

## THE GOD OF TRANSLATION

The God of the Bible is the “God of translation.” The term “translation” is usually associated with converting Scripture from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) into English, Chinese, Urdu, Punjabi and other tongues. Certainly that is included, but our title, “God of translation” implies much more. It encompasses God’s desire to reach all mankind, Christ’s incarnation and communicating the gospel to people with diverse cultures, philosophies and mindsets. To highlight this point, let’s first contrast the God of the Bible with Islam’s view of the Koran.

### The God of the Bible versus the Koran

The religion of Islam teaches that their holy book, the Koran (Qur’an) is not translatable; it is only divinely inspired in Arabic. They believe the Koran was written in heaven in Arabic and transmitted without error, addition or omission to the Prophet Mohammed in Arabic. Professor Andrew Walls says Islam considers the Koran<sup>1</sup> “the direct speech of God, delivered in Arabic...unaltered and unalterably fixed in heaven forever.” Of course technically it can be translated into other languages. However, Moslems believe the Koran’s “revelation ceases to be the Word of God...if the [Koran] Qur’an is translated from Arabic into any (other) language,” Professor A. L. Tibawi of Harvard University explains.<sup>2</sup> Adherents to Islam learn Arabic in order to recite prayers and read the Koran. For them Arabic is the language of God; God speaks only in Arabic and hears prayers in Arabic. Their Scripture is not translatable; their God is not a God of translation.

Contrast Islam’s view with God as revealed in the Bible. Scripture reveals God as the God of translation. God does not have His own divine dialect—the “language of God”—in which He communicates with humanity. God does not require us to learn His language; He speaks our dialect. Charles Kraft declares,<sup>3</sup> “God...uses the language and thought patterns of those to whom he speaks. He could have constructed a heavenly language and required that we all learn that language in order to hear what he has to say to us...He has, apparently, no holy language, no...linguistic patterns that he endorses to the exclusion of all other patterns.” God spoke to the Pharisee Saul in Hebrew, his mother-tongue (Acts 26:14). And God is not limited to Hebrew as if that were the only sacred tongue. On the day of Pentecost, by the Spirit’s operation, Jews from every nation under heaven heard God’s magnificent works *proclaimed in their own dialects* (Acts 2:6, 11). Andrew F. Walls points out<sup>4</sup> “the Pentecostal crowd of Dispersion Jews hears the wonderful works of God, not in the sacred language of the temple liturgy...but in the languages of the various nations that were their real mother tongues (Acts 2:11).” In principle at Pentecost God could have given the gift of audition, enabling everyone to understand one divine dialect. He didn’t do that; He gave diverse tongues to the 120 disciples. God respected the linguistic diversity and authenticated the many dialects of the Jerusalem pilgrims. D. A. Carson comments,<sup>5</sup> “At Pentecost God did not give the gift of one language...he gave the gift of many languages, so that the one message could be heard in all the relevant languages, thus preserving the diversity.” The hearers at Pentecost would be justified in declaring “God speaks my language!” When God speaks to us in our dialect, our secular tongue becomes a sacred language!

This principle—that there is no unique sacred language, either Old Testament Hebrew, or New Testament Greek or Medieval Latin—is the foundation of Bible translation. Religious scholar, Lamin Sanneh says,<sup>6</sup> “Muslims believe that Christians have no revealed language for revelation and so are divided by the languages of the world.” They misunderstand; it is not that “Christians have no revealed language.” Rather, God can be revealed in all dialects! All languages become sacred, “the language of God,” when Scripture is translated into them. Today the entire Bible has been translated into 400 languages, the New Testament into another 1,000 tongues and John’s gospel into 900 more dialects. Hence, at least part of Scripture has been rendered in 2,300 languages. This monumental accomplishment resulted from the realization that<sup>7</sup> “the

Christian Scriptures are not, like the Qur'an [Koran], the Word of God only when delivered in the original languages...The Word of God can be spoken in any language under heaven." God is the God of translation.

