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Notes on Translation of the Malayalam Bible

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THESE notes are designed to point out some of the difficulties of the translator's task, especially if he must transfer thought content into a language that is separated from the original in point of form, culture, distance, and time. It is not the writer's intention to present an exhaustive study of the Bible in Malayalam. Nor does he maintain that the problems dealt with are the most urgent and vexing. Peculiarities of Malayalam make it difficult to make clear some of the vexing problems to one not familiar with the language. Enough examples, however, will be cited to remind us that a Bible translation represents a formidable undertaking and that the great number of versions of the Bible in the vernacular of a multitude of tongues should be recognized as God's gift.

The Malayalam language is spoken by about fifteen million people who live on the southwest coast of India. There are many Christians in this area, including the Church of South India, Syrian Christians,¹ Roman Catholics, the Salvation Army, and Lutheran Christians. One third of the population of Travancore is estimated to be Christian. The rest of the population of this area is Hindu²

¹ Syrian Christians are a group on the west coast of India who claim to trace their spiritual ancestry to the apostle Thomas and about A. D. 60. They now constitute a caste of their own and retain the name, though some of them may no longer belong to the group as a religious body. Various religious affiliations have developed. The Mar Thoma Church has an independent episcopate but is in the Eastern tradition; the Jacobites still acknowledge the Syrian Metropolitan but have split into several groups also; another group has become absorbed into Roman Catholicism; still another group has affiliated with Rome but retains the Syriac rite. In addition to this, many individuals are now members of the Church of South India through the Church Missionary Society, which was established originally to purify the Syrian Christian Church in India. A few families have embraced the Lutheran faith.

² *Hindu*, though frequently used to denote all people in India, is strictly a religious term. It refers to the principal religion of India, which is willing to embrace and profess almost anything except the exclusiveness of Christianity.

and Mohammedan.³ Our own church numbers roughly thirteen thousand baptized souls in the Malayalam-speaking area.⁴

Malayalam is one of the Dravidian⁵ languages spoken in South India. The Dravidian people are some of the earliest inhabitants of India, later driven south and conquered by the Aryan people and, still later, by the Moslems. Malayalam has a strong admixture of Sanskrit. In its present form there are minor admixtures of Arabic and Persian through the Moslem invasions, and of Portuguese and English taken over from those rulers.

The original translation of the Bible into Malayalam was made in the early half of the nineteenth century. Under urging from some highly placed British Christians, the Syrian Christian Church prepared a translation of the Gospels in 1807;⁶ in a more or less co-operative effort Benjamin Bailey of the Church Missionary Society completed a translation of the New Testament in 1825 and published it in 1829. The Old Testament was completed in 1841. Since this translation was satisfactory only to the southern Malayalees, Dr. H. Gundert, a German Lutheran connected with the Basel Mission, produced a translation of the New Testament for northern Malayalees. After considerable discussion and reworking, a translation of the entire Bible satisfactory to all Malayalees was produced by a committee of representative Christians. This final production shows the particular influence of Dr. Gundert's translation in the New Testament and of Dr. Bailey's in the Old Testament. In all these translations, except in the case of the Syrian Christian translation of the Gospels, where the Syriac version was used, the

³ Mohammedans are very numerous in the Malayalam-speaking area, where our Moslem Mission has a part of its work. In this area, even during the riots that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan, the relations between Mohammedans and Hindus were very peaceful. Fanaticism is not evident ordinarily. The Koran has not yet been translated into Malayalam.

⁴ Our church also works in the Tamil area on the other side of the Ghats and on the southern tip of India. Work has also been started in Kanarese, Telugu, and Singhalese, and in Ceylon.

⁵ The Dravidian languages number four, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kanarese. They are spoken in the southern part of India and are quite closely related. Dialectic differences arise where two language areas border on each other; there are also some related languages spoken by hill tribes, but these do not constitute a large factor.

⁶ It is a rather sad commentary on a church that calls itself Christian since A. D. 60 that the first translation of the Gospels into the vernacular came in 1807 at the instance of Western Christians.

sources were the original Greek and Hebrew.⁷ This version, though it has some archaisms, holds a very strong position among the Bible translations into the languages of India.

The problem of effective translation was vividly stated in the interview between the English translators, Rieu and Phillips, which appeared in this journal October 1954. The cited discussion centers in part in the term *equivalent effect*. The translator should attempt to produce an effect in the readers of his translation that the readers or hearers received from the original.

To achieve such a goal is an ambitious project, and one fraught with dangers. Accordingly a translation cannot merely exchange one word for another, but requires a very sensitive interpretation. The rule "If in doubt, translate literally" is fallacious, because a literal translation may cause more misunderstanding of the meaning of the original than a clumsy effort at achieving an equivalent effect. On the other hand, one who strives to achieve an equivalent effect must have a rich fund of information about customs, usage, and the language of the original and the new setting. Ambitious and dangerous though this approach may be, every preacher and teacher of God's Word must cope with it when he tries to make the words of the Word vivid and understandable to his listeners.

