused of mistranslating the two passages he was responsible for. Most of these accusations were thrown around with little evidence to support them. Americans were probably quick to label the National Council of Churches "Red" because of the Communist scare resulting from the Cold War, which still raged on through the late 20th century.\textsuperscript{25}

Melissa Wallace and Serge Gavronsky both discuss the role of the translator from non-Christian lenses, both of which still provide much insight into translators' responsibilities. Wallace discusses the roles and goals of the translator within two frames: feminist and post-colonialist translations. Although writing from a non-Christian angle, she identifies several qualities of feminist and post-colonialist translators that can also be applied to Bible translation: "...as much as it can be said that the bridging of linguistic and cultural gaps draws people together, few would dispute that the creation of 'contact zones' also lays the groundwork for


friction, tension, and confrontation...” (By using the phrase “contact zones,” Wallace is referring to the areas in which peoples of varying cultures are brought together; translations would be an example of a contact zone.) “As familiarizer, [the post-colonialist translator seeks] to give voice to minority cultures, bringing the silenced to the attention of the masses...” Gavronsky defines the work of a translator through terms such as “conquer,” “creation,” and “approximation.” He argues in his article “The Translator: From Piety to Cannibalism” that an original is impossible to duplicate, and that a translation is only an approximation. Many cultural barriers between societies make word-for-word translations impossible, as words and phrases in one culture do not hold the same meaning in another. What may be considered acceptable in the original tongue may be utterly offensive in another. A translator “conquers” the original piece and “mutilates” it beyond recognition, completely absorbing the original in order to create a translation; Gavronsky terms this act cannibalism.

Addressing Oral Culture and Literacy

In regards to presenting the Gospel to people groups of oral culture, Bruce Graham, in his article, “Transforming Worldviews through the Biblical Story,” argues that the Bible as a story transforms worldviews. When people of oral cultures especially hear and understand a story in the Bible contextualized to fit within their own culture, eyes are opened and hearts are changed.

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Graham recognizes the need for storytellers who know the whole Bible story and can effectively work with oral peoples to communicate the Gospel.\footnote{28}

**A Brief History**

The completion of the Wycliffite Bible and the William Tyndale’s Translation frames an era of struggle between the Protestant Church and the Church of England. This struggle concerns the rights to translate Scripture from Latin into the language of the laymen, of which the Catholic Church believed to be vulgar and unholy. John Wycliffe’s completion of the first English Bible in the late fourteenth century led to bishop Thomas Arundel’s 1440 Constitutions, banning all people from reading Scripture in the vernacular.\footnote{29} Henceforth, priests and clergymen were the only individuals permitted by law to possess a copy of the Bible. Only the most educated could read Scripture, as it was written in Latin, an ancient language even in the mid-sixteenth century. According to *The Catholic Layman*, Protestant Bibles detracted from Scripture’s authority and holiness.\footnote{30} It was believed that laymen should not have the power to interpret the Bible apart from the priests’ direction.

A man by the name of William Tyndale began a translation revolution—after John Wycliffe’s completion of the first English Bible—that would crush the power of the priests and provide laymen across the country personal access to Scripture in the vernacular (mainly German and English). Tyndale claimed, early in his endeavors to translate Scripture, “It [is] impossible to establish the people in any truth unless the Scriptures [are] plainly laid before their eyes in their mother-tongue.”\footnote{31} He could find no allies within the Protestant Church willing to help him begin

\footnote{28} D. Bruce Graham, “Transforming Worldviews through the Biblical Story” (n.d.).
\footnote{29} Ng, “Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy.”
\footnote{30} “Is the Protestant Bible a Corrupt and Mutilated Translation of the Holy Scriptures?”.
\footnote{31} Votaw, “Martyrs for the English Bible.”
translation, so fled to Europe’s mainland, with the help of English laymen merchants, where he was able to print two completed editions of the English New Testament. The editions were circulated throughout Europe, beginning a chain of events that would make martyrs out of hundreds of Protestants across the continent. Tyndale was burned at the stake in 1536. His last words, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!” seemed futile, though all the while Protestantism was rising to take Catholicism’s place as the state’s official religion. This change would also bring about authorization of English translations and permission for church services to be held in English.\(^{32}\)

Taverner, Marbeck, Cromwell, Latimer, and Cranmer, English reformers influenced by Tyndale’s English translations, created their own editions of the New Testament and defied the power of the Pope. Even after King Henry VIII authorized the first English translation of the Bible in 1537, the Matthew Bible, these men were executed for their previous efforts to provide England with this freedom to read Scripture apart from the Catholic Church.\(^{33}\) Still, the freedom of translations in the vernacular sparked a gradual movement to translate the Bible into every existent language on earth.