### Incarnation—the Supreme Act of Translation

Islam's axiom that the Koran is not translatable reflects their view of God. Our tenet that the Bible can and should be translated stems from our realization of who God is. Islam teaches that God is God; He never became a man. In contrast, we declare history's greatest event—incarnation, that God became a man. Incarnation is the supreme act of translation, hence the Bible says "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). God doesn't ask us to ascend to where He is; that's impossible. Rather, He came down to where we are. Thus the divine Logos was "translated" into humanity to bring God to the human race. Again Professor Walls says,<sup>8</sup> Christ "is the Eternal Word of God; but Christ is Word Translated. That fact is the sign that the contingent Scriptures...unlike the Qur'an [Koran] may and should constantly be translated." Our God is the God of translation.

### Announcing the Gospel in Antioch

Acts records a pivotal event—the arrival of the gospel in Antioch, a truly cosmopolitan city (Acts 11:19-21). This was "one of the most crucial events in Christian history," because it was "the first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world," says Professor Walls.<sup>9</sup> Prior to Antioch the gospel was proclaimed to people familiar with the Old Covenant. This included Jews (both Hebrew and Hellenist), "half-Jews" (Samaritans) and Gentile proselytes and God-fearers.<sup>10</sup> However, it had not yet reached the pagan Greeks, the typical heathen Gentiles. "Antioch is famous," says F. B. Meyer "because a number of...unnamed disciples dared to preach the gospel to Greeks...in entire disregard of...Judaism." This epoch-changing event was not the work of the apostles, Peter or Paul, but of "small potatoes," some anonymous believers. "Antioch... the most important event in [Church] history, was brought about by unknown Christians," notes Johannes Munck. They were refugees from the persecution triggered by Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 11:19). Yet, after arriving in Antioch, they flaunted religious convention by evangelizing their pagan neighbours. Their success marked the beginning of the conversion of the Greek world, a step which changed the face of Christianity. But this required "translating the gospel," not into another language, but from one set of cultural concepts into another.

### Translating the Gospel

Prior to Antioch, Acts describes the apostles' proclamation as "announcing the gospel of Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). After he was saved, Paul "confounded the Jews in Damascus by proving that this One [Jesus] is the Christ" (Acts 9:22). In summary form the gospel to people under the Old Covenant was—"Jesus is the Christ," the Messiah, the Anointed One promised to Israel. This message works for Jews familiar with the Old Testament; it's also effective for Gentile proselytes and God-fearers attached to the Jewish community. It doesn't work well for heathen Greeks.

To pagan Gentiles "Christ" is just a name; the Greek name, "*Christos*" sounds like "*Chrestus*," a common slave name. To them, "Jesus Christ" sounds like any other name; they would understand there is a person—with the first name "Jesus," and the second (surname) "Christ." Of course the evangelists could explain that "Christ" is not just a name, but a title. Yet the title "Christ," translated literally, means "Smeared One," which only adds more complexity. Of course it signifies the Messiah, the promised One. Yet Christ, the Messiah was promised *to Israel*; He is the national Savior of the Jews. This message has little appeal to the Gentile nations. It was necessary to "translate the gospel" in order to reach pagan Gentiles. Andrew Walls explains<sup>11</sup> --"they found it was of little use to talk of Jesus as Messiah. The word meant nothing to Greeks, and needed endless explanation. They had to translate, to find a term that told something about Jesus and yet meant something to a Greek pagan. According to Acts (11:19-21), they

chose the word *Kyrios*, 'Lord,' the title that Greek pagans used for their cult divinities." Significantly Acts records that the Jerusalem refugees arriving in Antioch "spoke even to the Greeks, announcing the Lord Jesus as the gospel" (Acts 11:20). Breaking the previous pattern, they didn't announce Jesus as the Christ; they proclaimed "Jesus is Lord!" They risked being misunderstood; some Gentiles might consider adding Jesus as one more "lord" or "god" in their personal pantheon. The New Testament acknowledges this pagan concept. Paul writes "For even if there are so-called gods...and many lords, yet to us [Christians] there is one God...and one Lord, Jesus Christ..." (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Yet, they took the risk, "translating the gospel" into Greek cultural concepts and it was rewarded; Scripture records that the "Lord's hand was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). The Church in Antioch, the first local church in the Gentile world, began as a result of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. This pattern of "translating the gospel" has been repeated many times since then.

