



# Editorial



## Tony Graham

Tony Graham lives in south Shropshire and has been part of *The Bible in Transmission's* editorial team since 2001.

This edition of the Bible in Transmission is dedicated to translation, which may feel, for many of us, like a subject 'over there', concerning someone else, and a people far away. Yet its immediate relevance can be demonstrated by considering a community of people, present in the UK and elsewhere, that still awaits a Bible in their heart language.

The visual language of the deaf community in Britain, British Sign Language (BSL), is thought to have originated in the growing urban centres of eighteenth-century Britain. Since then BSL has evolved and become the preferred language of an estimated 50,000–70,000 people in this country and recent figures from the British Deaf Association suggest that on any day up to 250,000 people use some BSL. While many people groups now have a Bible in their own language, the deaf community in Britain are still waiting for a recorded scholarly version of full texts of the Bible in BSL, translating the original Hebrew and Greek texts – rather than rendering an English translation second-hand.

Many deaf people find reading English difficult; it is hard to learn English without access to the sounds of the language from birth. Others are bilingual in BSL and English, but they still long for a Bible that is theirs, in their 'heart' language. This is a difficult task and will take many years but the BSL Bible Translation Project, launched in 2006, has made a start, recently producing a pilot DVD of the first section of Mark's Gospel (1.1 – 3.6) so that they can get feedback on any changes that should be made.<sup>1</sup>

The project teams (deaf BSL users, BSL linguists and biblical scholars) have tried to be as accurate as possible in translating the Greek text of Mark's Gospel, but also to produce a version that is natural in BSL. The aim is to express a comparable meaning that the source text would have had to its original readers. This is fraught with difficulties. Like all translations of the Bible, the BSL version is a necessary compromise between 'literal translation' and 'dynamic equivalence' (or 'form-equivalence' and 'function equivalence'). Bilingual deaf people and BSL interpreters are usually used to the idea of 'dynamic' interpretation (where the guiding principle is thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word) because of the very different ways English and BSL are structured grammatically. However, the Christian tradition of the authority of the Bible as 'the Word of God' exercises a constraint on most Bible translations not to depart far from the 'actual words' of the text – although this can result in a translation which is not natural in the target language.

The challenge is to produce a text that both accurately represents the meaning of the original texts and is acceptable to its users – a text that is a model of good scholarly practice and yet can engage the hearts and minds of its readers. This is what the translators of the King James Bible had in mind over 400 years ago. As Gordon Campbell reminds us, the translators of the KJV wanted to produce a text that could be understood by anyone. They balanced academic rigour with the need to produce a text that was easy read aloud. In the seventeenth century the Bible was more often heard

than read and has a poetic rhythm that makes it easy to memorise.

The impact of the KJV on the English-speaking peoples is unequalled, but at the time of its publication it was not the Bible of the people. Despite King James' attempts to ban it, the Geneva Bible, with its extensive marginal notes, largely remained the Bible of choice until after the Restoration in 1660.<sup>2</sup> Nick Spencer tells the story of this version of the Bible, all but forgotten in our day, which was the most widely read and influential English Bible of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Moving forward to the present day, Jon Riding discusses the significant developments in Bible translation in the last 60 years. As he points out, the model of translation has been radically transformed by advances in three key areas – the local approach, changing ideas about the principles of translation and developments in new technologies, particularly personal computing, that have

develop and renew itself. Although the statistics do not tell the full story, whatever measure we use 'the evidence shows that when a community has access to the Scriptures in its own language the impact can be enormous', as we see in examples from Asia, Europe, Africa and Central America.

In our final article, Chris Sunderland explains how and why he uses the ancient tradition of storytelling to translate the Bible into a form that our society can hear. The storyteller enters into the words, re-imagining their original context, the culture and even the inner world of the first tellers. The original Bible story is left intact and connections are made with the dominant narratives in our culture. If told well, stories can challenge our beliefs and open up a space for the re-imagination of our society.

For the past 200 years, Bible Societies across the world have worked to make the Bible available in the languages people need most. Out of the world's 6,900 languages, parts of the Bible are available in more than 2,400, the entire Bible is available in at least 426 and the New Testament is available in 1,115. Bibles became available in ten more languages and New Testaments in 27 more in 2010. However, over 4,500 languages still wait for even one book of the Bible. This means millions either have no access to the Bible at all or can only encounter it in something other than their 'heart' language. There are more than 500 translation projects currently under way, having the potential to impact more than four billion people.

As the example of the BSL Bible Translation Project reminds us, the task of translation is not just about the production of printed Bibles as they don't always meet the needs. As a result, translators are responding through programmes that make the Bible available in other formats, including Braille, audio and BSL.

Now into its fifth century, the King James Bible continues to be read and loved. Its impact on the English-speaking world is well documented and it has rightly been called 'the fountainhead of Bible translation into English'.<sup>3</sup> As we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the KJV, let us too remember the ongoing work of Bible translation around the world and the vision to see a day when the Bible's God-given revelation, inspiration and wisdom shapes the lives and communities of all people everywhere.

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### Notes

1. The DVD is priced at £3 [plus £1 p&p]. To obtain a copy of the DVD, contact [info@bslbible.org](mailto:info@bslbible.org). To offer feedback on the translation, e-mail [info@bslbible.org](mailto:info@bslbible.org) or look for details on the website. To make a donation for the ongoing work of the Project, look for details on the website or send to BSL Bible Translation Project, Flat 1, Thorne House, Wilmslow Road, Manchester M146DW.

2. See A Nicolson, *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 228–9.

3. G Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 275.

dramatically reduced the time it takes to translate the biblical text. Just as the BSL Project works with teams of deaf people and BSL linguists work creatively on equivalent ways of expressing in BSL the meaning of the original text, so Bible translation agencies around the world work with representatives whose cultural and linguistic roots are within the community. They try to find ways of doing this which convey the meaning of the original text with accuracy, but also expresses it naturally in the mother tongue, using a thought-for-thought approach to the task of translation.

Biblical scholar Paula Gooder reminds us that no translation is perfect. A translation 'can communicate only a small fraction of the resonances and allusions of the original text'. Very often Paula produces her own translation of biblical passages. It is a process that helps her savour the text more effectively and 'allows the different levels of potential meaning to be highlighted in a way not possible if we just use published translations'.

An indispensable tool for studying the Bible is a concordance. After a brief overview of the history of biblical concordances, Neil Rees highlights how recent developments in computer technology have made the process of compiling concordances more efficient and accurate. This means it is now possible to produce Bible study aids in languages where previously there would have been insufficient resources available.

Simon Crisp asks some pertinent questions about Bible availability around the world. How do we respond to, for example, issues of poverty or illiteracy when speaking about Bible availability? Simon reminds us of the continuing need for Bible translation to continually

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