Almost three hundred years later, Charles Thomson became the first to complete an American translation in 1808.\(^{34}\) Kendrick Grobel, author of “Charles Thomson, First American New Testament Translator: An Appraisal,” brings into consideration new issues with as much importance today as the rights and freedom to translate Scripture were fought for in Bible translation’s early history. These issues include the translator’s style and interpretation of an original work, the specific vocabulary and phrasing the translator chooses to use (with

\(^{32}\) Ibid.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid  
\(^{34}\) Grobel, “Charles Thomson, First American N. T. Translator.”
consideration of semantics and syntax). Grobel praises Thomson for his “rendering of technical expressions” in his translation, which is probably due to his long experience in Congress. There are other instances in his translated work that reflects other areas of influence in his life, such as his Quaker affiliation revealed in his interpretation of Galatians 5:1: “…stand up for the liberty with which Christ hath made us free!” Thomson also uses the term “improveth” to mean “utilize,” a Yankeeism revealing his area of settlement in the New World. Grobel, however, brings an issue to light in Thomson’s translated work that further introduces the concept of contextualization. He states, “Thomson seems to have had the misconception that a literal correspondence of the Greek and the English definite articles is possible.” Throughout his work, the articles he uses to identify noun phrases are inconsistent. For example, he writes “α Holy Spirit” in one verse, and “the Holy Spirit” in the next. Even this small difference in phrasing creates ambiguity, which may lead to the question of whether there is one true Holy Spirit or multiple Holy Spirits. Issues such as this one arise in every translating project in the present day. These issues must be resolved and work must continue to finish what Protestant translators have begun. In the words of Joseph Fort Newton:

“No it can be read in almost every tongue under heaven, and the fact that it is the one book that can be universally translated is a touching proof that God is not far from any tribe, and that in the lowest human being his image shines. Poor raiment for his word many of those dialects are, but somehow that mighty book can clothe itself in each. One version…remains to be achieved…and that is to make the translation of the Bible

35 Ibid.
into the life of humanity. When that translation is finished…there will be a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness and the peace of God.”36

In Newton’s words echo the final task for Protestant translators: to take on the responsibility of providing God’s word in every language, in every people’s mother tongue. The translation process encompasses more than simply word-for-word translation, but also in-depth consideration of the target group’s culture—as Su Fang Ng states, “the Vulgate must be superseded by the English Bible.”37 In this case, the “infallible,” “holy” language must be superseded by the vernacular, whatever language and medium that may be.

In order for Scripture to be truly understood by all nations, it must be translated to be culturally relevant in each society. Religious vocabulary, concepts, and themes must be altered to fit into each individual culture while still retaining accuracy. Townsend began a journey with the establishment of Wycliffe Bible Translators to see every nation with a copy of Scripture that it can truly understand. The term, contextualization, implies a version of Scripture that people groups will use, whether the version of Scripture is written, recorded, or visualized. Lamin Sanneh, quoted in William Adrian’s “Is Bible Translation ‘Imperialist’? Challenging Another Anti-Christian Bias in the Academy,” states, “Christianity belongs to all cultures and ‘is not intrinsically a religion of cultural uniformity.’”38 Christianity does not only fit one bill; Christianity in the present-day United States of America will look vastly different from Christianity in China. The context of a society defines the methods in which Scripture must be translated to be fully understood, accepted, and distributed to a people.

36 Newton, “The Supremacy of the Bible.”
37 Ng, “Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy.”
38 Adrian, “Is Bible Translation ‘Imperialist’?”. 
Linguistics

In order to further understand the depth of Bible translation and its potential relevance to a specific people or culture, one must have some idea of at least three different aspects that "umbrella" the subject: linguistics, contextualization, and the role of the translator. Over the last century, translators and scholars alike have performed in-depth studies and have completed surveys of the translation process. Using these studies and individual field experience, thousands of missionaries have altered their methods of translation until finding a process that yields the most accurate, effective translations of Scripture. In the area of linguistics, the process has largely remained the same, although contextualization has become a major factor in the later half of the twentieth century until today.

Eugene Nida, in his article, "Science of Translation," presents several linguistic rules and standards based the nature of receptor languages, or target languages, as they are referred to in this paper. Translators must strip the original translation to its foundational concepts and themes; as Nida writes, "Instead of going directly from one set of structures to another, the competent translator actually goes through a seemingly roundabout process of analysis, transfer, and restructuring." It is from the foundational concepts and themes that a "competent translator," as Nida describes, forms the base of the new translation, before reforming it to adhere to the receptor language’s grammatical structure and literacy level. Jacques Derrida and Lawrence Venuti’s argument for a "relevant" translation seems to agree with Nida’s foundational theory of translation: "...The translation must be quantitatively equivalent to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, explicitation, analysis, and the like." The quantitative value of words in

39 Nida, "Science of Translation."
a translation, Derrida and Venuti explain further, "Is the invisible unity of an acoustic form that incorporates or signifies the invisible unity of a meaning or concept." Thus, the quantity of words does not refer to the number of words, as in a word-for-word translation, but rather to the weight of words and their representation of the words in the original text. This concept touches on the analysis and restructuring of the original text that Nida describes. Therefore, in order to complete an accurate, relevant translation of Scripture, one must understand the depth of its biblical concepts and the nature of the receptor language.

In recent studies, researchers address linguistics within a framework of contextualization. To translate an accurate, relevant text from one language to another, understanding biblical concepts and the nature of the receptor language is not enough. Translators must realize that they are restructuring a text, translating it from one culture to another as well. "The meaning of words resides in the cultural use of them, not in lexica," Jerome Neyrey argues. "Moreover, the greater the chronological distance between the culture of the [New Testament] and ours, the more likely the meanings of words will be ‘lost in translation.’" Neyrey emphasizes the importance of understanding both the cultural context of words used in the Bible and those used in the target culture before deciding on an adequate translation. The primary example Neyrey uses to convey this point is a Greek word in Scripture that is commonly translated to mean give thanks in English. The concept of giving thanks, however, is not a concept commonly found in ancient culture in regards to the relationship between a God and his creation. "Modern notions of ‘giving thanks’ lack appreciation of ‘praise,’ ‘honor,’ and ‘glory,’ which are the proper cultural context for interpreting even [the Greek form of the word]." This notion is accurate, based upon

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41 Neyrey, “Lost in Translation.”
42 Ibid.
observations of American worship and Christianity; much is said about the *prosperity gospel*, and much is taught about the importance of thanking God for his blessings and provision, but very little is said about serving him and regarding him with reverence, recognizing his holiness. Maybe humanity’s present regard for God and its assumptions about his character would have been different if this Greek word was translated to encompass its full meaning.

