

Postscript 2001

A word on the Old Testament (OT) phase of the Abakaliki translation project.

Fifteen years have passed since the Epilogue was added to this story.

The three translations remind us of a race on the track field. The eagerly expected Izi Bible is to be printed by the end of this year 2001. Ikwo and Ezaa for various reasons are both lagging behind. Ezaa has made least progress of the three.

The OT, as the New Testament (NT), is the fruit of the labor and painful toil of Nigerian Bible translators who worked and still work under the supervision and the consultation of Reinier de Blois, seconded by his church (the Netherlands Reformed Church, NRC) to the United Bible Society (UBS). For a while the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) with its own consultant, David Momo, joined the project to be sure that it was in good hands. With Reinier de Blois, and the NRC behind him, the project could not have been off. We who worked on the NT phase are deeply grateful for the vision and unfailing commitment – financial and personnel-wise—of the NRC and its Dutch constituency during the many years of hard work of all involved.

Had it not been for that kind of exemplary dedication and faithfulness of the NRC and its staff from the very beginning, the difficulties would have been insurmountable. The NRC began its work in the late seventies. The translated Izi-NT and the Izi language were the foundation on which the Izi Church was built. The Church required its Dutch personnel to learn Izi for all the activities in their Bible and Agricultural Training School that were combined with medical work. This provided for a healthy balance of evangelism, discipleship formation and manual work alongside the translation project. Izi became their language of instruction in school and church. Literateness in Izi was a requirement for baptism. Today there are over 80 local churches in the rural areas of northern Izi country where the Izi translation is used extensively. Evangelists used the Izi hymnbooks like *Ekele Oma* and many Psalms composed with local tunes. Those were selected and compiled on the basis of songwriter competitions that the NRC holds twice a year to encourage song writing.

Why so long?

The reader may ask why it took so long to complete the first of the three Bibles, and why the Ikwo and Ezaa are not even near completion.

The main reason was the prolonged absence of John Ovuoba who went for further training in the United States. He may one day write a book about the saga of his own life, his stay overseas and how he continued from there. The NRC hired him for the Ikwo translation project and he is still at work adapting the Izi OT to Ikwo. A younger translator, Joseph Itumo, is doing the same for Ezaa.

Each of the translators has their own trials. Samuel Iyoku has diabetes and serious eye problems. He has not had an easy life, but in spite of all his adversities he has kept the faith and is still pastoring an Izi church. To tell the story of each, another book would have to be written!

If we wonder why God allowed the many setbacks in the lives of the men behind the translation desk, we need to remember that the enemy of God seems to increase his attacks as a translation moves toward completion. On the other hand, once a church grows out of the translation process itself, its pastors begin to take an active part in how the Word is to be expressed in their own language. The Izi community has, over the last 40 years, produced a number of pastors who want to participate in the process and their own mind to be heard. The original “village checking” has given way to lengthy and lively discussions and time-consuming arguments on both sides, particularly in relation to how to translate poetic passages.

DeBlois asks: “WHAT do you do with an expression like Gen. 49:11: ‘He will tie his donkey to the vine.’” where Juda is promised a life of eventual prosperity? Neither donkey nor vine are known in Izi. To what degree should one make implicit information explicit? The cultural equivalent would be ‘he will tie his GOAT to the YAM FARM, but for an Izi man that would be an absolutely crazy idea or nonsensical. What should we expect the pastor to explain and what should be included in the text itself?

The dynamics of Bible translation does not allow the consultant to cast the decisive vote. He has the demanding job of arbitrating between extreme literalists and those who desire an overly idiomatic YET more meaningful rendering. The organic growth of a participatory translation project cannot be compared to a factory producing mechanical equipment at an economically calculated rate of output! Rather it grows as a well-watered tree.