Paul's New Testament epistles suggest the slogan "Jesus is Lord" summarizes "the gospel to the uncircumcision" (Gal. 2:7). He says, "If you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9 NLT). The "litmus test" of the Holy Spirit's inspiration is that "...no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Moreover, the gospel's ultimate triumph occurs when "every knee shall bow...and every tongue shall openly confess that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-10).

### Translating the Gospel Today

There is only one gospel; its core is the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Any other gospel is a "different gospel," which ought to be rejected (Gal. 1:6-9). Yet this unique message can be presented in various ways, depending on the audience. The apostles, Peter and Paul, acknowledged there is the "gospel to the uncircumcision" as well as to "the circumcision" (Gal. 2:7). Hence Acts records a variety of Paul's gospel messages—his presentation to Jews and devout Gentiles in the synagogues of the Dispersion (Acts 13:16-41), to Greek intellectuals at Athens' Areopagus (Acts 17:22-32) and to idolatrous "Barbarians" in Lystra (Acts 14:15-18). The former differs from the latter; in the synagogue Paul quoted from Scripture and reviewed Jewish history. On Mars Hill he quoted Greek poets and Athens' altars (Acts 17:23, 28). Paul was translating the gospel for different cultures. Contrary to some commentators,<sup>12</sup> Paul's "Athens Apologetic" was not a failure; two prominent people were gained, including "Dionysios the Areopagite," one of twelve Athenian judges of religious affairs (Acts 17:34).

The New Testament pattern for gospel proclamation is not "one size fits all." There is no single message suitable for all people, regardless of their background. No single "silver bullet" exists which can reach everyone. Any gospel booklet—e.g. "*The Romans Road*," "*The Four Spiritual Laws*" or "*The Mystery of Human Life*"—will resonate with some people and not with others. The challenge for Christians today, when the cities of North America are becoming increasingly multicultural and multiethnic, is to "translate the gospel" into forms which can reach different people. The level of complexity is magnified by the "generation gaps" between "baby boomers," "Gen X-ers," and the "Google generation," between "modern" and "post-modern" worldviews. A recent survey of religious beliefs in the US concluded that<sup>13</sup> "Americans believe in everything. It's a spiritual salad bar...[It] is a 'salad bar' where people heap on upbeat beliefs they like and often leave the veggies—like strict doctrines—behind." The diversity of spiritual concepts in North America today may be no less than in Paul's day (*circa*. 50 AD,) when he beheld a multitude of deities in Athens. The challenge to make known the "Unknown God" portrayed in the Bible remains. To effectively reach our neighbors, friends, colleagues and relatives with the good news of Jesus Christ requires translating the gospel into contemporary terms they can understand while preserving its life-changing power.

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NOTES:

1. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Orbis Books, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, UK, 1996, p. 27. A. F. Walls is a former missionary to W. Africa and Professor at the University of Edinburgh, UK. Along the same lines Prof. Walls talks about "...the ultimate untranslatability of [Islam's] charter document, the Qur'an [Koran]. The Christian Scriptures, by contrast, are open to translation." (p. 23)
2. "Is The Qur'an Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion" by A.L. Tibawi. Paper read at the XXVth International Congress of Orientalists on Friday 12th August, 1960, in the University of Moscow, and later published in *The Muslim World*, Volume 52, 1962, pages 1-16.
3. Charles H. Kraft, "Culture, Communication & Christianity," William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, 2001, p. 209. Charles H. Kraft is a former missionary on the faculty of the School of World Mission, Fuller Seminary, S Pasadena, CA USA.
4. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 32.
5. D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, p. 74 Carson is professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. USA.
6. Lamin Sanneh is Professor of Missions & World Christianity and Professor of History at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT, USA. His writings include, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 1989
7. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 47.
8. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 27. In this context, Prof. Walls makes the important point that "the true analogy with the Qur'an [Koran] is not the Bible, but Christ. **Christ** for Christians, the Qur'an for Muslims, **is the Eternal Word of God; but Christ is Word Translated. That fact is the sign that the contingent Scriptures** (also described as Word of God) **unlike the Qur'an [Koran] may and should constantly be translated.**" The highlighted text is quoted above.
9. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 52. These phrases appear in reverse order in the original.
10. Luke's record in Acts makes a clear distinction between Jews and Gentile proselytes & God-fearers. Proselytes accepted circumcision, the Jewish diet and regulations; "God-fearers" remained uncircumcised and were more accommodating on the Jewish diet etc. The Apostle Paul addressed, "Men of Israel [Jews] and those who fear God [i.e. Gentile God-fearers]" (Acts 13:16) Also "Sons of the race of Abraham [i.e. Jews] and those among you who fear God [i.e. Gentile God-fearers]" (Acts 13:26) The "Jews and devout proselytes" are referred to in Acts 13:43). Cornelius was "devout and one who feared God" (Acts 10:2). Nicolas (one of "the seven" deacons) was a [Gentile] "proselyte of Antioch" (Acts 6:5)
11. Andrew F. Walls, "The Mission of the Church Today in the Light of Global History" in *Word & World*, Volume XX, Number 1, Winter 2000 pp. 17-21. Along the same lines, Prof. Walls writes, "Many believers were forced out of Jerusalem...Most of them...proclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the Jewish communities (Acts 11:19). But some people...arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, began to talk about Jesus to "Greeks"—that is, to pagans (Acts 11:20). This meant talking about Jesus in a new way. There was little to be gained by stressing the ethnic term "Messiah." It could be translated into Greek easily enough, but the translation ("the Smeared One") would still seem odd to anyone not well acquainted with Jewish institutions. Explaining it would require a lengthy introduction to the Scriptures; and supposing there were Greek pagans with the interest and stamina to pay attention, they might still be puzzled to see any relevance to their own situation. Why should they rejoice that the national savior of Israel had arrived? What sort of good news to them was the restoration of Israel? The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene...took a different route. Linguistic translation was not enough; conceptual translation was necessary in order to convey the fact that Jesus had ultimate significance for Greek pagans, just as he had for devout Jews. They presented Jesus as Lord, *Kyrios*." [Andrew F. Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church" in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, vol. 28, No. 1, (January 2004) p. 4]
12. The "mixed response has led to the conclusion that Paul's attempt at a 'philosophizing sermon' was a failure," says Ron Vince in "At the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31): Pauline Apologetics and Lucan Rhetoric." He cites Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) p. 601 as one example.

Dr. Ralph Winter counters this view, after explaining its basis as follows: "Luke's succinct summary of Paul's Areopagus address has sometimes been...judged [as 'highly pleasing to Almighty God, but never to be done again.'] As such, it is seen as a one-off, valiant attempt at philosophical discussion...in the sophisticated field of apologetics in the late Roman Republican and early Empire....The Areopagus address is regarded in some Christian circles as a well-meaning, innovative experiment, 'highly pleasing to Almighty God'—after all it resulted in the conversion of the two distinguished Athenians and their entourage—but it was 'never to be done again'. Therefore, it has to be concluded that today Acts 17 provides no paradigm for Christian apologetics which are an essential prerequisite to evangelism.

Those who believe that this address was, in effect, a failure, support their contention by arguing that Paul himself subsequently resolved never again to attempt this approach in his ministry. They argue that, of his evangelistic endeavours at his next port of call, Paul 'determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2) in that culturally sophisticated city of Corinth." [Dr. Ralph Winter, "Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul's failed apologetic in Acts 17?" (emphasis added) on line at <http://www.euroleadershipresources.org/resource.php?ID=120>

12. The Survey was the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of 35,000 Americans. Pew released demographic data in February, 2008 from the survey, conducted May through August 2007. The quote is from *USA Today* - Jun 29, 2008.