There are several examples of phrasing in the book of Romans from the Greek that Andrie du Toit considers to be “headaches” for translators, furthering the exploration of the nature of linguistics. He argues that, not unlike Nida, Derrida and Venuti, and Neyrey state in their works, “[the accuracy of the source text’s communication] should be determined by linguistic means, which naturally includes contextual, cultural, and social-historical insights."43 A “relevant” translation cannot be produced without considering these other aspects (these aspects can be consolidated into the two remaining all-encompassing factors of the Bible translation process: *contextualization* and *the role of the translator*). “A relevant translation would therefore be, quite simply, a ‘good’ translation...that does its duty while inscribing in the receiving language the most relevant equivalent for an original, the language that is the most right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on.”44 Thus, the study of linguistics in regards to Bible translation calls to attention the importance of contextualization.

**Contextualization**

Reading the Bible in a strange tongue, or even in a familiar tongue, is like walking on a path through dense forest with a dim flashlight. One might squint intensely on that path, trying as

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43 du Toit, “Some More Translation Headaches in Romans.”
44 Derrida and Venuti, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”.
they might to see the ground in front of them, but there is little illumination. The path around them is black and impenetrable. The path is not smooth and straight, either. Thick roots and bushes are almost invisible obstacles one will inevitably stumble over, and with each jolt the flashlight fades in and out. One will become frustrated and frightened, seeing no hope in the darkness. One may dash the flashlight against the dark tree poised in the path’s center before throwing themselves onto the ground in despair.

S. Ralph Harlow writes, “It is in our mother tongue that our finest thoughts are formed... Only dimly [can students] grasp the hidden meanings implicit in the thought back of the words of the Scriptures in a strange tongue.” Humanity cannot be properly fed with Scripture unless it has a Bible in a language they were raised to understand. And, when Harlow wrote the above statement in 1937, there were only 978 languages in which some verses of Scripture were translated—there are 6,902 languages in the world today. Translators will not succeed in translating Scripture into the remaining languages unreached without contextualization. For contextualization is a bright, illuminating light for those in the darkness. Not only will one see the path in front of them, but can anticipate the path ahead.

Many translators begin a project with good intentions and progress. They have studied the target language and culture until they feel they understand and can begin interacting with the people in the culture. They have all the materials they need to complete an accurate translation of Scripture. They have with them an effective, harmonious team of fellow translators and native speakers to aid them in the task. However, although the translators are living among the target people group, studying the target culture and language, the translator brings with them their own cultural beliefs and backgrounds as well. According to Melvin and Carol Ember, ethnocentrism

45 Harlow, “Sharing the Bible in Strange Tongues.”
46 Ibid.
and cultural relativity exist in every culture. Because not every culture is the same, people will have opposing views, and may most likely feel biased towards their homelands. This is only natural; most translators may not be consciously aware that their own culture is influencing their work on a particular translation. A translator, however, “must be thoroughly familiar with the text he is translating, with the meaning of the words in his own tongue, and in the original Hebrew or Greek... The translator must know the native language and idiom, and... must understand the spirit as well as the letter of the language into which the Scripture is being translated.”

If the translator is fully aware of the culture’s belief systems, culture, and language, they can distinguish between the target people’s influences in the translation and their own. With this in mind, translators can effectively produce an accurate representation of Scripture in the target language.

John and Bonnie Nystrom present several examples of contextualization in their work on a translation in Arop, a small people group on the Papua New Guinean coast. John Nystrom oversaw a team of native Arop speakers who were translating the story of the woman who had been bleeding for years in Mark, chapter five. After Jesus healed the woman, he said, “Go in peace.” The group of Arop translators wrote, “you go skin-windy” for “go in peace.” Nystrom, still learning Arop expressions at that point, questioned the translation. Emil, a close friend of Nystrom’s, who was working on the translation with the team, explained the term. For the Arops, “skin-windy” is the feeling one has after dipping in the lagoon, sitting down to rest, and feeling the cool breeze after a long day in the unbearable heat. “Skin-windy” is a feeling of relief. When

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47 Ember and Ember, Human Culture: Highlights of Cultural Anthropology.
48 Harlow, “Sharing the Bible in Strange Tongues.”
speaking with the Arops, Nystrom also referred to the “Word of God” as “Jesus’ Good Talk,” another example of contextualization.⁴⁹

In the Inuit, or Eskimo, translation of the Bible, Jesus is represented by the “Seal of God,” unlike the “Lamb of God,” as He is described in the English Bible. In Inuit culture, the seal represents innocence, as does the lamb in ancient Hebrew culture. If the Eskimos were to read an uncontextualized translation of Scripture in their language, they would not understand the reference to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” because, geographically, there are very few sheep in their area. They do not place any value on a lamb like they do a seal pup.⁵⁰ If the Inuit possessed an uncontextualized translation of Scripture today, they would not understand the person and character of Jesus. They would not see him as a perfect sacrifice; who would put a spotless lamb on the altar to pay for the sins of humanity? What is a lamb? What is so important about that animal? But if the “lamb” was contextualized in Inuit culture, the seal paid the price for all. The Inuit would be in awe of such a valuable sacrifice.