The most obvious problem is that of isolated words. The very term that should be used to describe God must have caused the early missionaries in India some serious qualms. Should they use a Hindu term, or should they manufacture one? *Daivam* is used in the Malayalam Bible; it differs in form from the Hindu *daivan* 'god' and *daiivi* 'goddess' only in its common gender ending. Hindus will occasionally use the word *daivam* to denote god in a general sense. But years of usage seem to have drawn the line of demarcation accurately enough. It is interesting to note, however, that the word *Eeshwaran*, which to the Malayalee denotes the god Siva and is sometimes used to indicate the god-principle or god-above-gods, is used in the Bible in the Hindi language.⁸ Evidently the problem does not affect the situation there as it would in the Malayalam Bible.

⁷ The Malayalam New Testament parallels very closely the Nestle text.

⁸ The Hindi language is spoken by more people than any other language in India. It is slated to become the national language in future.

The passage, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow" (Is. 1:18), carries tremendous force with those who know snow and the whiteness with which it can blanket and beautify the most sordid surroundings. But a translator has difficulty in producing an equivalent effect unless he forsakes the picture and uses another. The translators of the Malayalam Bible translated it literally; the truth remains but is hardly vivid to those who have never seen snow.

On the other hand, because the Malayalam people are familiar with the customs of agriculture of Jesus' time, they readily grasp the meaning of many of His parables. In translating the parable of the sower and his seed, the translator has the assurance that the reader has certainly seen and possibly performed the very tasks on which the parable turns. Describing Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a very vital idea to people who at some time may well have done just this sort of shepherding. Leaven works daily in the bakeryless villages of the Malayalam country and one doesn't have to explain the parable of the leaven as he does in the American situation.

The customs of a people also affect the translator's task. What should one do about honorifics? The Malayalam language has a system of honorific forms of address which are applied to people in various situations. These will vary with the education and background of the people using them and those to whom they are to be applied. Without going into the details of these honorifics, suffice it to say that when Peter addresses the Savior and says, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), he uses a word which a man might use in addressing his son, servant, or wife, but never his superior nor even his equal. But had the translators used an honorific in this case, they might be outdated by now. The use of honorifics varies in various sections of the country and in various times. Furthermore, what honorific is fitting for God? The same that Hindus use in their worship? Is that not almost insulting in itself? Is it not possible that no honorific is the greatest honorific or that the honorific must come from the context and not from the word?

But even if we could grant that the custom of honorifics would change no faster than the rest of the language and that the prob-

lem of an honorific for God would not be too difficult, other questions would arise to confuse the issue. Since the original does not use these honorifics, the translators must decide a number of problems. Would it be fitting to indicate the growing respect and faith of the disciples for the Savior as well as the growing hatred of the Pharisees by a change in honorifics? When Nathan tells David, "Thou art the man" (2 Sam. 12:7), is an honorific fitting in that shattering accusation? If it isn't, is it ever fitting when God's prophet speaks to the king? And if so, when? Similarly, in the discussion between Jesus and the sisters, Mary and Martha, at the time of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:21-40), the sisters address Jesus in a most familiar fashion. The translation does not show any honorific at all. But the fact of the matter is that in conservative Malayalam society women would not hold this sort of conversation with men at all, particularly not with men who are not their husbands or relatives. The translator is faced with an impossible task in producing an equivalent effect and is therefore forced to a degree of literalness in his translation.

Theological terminology comes in for a great deal of consideration. The translators are usually faced with the alternative of investing a Hindu word with a new meaning or coining a new one. The word with which sin is translated, *papam*, carries a very weak and diffuse meaning in Hinduism. It is occasionally described as a backlog of error and evil that will have to be worked out in the *karma* of a sinner, either in this life or in the life to come.⁹ The translators used this word in the hope, largely fulfilled, that the context and descriptions in the New Testament as well as the other words for sin would so specify and narrow the term that it would assume a clarity which it does not have in Hinduism. It can sometimes serve as a bridge from Hinduism to Christianity in mutual discussion; but this advantage is often outweighed by the fact that

⁹ Very roughly, *karma* is a doctrine that describes the continual workings of fate and sin in the lives of men and other creatures; everyone and everything, somehow or other, in some incarnation or another, reaps the just rewards of his sins. By following certain disciplines — *dharmā* — one can lift himself out of this endless line of birth and rebirth and be absorbed into the infinite. Sin, or *papam*, keeps him in this endless line and may be ceremonial as well as moral. This explanation roughly summarizes the situation, although it probably is an oversimplification of a very complex doctrine.

Hindus will often judge the Christian doctrine of sin by their own standards, because the same word is used.