The De Blois family settled into Iziland in 1983 and spent their first seven years among the rural Izi population studying the language and culture. And a few years later they had the opportunity to spend another three months in the same area, this time as a family of seven. Otherwise the family has lived in Holland and DeBlois has supervised the work and visited the translation team twice every year. He never wasted his time while waiting for the Abakaliki translators to catch up with their work. He became a travelling consultant for several other UBS project in Africa and recently received his doctorate in linguistics in Holland for his research on a modern dictionary of Hebrew semantic domains, the foundation of an ongoing project to produce the remaining twenty-one volumes on each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. ⁱ

Over the years DeBlois has supervised the former translators and trained new ones such as Nikodemus Ude, now a dynamic NRC pastor. Ude and he proofread the Izi OT in Holland where DeBlois is now formatting the whole Bible in his own office. This is truly an extraordinary accomplishment without which the production of this Bible would have experienced further delays. His African colleagues have also learned the skills of working with their computers. John Ovuoba and others of his age group are now even linked to e-mail. Government offices in Abakaliki have e-mail and Internet – if the phone lines are not down!

The Abakaliki area attained statehood shortly before 1990. Even twenty years ago the area was considered to be among the most backward in Nigeria. Today, says DeBlois, “the Ebonyi State is a national example of progress.” What brought this about? The spread of the Gospel, to be sure, but also political changes. The state has its own local governments and has recognized the local languages like Izi as a means

of instruction in the primary schools. The only setback is the lack of state finances to produce the necessary Izi primers for the Izi speaking area. The status of Izi has nevertheless been raised beyond expectation.

Why the Old Testament?

Unfortunately there are still those who tend to despise their own language in deference to the trade language, Igbo. Some of the churches in town still switch to Igbo as soon as an Igbo speaker enters the church. The pride of prestige still lingers on. “Many old people see the church as a type of education and therefore only of interest to the younger generation. Some of the older people look at the church as just another source of ‘ji le nwa’ (yam and children),” writes DeBlois: “I remember one old man in Otsokpuru who addressed one of his gods during the yearly yam sacrifice as follows: ‘I have served you all my life. I gave you fowls, goats and even a cow. But you have given me nothing. I you don’t give me a house with a zinc roof this year, I will throw you away and start going to church.’ This is a typical case of contemporary Izi religion.”

Yet we must not judge this lack of comprehension harshly. It will take time until the foundation of the OT will have had an impact on a church that up till now has been like a tree cut off from its roots. Without access to a translation of the OT, is it possible to have an understanding of the Gospel message beyond its aspect of personal forgiveness and salvation from bondage to sin and fear of evil spirits? Without the historic background of the people of Israel and the thread of progressive revelation through the expanding covenant with Abraham, the New Testament is but a first step. For a continent whose lifestyle closely approaches that of the OT, should not translation work *begin* in that part of God’s Word?—This is not the place to discuss this issue as others have written about it.

We believe that the historic Western Church, with all its denominational variations, is equally disconnected from its Jewish heritage – yet for a different reason. Access to the translated text is obviously not all that matters. Having rejected or forgotten the Jewishness of the Gospel, most of the Western Church still adhere to the erroneous doctrine of Replacement Theology, according to which the Church has taken the place of Israel. The consequences of that error are equivalent to having no OT at all. In that view, the OT at best is a source of stories and illustrations, a collection of types. At worst it can be discarded as legends and myths. The new historians today, supported by the new archaeologists, claim that since no artefacts have been discovered that predate 800 BCE, whatever is claimed to be older must be chalked up to imagination and folklore. And what does that do to the NT? Lacking its Hebrew connection, it went adrift in the Hellenistic worldview that influenced centuries of Church History. The Early Church Fathers with their Christian anti-Semitism stand at the root of this damaging separation.

How long will it take until the Abakaliki Christians can appreciate what it means when Jesus refers to “other sheep” that are “not of this fold” (John 10:16, reinforced by the Apostle Paul in Eph 2:15-16), “salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22) alluding to much more than just Isaiah 2:3,

“for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”

or when the Letter to the Jewish-Gentile church in Rome claims in reference to the Jews that

“God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29)?