Contextualization comes with a price. To create a culturally relevant translation of Scripture, a translator must not only take into account a word-for-word translation from the original Greek or Hebrew (literal translations are greatly discouraged present day, anyway), but must also understand the target group’s culture, keeping in mind their own role as a translator throughout the entire process. The translator may not be conscious of the fact, but the way in which they interpret Scripture and their style of writing will permeate the final work. Charles Thomson’s first American Translation ceased to be printed because of its many inconsistencies.

and reflection of Charles Thomson’s own background. Details as seemingly miniscule as phrasing and particular usage of definite articles can alter the meaning of Scripture. The translator must be aware of this; although they may not be able to completely divorce themselves from their translation, they must minimize their own lives and backgrounds as much as possible.

**Role of the Translator**

The argument concerning the translator’s biased perspective has endured over for centuries, especially in non-Christian circles. According to William Adrian, “A strong anti-Christian bias exists in the modern American university… Cultural relativism pervades the academy, and the values of Western culture are viewed as imperialistic. Likewise, Christian missionary activity has been viewed as cultural imperialism.” Adrian highlights several conspiracies that developed regarding missionaries and translators’ imperialistic effect on Eastern culture. Some in the academy claimed Christian missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators conspired with the Rockefeller Empire to destroy indigenous cultures in the age of oil. Others have claimed missionaries demand a people group be westernized before they can convert to Christianity. Still, others accused members of SIL and Wycliffe of being spies for the CIA in the 1970s. Adrian argues, however, that in many cases translators and their continuing works in Bible translation have preserved indigenous culture rather than destroy it. In Slovakia, for example, Bible translation saved the culture from a totalitarian, communist mindset instilled by the government and, ironically, *universities*—the academic minds—in the country.

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52 Adrian, “Is Bible Translation ‘Imperialist’?”
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Bible translation on a particular Apache reservation provides further evidence of Bible translation’s and translators’ preserving, yet controversial effects on target cultures. San Carlos interpreter Phillip Goode and several Lutheran missionaries lived and studied on an Apache reservation. Apache was only previously used as a referential system, but as the missionaries worked to translate Scripture into Apache, the idea of Apache becoming both a written and spoken language arose. ⁵⁵ There were several areas of controversy, however, that riddled translations projects in San Carlos. First, Apache was a dying language, one that very few Apaches other than the oldest generations spoke. Younger Apache Americans could not understand the idiomatic language, especially when the education they received was taught in English (the Apache phrase for, “May I spend the night?” is literally translated as, “Is there space at your feet?”)⁵⁶. Several aspects of the Apache language were also considered by many on the reservation as “medicine man talk.” “This term,” writes Samuels, “covers certain forms and genres of Apache speech that are considered ‘dangerous’ or traditionally ‘powerful’ and therefore not suitably for Christian practice or, in many cases, for schoolchildren to learn.”⁵⁷ Apache was a language almost extinct before Goode completed an Apache translation of Scripture, claiming “medicine man talk” to be obsolete and meaningless. Goode’s decision to continue a translation using “medicine man talk” caused friction and disagreement with his peers. Through Goode’s endeavors to provide a translation of Scripture for the Apache people in San Carlos stirred many questions regarding the nature and semantics of language. Goode endured discouragement and controversy to preserve a language that was rejected for its demonic characteristics.

⁵⁵ Samuels, “Bible Translation and Medicine Man Talk.”
⁵⁶ Ibid.
⁵⁷ Ibid.
An interview between Jonathan Benthall and William R. Merrifield, senior cultural anthropologist at Wycliffe Bible Translators goes hand-in-hand with Samuels's observation of the translations projects on the Apache reservation. "SIL has been accused of introducing the Protestant work ethic into American Indian societies to which it is foreign... Unconsciously you may be importing European values," Benthall observes. Merrifield replies with agreement and explanation: "The Chinantec...have their own very strong work ethic already... We want these societies to have the Scriptures available to them, and to make for themselves inferences about how to incorporate Christian living into their cultures... We are well aware that all outside contact with these societies...carries a potential for unforeseen consequences." Here, Merrifield expressed the inevitable Bible translators today: translators desire for all nations to have Scripture in their language, and translators themselves must enter and study the culture to provide that translation. The translators bring with them their own identities, influence from the outside. Any influence other than that which exists within the target culture will have some sort of impact on the people; Bible translators try as they may to provide as pure a translation as humanly possible, giving the people the opportunity to decide its application for themselves.