“Incarnation” has a very simple and easy translation in *avatharam*. It is used in the Malayalam Nicene Creed, but not in the Malayalam Bible. Though it is simple and easy, it is most dangerous. Hindu gods have many *avatharams*, ‘modes of appearance among men.’ In fact, this avenue of *avatharam* permits many Hindus to reduce their almost infinite number of gods and to describe the “Trinity” of Hinduism¹⁰ as parallel to the Christian Trinity. The *Madras Mail*, an English daily in South India, regularly runs Christmas articles of which at least one will try to draw the parallel between the incarnation of our Savior and the incarnation of the god Krishnan. But the incarnation, or *avatharam*, of Hinduism is little more than a theophany, a mode of God’s appearance to men. For these reasons, probably, the translators felt that it was far wiser to use the somewhat clumsier but far more explicit expression “was made flesh,” *jedam ai*.

One of the most interesting examples of vivid and idiomatic translation is found in the case of Elijah’s challenge to the Children of Israel on Mount Carmel. RSV translates it, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” (1 Kings 18:21). The Hebrew indicates a figure of speech in the word חֲפָזִים. The Malayalam translation puts it into a very vivid idiom: “How long will you put your feet into two canoes?” If we remember that a large part of the Malayalam area is adjacent to large inland lakes, that the entire area is bordered by the Arabian Sea, and that one can travel all the way from Trivandrum to Cochin, 150 miles, by backwaters without entering the ocean, we can grasp the force of such an idiom. The translation is not in the least bit literal or even faithful in its wording; but it is most vivid and faithful in the effect it has upon its readers.

But the difficulty of translation lies not only in the individual words of the original that do not find their equivalents in the vernacular; it also lies in words and usages of the vernacular which are more precise or more diffuse than the words of the original. This situation often forces the translator to make a distinction

¹⁰ The Triad of Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Siva, the Destroyer.

which does not exist in the original, because the vernacular demands that distinction.

The Malayalam has two ways of saying "we." If the speaker means to include the people to whom he is speaking, he says *nam*; if he means to exclude them, he says *gnangal*. There is no common term to cover both. It must be one or the other.¹¹ Generally this choice does not create much difficulty. When Paul speaks to the Galatians of the Gospel "which we preached to you," it is evident that *gnangal* is to be used; but when he says that Christ has set us free, it is just as evident that the inclusive *nam* is to be used. However, in the account on the Transfiguration, Peter says: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles. . . ." In which sense is "us" to be understood here? The translators put it into Malayalam as follows: "Master, it is good that we (*nam*, including Jesus) are here; let us (*gnangal*, excluding Jesus) build three tabernacles. . . ."

The Malayalam language also distinguishes between the two types of negation of the verb "to be," roughly parallel to the Hebrew usage of לֹא and אֵין . This distinction also applies to the affirmative form of the verb. Thus, to the question, "Is there a book in the room?" the answer will be *undu* or *illa*, affirming or denying the existence of a book in the room. If the question is: "Is that a book in the room?" the answer will be *arnu* or *alla*, affirming or denying the quality of "that" as a book. This distinction makes the work on the Old Testament somewhat easier, but in the New Testament the problems of accurate translation continually arise.

Relationship between brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., is described in a considerably different fashion from the English or the Greek and Hebrew originals. In common Malayalam parlance, Andrew would be Peter's older brother or younger brother, not just his brother (John 1:40). We do not know who was the senior and can simply call them brothers; but that is not the way people talk in Malayalam.

A problem of diffuse relationship also arises from this indefiniteness. The general term *brother* and the more specific terms *younger brother* and *older brother* are used to describe people who are not

¹¹ This peculiarity also extends to Tamil, Telugu, and Kanarese, the other Dravidian languages. To the best of my knowledge it is peculiar to them.

brothers at all. They are applied to sons of brothers and sons of sisters. But the word to describe the relationship of the children of a sister and brother is a completely different one. And that same word is used to describe a brother-in-law or sister-in-law. Mother-in-law and an aunt of a certain relationship are described by the same word. Looking at the Malayalam only, one would not be sure whether Peter's relative whom Jesus healed was his mother-in-law or his aunt (Mark 1:10). The fact that this apparent confusion can be explained by ancient tribal and caste customs does not make the matter any easier for the modern translator.

The use of verbs, tenses, verb forms, word sequence, causal formations, and a host of other grammatical matters would further explain the problems in translating the Bible into Malayalam. But it is very difficult to describe the nature of those problems unless the language concerned is familiar to the readers.

These examples will suffice to show what a serious problem translating the Bible into Malayalam is and how important it is that it be done well. Inasmuch as in 1956 we celebrate the 250th anniversary of Protestant missions in the Far East, we cannot but add our thanks to God that men like Ziegenbalg¹² and his many followers applied themselves to the important task of translating Scripture into the native tongues.

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¹² With Pluetschau, Ziegenbalg arrived on the Tranquebar Coast in 1706 and started mission work among the Tamilians there. He produced a translation of the New Testament in a very short time.