How long will it take until they can understand that the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles AND the prophets, that the Church is a “mystery” (Eph 2), that is rooted in God’s plan of Redemption beginning with the Covenant promise to Abraham, with one man through whom all the nations of the world are to be blessed? We still wonder if some elements of the African Church, in spite of phenomenal growth, still consider Christianity as a matter of personal and social prestige?

In short, the task of Bible Translation remains unfinished until the two parts (old and new) form an inseparable unity – linked by shared terminology, subjects and themesⁱⁱ -- to be demonstrated by the unity of Jews and Gentiles (Africans included) in one common body, now and in the Messianic-Jewish Kingdom to come.

What next?

As to the next phase of this project, we are privileged to report that the NRC is determined to pursue the triple language approach and to continue coordinating the remaining translations. They recognize the advantages of this dynamic approach of cross-fertilization through closely related languages and culture. It is expected that this slower approach will bear fruit also for the first revision of the Izi Bible when the time for it will have come.

If Ikwo and Ezaa cannot make sense of what the Izi model says, they will be free to make their version more explicit. That may lead to Izi replacing its own rendering with a more intelligible one matching either of the two other versions. This process was found enriching even for the narrative and didactic passages of the NT translation phase.

It is our sincere prayer that the formatting process will not be held up by computer problems and that the whole translation team and all the churches involved, both in Holland and in Nigeria, will one day see the fruit of their labor to the glory of Him who has said “the last shall be the first”. May the treasures of the Izi OT lead to the end of confusion between religion/education and relationship, and may they not only lead to the spread of literacy but also to the spread of the knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of the Jewish Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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May the work of Bible Translation, of the Old and the New Testament, continue as long as the doors remain open, for the Lord Jesus said: “night is coming when no one can work.”ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, Come soon Lord Jesus, come!

ⁱ In addition to this research which involved the development of special software he produced “Paratext”, another tool for translators and additional modules, sponsored by the UBS and to be integrated with his dictionary software in SIL’s comprehensive software package “Translator’s Workplace”.

(<http://www.wycliffe.org/insider/workplace.htm>; http://www.ethnologue.com/LL_docs/contents.asp; <http://www.ubs-translations.org/>)

ⁱⁱ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., 1978, *Toward an OT Theology*

ⁱⁱⁱ John 9:4. This word is loaded with tension. To be at peace in the face thereof is only possible if we put our trust in our Heavenly Father. The Wycliffe Bible Translators have the clearly defined goal to assure that even the last linguistic community in the world with God’s help will get their own Bible Translation Project by 2025. Whether or not God the Father will postpone the return of His Son until this goal will have been reached, only He Himself knows. Until then both is needed: an increasing readiness for His Second Coming and at the same time a goal-oriented all-out effort to the uttermost. It is our personal conviction that this goal could be reached sooner than envisaged if the Churches were to implore the God of Israel in favor of the Jews in order that both together, believers in the Messiah from among the Jews and from among the Gentiles may give themselves to this task.

Does not Isaiah remind us that one day the nations, until the end of the earth, will find their way out of darkness through the light of Israel? (Isaiah 49:6, see 49:3 according to which this passage cannot possibly refer to Jesus only.) Isaiah’s prediction has begun to be fulfilled. Never in 2000 years before have there been so many Jews come to accept Jesus as their Messiah. Long ago Paul and Barnabas quoted that passage in Antioch where they clearly applied it to Israel. Is there any reason why the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy should be postponed to the time of the millennium? Should not the Church recognize that the time of fulfillment has come?

Would the Jews who accept Yeshua as their Messiah be willing to put their knowledge of Hebrew and their gifts in language learning to the task of Translating the Old Testament in order that the prophetic word may be fulfilled much sooner: “And many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths.” For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” (Isa 2:3)