The role of the translator can have immense impact on a culture, and most translators are aware of the fact. Translators such as Goode and Merrifield desire to preserve culture, providing contextualized Scripture that will enlighten and transform people's souls, without compromising their identities as individual nations with unique traditions and culture. Birgit Meyer presents an account of the NMG (Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft, a German missions organization), whose goal was to provide Scripture for the Ewe people of Africa without imposing Western influence. What the translators proceeded to do, however, was lock the people in their own

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58 "The Summer Institute of Linguistics."
59 Ibid.
culture, going as far as to attempt to unite the geographically scattered people group (though each of these communities spoke the same language, their cultures were vastly different).\textsuperscript{60} They imposed Western power over the Ewe nation and used it to keep other foreign influences from entering the culture, claiming “a local desire for homogeneity and salvation.” The translators demanded the Ewe people transform not only religiously, but also politically and progressively, denying their traditional lifestyle and culture in order to adopt a Western Protestant one. Although beginning the translation project with sincere intentions, the translators violated the Ewe people, rejecting their existence as a multicultural nation scattered, yet defined by an all-encompassing language. Translators need not affect and change a people in this way when presenting Scripture; “that mighty book can clothe itself in each [people group],”\textsuperscript{61} no matter the diversity or barrier between the people group and the translator.

It is not only important to understand the intricacies of the translator’s role itself, but the public eye’s interpretation of the translator’s work. Both the role of a Bible translator and the process of translation itself from a non-Christian perspective poises interesting questions and views that are essential for a translator’s success or failure. After all, it is the public to which the translator presents Scripture.

The Revised Standard Version of the Bible was introduced in America on September 30, 1952. The general public received the translation with open arms; the first edition sold out soon after its release. Among the satisfied, however, were those who spoke against the crowd. Many referred to the RSV as “The New Communist Bible,” among other new titles. The initial accusations of the translation’s Communist affiliation held American citizens’ attention, however the accusers could not provide ample evidence to support their claim. Any word of a Communist

\textsuperscript{60} Meyer, “Christianity and the Ewe Nation.”
\textsuperscript{61} Newton, “The Supremacy of the Bible.”
presence in America during this time aroused great suspicion and anxiety, as the United States and the Soviet Union were at serious odds for the greater half of the twentieth century. It was later in the conflict that eight translators involved in the RSV’s creation were accused of being involved in “un-American organizations.” Harry Orlinsky, a Jewish scholar invited to revise specific Old Testament sections, was also attacked by the American public. Critics “questioned his theology” and held him responsible for all changes in the Old Testament they felt “[reflected] on the deity of Jesus.”

Orlinksy was knowledgeable in Semitic languages, the reason for his involvement, though America was only concerned with his religious background. Not by any means are personal religious beliefs contrary to the Word of God a factor that can or should be overlooked. The point is, often times, the public—whatever or wherever the public may be—is easily swayed to believe whatever strong, convincing voice they hear over the others in a time of turmoil. In the RSV translators’ case, it was the during the Cold War, an unstable period in America’s history, riddled in paranoia.

The act of translation positions the translator in a position of power over the People; in the case of Bible translation, the final text the translators complete is the only source of God’s Word the target people group will ever receive. Because Bible translation is not only a human act, but an act of God, it is possible for translators to complete an accurate, contextualized work that will bring many to the throne of God in repentance. If intentions are selfish, contrary to the will of God for all to hear his message of salvation, translators can use the work of Bible translation (or any translation of any text) to impose their influence and culture upon another people. Melissa Wallace argues (using a Polysystems theory of text manipulation) that translators are manipulators. She writes, “Translators [have] the power to manipulate texts at

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62 Larue, “Another Chapter in the History of Bible Translation.”
more than one textual level, between linguistic, cultural, and even political boundaries.”

Looking back at the many examples of Bible translation’s effects on the target culture, and the history and present inevitability of translators’ influence over a people group, one can see that her statement is not inaccurate. Bible translation in its purest form, however, is not to manipulate Scripture in any way; a translator’s purpose is to retain the themes and concepts present in Scripture and to restructure and transform the work into a culture. The translator should have no control or influence over Scripture itself.

Serge Gavronsky, however, takes Wallace’s argument to another level. His grotesque use of imagery and diction create an entirely unsavory view of translation: “the aggressive translator…seizes possession of the ‘original’…savors the text, [or] truly feeds upon the words,…ingurgitates them, and…enunciates them in his own tongue.” He defines the later processes of translation as cannibalism, which “emphasizes the disappearance of the slightest trace of the ‘original’.” Gavronsky claims that it is impossible to duplicate a text, that “the original is mutilated beyond recognition.” If the argument is taken literally, Gavronsky’s statement is true—the translator is not directly duplicating Scripture when translating it contextually into a vastly different culture and language. Phrasing and syntax must change to adhere to target language grammar rules. Translators must study both biblical concepts (i.e. themes and vocabulary) and the target culture in depth, for they must find a link between them. Du Toit’s “Translation Headaches in Romans” and several other articles reveal the struggles translators endure to find the correct, accurate, and contextualized phrases and words to replace

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the originals. Sometimes, the translators do “mutilate” and “manipulate” Scripture to the point their translation cannot be printed or published (take the Charles Thomson Bible, for instance\(^\text{65}\)). Literally speaking, the final translated product will be very different from the original Word of God.

However, the translated biblical themes and concepts should be entirely the same as the originals, despite the necessity to express those themes differently in translations. And they must be the same for the translation to remain accurate to the original. As Newton argues, “…the fact that [the Bible] is the one book that can be universally translated is a touching proof that God is not far from any tribe.”\(^\text{66}\) Non-Christian translators are missing an important piece to this supernatural puzzle—the God factor. Without His influence, all these thousands of translations of Scripture would be as Gavronsky describes them: a mutilated, distorted “copy” of the original.

**Three Methods of Bible Translation: The Traditional Method**

The three major methods of Bible translation used today have evolved as the necessity for Scripture’s accuracy and relevance have become the primary objectives for present day translators. Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages, especially if translators use only one of the three to complete their work. Though each of these methods furthers the work of Bible translation, not one is entirely sufficient without the other. The aim is to fluctuate between the three, depending on the translation project.

The first method ever used by the first Western missionaries is the “traditional” method. The appointed missionary or team of missionaries completes the project, with little to no help from native speakers. The missionary or team studies the target language and culture (this

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\(^\text{65}\) Grobel, “Charles Thomson, First American N. T. Translator.”

\(^\text{66}\) Newton, “The Supremacy of the Bible.”
includes interacting with the people, though not during the translation), becomes very familiar with biblical concepts and the original Hebrew and Greek translations, and completes the translation, before distributing the text to the target people group. Henry Smith and Leonard Greenspoon provide surveys of early Bible translation projects in which the translators used the traditional method to produce a revision or translation of Scripture. Smith focuses his survey on present work in Old Testament studies (present day for Smith was the first decade of the twentieth century). The Protestant Bible translation movement was early in its progression, before the establishment of Wycliffe Bible Translators. Only rumors were spread in 1907 “that two American scholars have a Hebrew grammar in preparation, but I have not been able to verify it.” 67 The Greek concordance had just been completed, and studies of intransitive verb-forms in Aramaic had not yet begun. Teams were sent out into the Middle East to study the archaeology existent at the time Scripture was written. “To understand a human document we need to get it into its human relations. This means first of all into its relations of time and space,” comments Smith. Much study was also conducted of Hebrew literary analysis, and distinguishing between the authors’ poetry and prose. Without this particular study, the authors’ intentions would be misinterpreted.

In Smith’s survey of Old Testament studies, the “home team” conducted most of the research. The West compiled information and documentation and studies of Eastern ancient history. American scholars developed Hebrew grammar after studying the language in depth. Smith does not provide any evidence of Eastern aid in most of the process, thus, primarily, the traditional method of Bible translation prevailed. Greenspoon provides an account of the intricate process of translating the Jewish version of the Hebrew Bible. All of the translators involved

were students of American Jewish history, who formed a committee to begin translation. Immense struggle and conflict ensued over issues ranging from semantics and gender-related references, misplaced lines in the text, to the format of the title page. When encountering these issues, the committee would discuss them for a period of time, and place votes to make major decisions.\textsuperscript{68}

Due to the nature of the Jewish Hebrew translation, aid from a specific people group may not have been essential, as they completed most of the work using solely the committee with the addition of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the addition of the Conference was due to the need to reorganize the structure and format of the translation process). The men met for sixteen ten-day sessions over the course of eight years to complete the translation. When not in the sessions together, the men corresponded over long distances. This scenario did work for the committee, apart from some discrepancies with the final format of the text, and the Jewish Hebrew Bible was completed in 1917.\textsuperscript{69} If one were to examine the Nystrom’s work with the Arop people in Papua New Guinea in the context of the traditional method, extensive time away from the project would have proved detrimental to the final translation. As the Nystrom’s worked on the translation, they continued to learn about Arop culture and language in more depth. They could not have learned to the capacity they did without spending the majority of their time living immersed in the culture with the people. For the Nystrom’s, the cluster method proved most effective.

The Cluster Method


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
In the “cluster” method of Bible translation, the missionary or translator’s objective is to create a translation group comprised completely of native speakers of the target language. The missionary desires to train men and women from the target culture to learn the art of translation and initiate their own projects to the point they do not need the missionary’s supervision. The missionary may move from project to project, area to area, and may be responsible for translations in multiple cultures. Here, their tasks are not as much translation- as they are management-oriented (soon after the management-oriented stage, their tasks become training- and replacement-oriented). A people group is considered “reached” when a church is planted in their village. When the people group joins the church-planting movement and establishes their own “daughter” churches without any outside aid (Western/Eastern missionaries), they are truly independent, reached, and equipped to continue reaching other nations with the gospel. The same concept can be applied to the Bible translation in regards to the cluster method: when a missionary team has trained native speakers to translate Scripture and train others within their village and abroad to do the same, and can initiate their own translation projects, the people group is truly reached and penetrated with the gospel and the process of possessing it in their own language.

The Nystrom’s work in Papua New Guinea is a perfect example of the cluster method. In the following selection, Bonnie Nystrom captures the essence of cluster translation through John’s desire to become involved in Bible translation: “Before we came to PNG, God had given John a strong desire to train and mentor Papua New Guineans to be translators themselves, and to launch them into the Bible translation movement as future trainers and consultants for other language projects.”70 After ten years working with the Arop people, a great tsunami swept across

70 Nystrom and Nystrom, *Sleeping Coconuts*. 
PNG’s coast, completely destroying the Arop village along with many others, killing hundreds of villagers. The Nystrom’s were not in the area at the time, thus returning to tragedy. Many of the translators they had trained and become close to over the course of ten years did not survive the tsunami. The Nystrom’s had to start from scratch, building from the ground up with little materials. At this point, the cluster method took shape.\textsuperscript{71}

Before the tsunami, John Nystrom had been initializing first drafts of the Bible translations. The process was not as effective this way because Nystrom knew that the native speakers could produce a more natural-sounding translation of Scripture than he ever could, even with years of study. The translators thus formed two teams of translators, both beginning with their own first drafts of the book of Mark. During the first week, Nystrom would work with the first group, the second week with the second group, and the third week by himself, editing the drafts the translators created on their own to be discussed the next week they met. The notes Nystrom wrote for each draft he handed back to the translators, who would proceed to make necessary changes to the translation. Nystrom taught the native speakers translation principles when opportunities arose, to the point the native speakers performed most of the editing and restructuring before Nystrom looked over the work. Soon, the translators were able to initiate the translation of whole books of the Bible without Nystrom’s assistance.\textsuperscript{72}

One day, one of the pastors working with the translation team was reading aloud a newly translated passage. His brother had come to watch them work for the day. “As Peter read [the passage], [his brother] started laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ I asked.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
'It's not funny,' he said. 'This is in my language, and it just sounds so good to hear it.'\textsuperscript{73}

Although the process was as long as any traditional translation could be, the cluster method proved to be the most effective for the Nystrom’s, and those like Peter’s brother felt refreshed to hear Scripture in their own language after years of waiting. To hear a contextualized Word within a barren culture is to send rain upon a dry desert. Though the Word could fall among deaf ears, a harvest can be sown and reaped.

\textbf{The Storytelling Method}

The storytelling method has only recently become one of the most desirable methods of translation. Unlike the previous two methods, the storytelling method focuses on translating portions of Scripture for societies who prefer passing knowledge from generation to generation by word of mouth, or story form. Oftentimes, the story translations are not written down, but recorded for the society to use; people within target cultures who prefer using the storytelling method will not have an established written language. The following interview account with a translator working on storytelling projects throughout South Asia will introduce this new method of translation, revealing the steps involved in the translating process. Elizabeth Wilson, translator with Wycliffe Bible Translators, recently returned from a location in South Asia where she trained and worked with native speakers on several Bible story translation projects. This particular method of translation is a very intricate process involving a number of native speakers, a designated storyteller, recording materials, copies of Scripture in the native language and the translators’ native language (provided the target culture has a completed or partial translation of Scripture), and access to research materials (Wilson describes what "research materials" entail).

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
Even before this translation process began for Wilson, she and her co-translator spent several months in Thailand, where they began learning basic language learning and storytelling techniques. “We were to mainly focus on language learning, culture learning, and developing relationships [in the first session of training], though,” 74 Wilson recalled during the interview. The heavy emphasis on storytelling training did not occur until returning to Thailand after some experience on the job. Before beginning work with the K People (this pseudonym, K, will be used because of the sensitivity and confidentiality of this particular people group), Wilson was provided with all the research materials she needed to complete a storytelling project. She completed thorough exegetical research on a twenty-verse passage of Scripture using notes and handbooks created by previous translators, several Hindi translations of Scripture, and other resources provided for the work. It was then that the story was recorded as an mp3 file and played for a native storyteller.

The purpose of the storytelling translation technique is to provide a medium that is most accessible and most desirable in a particular people group. In some cases, the people group already has access to a written translation of Scripture, however the group behaves like an oral language group; information and heritage is passed down by word of mouth rather than by written works. There are other groups that still do not have access to Scripture—written or oral. Storytelling is a natural behavior for many people; if Scripture is translated in story form, important events in the Bible can be remembered for generations as the stories are told over and over again in a particular culture. Wilson and her co-translator worked to ensure the stories they presented storytellers in South Asia were accurate to Scripture as the storyteller retold the stories. The first retelling of the story was always a rough draft, recalled Wilson. “It would cue me in to

74 Elizabeth Wilson, Storytelling, March 3, 2013.
what stuck out in the story for her, or what parts she may have forgotten.”75 After the first telling, Wilson would discuss the story with the teller, addressing the parts of the story she did not retell, making notes and adjustments before playing the story for another native audience.

The two most important factors to consider when translating stories, Wilson described, are the people’s culture and the story’s accuracy to Scripture. “[After playing the story for the storyteller], I would play it for someone else, get their feedback on it, and make necessary changes, making sure, at the same time, that every single step of the way everything she said was accurate to Scripture. If she said something that wasn’t accurate, I wouldn’t go take that and play it for someone else…”76 To maintain accuracy to Scripture as well as producing a translation of a story relevant to the target culture is a complex balancing act. Wilson gave several examples of issues in translation that concerned concepts or vocabulary in the Bible nonexistent in the target culture.

“Forgiveness was a big deal,” Wilson continued. She and her teammate struggled to find an accurate translation of the word and concept forgiveness that would make sense to the K People. They had to convey the truth that God is forgiving, that if one were to commit even the worst sin (in K culture, committing adultery was an unmentionable wrong), one can ask God to forgive them, and out of the immense love he has for humanity, he would forgive them. Wilson and her teammate spoke with numerous people throughout the village, asking them, “How can God forgive such a big sin: adultery?” The majority answered, “Well…If God had a big heart, he could forgive even the greatest sin.” Thus, the concept of a forgiving God seen throughout Scripture became a “big-hearted” God in K culture and translated Bible stories.77

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
In all her experience overseas, Wilson worked within both the storytelling and cluster methods of translation. She worked with one people group for two years and six people groups for one year on storytelling projects, training twenty-four men to work on storytelling projects in their own languages. In this case, working within both methods was extremely effective for Wilson and her teammate. One of her primary objectives for working with each people group was to conduct training classes, teaching the men to translate Scripture independent from missionary aid. Training sessions do not require as much time from the missionary as translating does, such as the translations completed via the traditional method. The cluster method gives the missionary flexibility to work with multiple people groups, moving to and from various projects with less of a connection with the work in each individual project.

Using both the cluster and storytelling methods also increases accuracy to both Scripture and cultural relevance. The cluster method brings together a group of translators who speak the target language and live in the target culture. As the native translators learn the biblical concepts and themes, they can more effectively make connections between those biblical concepts and aspects of their own culture. When John Nystrom was working on the Arop translation, there were times he questioned the translators’ first drafts of Scripture regarding its relevance to biblical truths. He did have to correct the works if they were inaccurate, however, culturally, the Arops created a smooth, natural-sounding draft that no Western missionary ever could.78

The storytelling method brings to the translation a vibrant color from both Scripture and the culture’s tradition and heritage. Contextualized story comes to life in a community, as the stories of truth and salvation are told over and over again from generation to generation. Scripture is available to both oral and literal cultures in a way that speaks to their hearts. Bruce

78 Nystrom and Nystrom, Sleeping Coconuts.
Graham argues, “Every nation needs to understand its history and origins... A people’s story that is disconnected from God’s story will remain hopeless and without enduring purpose. People need to find their place and purpose on earth in light of God’s story among the nations.” Thus, every nation needs storytellers, whether the culture is literate or oral. Stories knit purpose and history in an intricate web for the teller and the listener. The intrinsic value of God’s story is the fact everyone plays a part. Every individual’s origin and purpose is intertwined with God’s. What better way to share the gospel than through story?

Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics (GIAL)

Townsend’s dream that every nation would have access to Scripture in their heart language has since been realized, and work has exponentially increased in the last twenty-five years to spur on the translating movement. In 1999, a center for higher learning opened for the first time—the Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics, or GIAL. The institute stemmed from Townsend’s Camp Wycliffe and the Summer Institute for Linguistics, all of which provided summer classes in language study in the 1930s (the Summer Institute is referred to today as SIL International). There was a desire for an institute for higher learning for missionaries entering the mission field to study language, something additional to the summer classes available, and credible, providing enrolled students with a degree in Linguistics and language study.

GIAL provides students with in-depth experience in exegetical study of biblical language, providing a foundation for further language study overseas. They will be equipped to train others to begin a work in Bible translation, furthering the final task onward. GIAL is immensely diverse concerning the kinds of students that attend the school (young, old, married, single, both men

79 Graham, “Transforming Worldviews through the Biblical Story.”
and women). According to David Ross, “this is a positive indicator of the future for GIAL.” In comparison, admission into organizations Camp Wycliffe and SIL International in the 1930s was strictly for single men between the ages of twenty and thirty with prior Bible and language study experience in a seminary. Work in training for Bible translation was not officially recognized in the United States until Townsend founded Camp Wycliffe and SIL International was established. GIAL has only furthered formal language, culture, and Bible study in the United States. The need for Scripture in every language on earth has been acknowledged in the States, and will only continue to grow as years pass, based upon Bible translation’s history of growth.

**Conclusion**

With Townsend’s establishment of Camp Wycliffe and SIL, and the newly founded GIAL, the Bible translation movement has grown exponentially in the last century alone. John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, among others who were martyred for the cause, laid down a lasting foundation for Bible translation. Without Tyndale’s tenacity to produce illegal translations of Scripture in the vernacular, ripping the power of interpretation from the Church of England, Bible translation would have little momentum. Wycliffe and Tyndale recognized the need for their people to understand Scripture, to have the ability to read it in a language they could truly understand. Now that we have read the Bible and understand it in our own language, how can we not share it with the world? Thus, driven men such as Cameron Townsend witnessed the frustration and hopelessness found in a people desperate for a God that they long to hear from. The Kaqchikel man Townsend approached knew there was a God who could speak Spanish, but why not Kaqchikel? Townsend’s new vision produced Wycliffe, and the beginnings

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80 Ross, “The Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics (GIAL).”
of an organization whose all-encompassing purpose is still, solely, to make God’s Word accessible to all people in the language of their heart.

The first translations in the United States, revealed through Charles Thomson’s Bible and the Revised Standard Version produced in the mid-1900s, were rejected by the public for errors in linguistics, contextualization, and the translators’ own influences in the work. As translation continued, both the three main aspects of translation and the methods by which Scripture translations are produced became more refined. Today, translation is still a laborious process, however the effectiveness of the translation methods allow them to work through any obstacles they encounter. Translators have largely moved away from the traditional method, focusing their attention on training native speakers to produce their own translations. Translators have become the teachers, native speakers the students. No longer will foreign translators and missionaries be needed through the entire translating process.

With the balancing, fluctuating use of these methods of Bible translation, along with translators’ awareness of their role as a translator and responsibility to ensure their work is fully contextualized for the target people group, every nation will have an accurate copy of Scripture that they can understand. Not only will they read or hear the Word of God in a language they can understand, but the translators will have bridged an ancient, cultural gap. They will see the Word of God come alive in their own cultures, realizing and recognizing the person of Jesus wearing their clothing, walking where they have walked, and resembling one of their own people. The message of God is universal, making it possible for every nation to obtain the truth of the gospel.
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