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PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING THE NEW TESTAMENT INTO PASHTO

The Pashto language

In recent months Pashto-speaking people wearing their turbans and guns have been introduced to us in our own living-rooms by TV news and reports due to the present situation in Afghanistan. Pashto is an eastern Iranian language spoken by 12 million people in Afghanistan and in the North-West Frontier of Pakistan. It is a regional language in Pakistan, where Urdu is strongly promoted as an official language by the government. Pashto is one of the two official languages in Afghanistan. "The more closely the language of the Pathans is studied the more obvious it becomes that it represents just what one would expect from its geographical interposition between the Iranian and the Indian world, a language which has strong features of both groups of the Indo-Iranian section, with the Iranian predominant. These features are to be seen not only in the etymological relationship of words and derivatives, but, more interestingly, in the actual structure of the syntax."¹ The Pathans are Muslims and their language has a large vocabulary taken from Arabic through Persian or from Persian itself.²

To the Pathans, as Sir Olaf Caroe expressed it, "this language whether Pakhtu ("hard" spoken type) or Pashtu ("soft" spoken type) is the most obvious symbol today of Pathan identity and the measure of the Pathan pride."³ His claim is true even today, and easily recognized by anyone having contacts with Pathans. It is probable that Pashto was not a written language until the 15th century. But since then Pashto literature has been produced by numerous poets, authors and scholars. I mention just two well-known poets, Khushal Khan Khatak and Rahman Baba, whose poems are loved and recited by the Pathans.

*The Pashto New Testament*⁴

The first effort to communicate the Gospel to the Pathans by translating the New Testament into Pashto was made by British missionaries about 1820 in South-India. They had never seen the area where Pashto was spoken. They sent the books with a caravan going to Kabul. Because there was no recipient the books were sent back with another caravan, which was robbed by the Afridis (a Pathan tribe) in Khyber Pass. What happened to the books, nobody knows.

Two versions appeared in the 1860's. One which was never printed was done by the well-known Major H.G. Raverty. He had a Maulvi-friend who did the actual writing. The manuscript is in the British Museum. The other was done by Rev. Isidore Loewenthal. He was a Polish Jew, expelled from his country. He became a Christian in America and later came out as a missionary of the American Presbyterian Mission. He mastered several languages including Hebrew and Arabic. Unfortunately his own watchman shot him on April 27th, 1864 in Peshawar.

It was about 25 years later when T.J.L. Mayer, a missionary of the Church Missionary Society at Bannu, translated the Bible into Pashto. The Pashto revision committee revised the translation which was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society, London in 1890.

After the Second World War a group of Danes under the leadership of Jens Christensen, who was an American missionary but of Danish descent, published a new version of the Pashto New Testament. Rev. M.A. Taib, a Pathan convert, was helping them in the work. It is said that the translation followed quite faithfully the authorized Danish New Testament. The translation was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1946.

Years passed by, and the New Testament in its Pashto 1946 version was running out of stock. The Pakistan Bible Society published a new edition in 1968, but it was full of writing mistakes, errors etc. A committee was formed to revise the Pashto New Testament, including Miss G. Fisher who was a Danish missionary, a Pathan and Rev. A. Masih, but after revising a few gospels Miss Fisher died, and the work was not resumed.

Meanwhile Rev. Jens Enevoldsen, a missionary of the Danish Pathan Mission became an associate of the Pashto Academy established in Peshawar in 1955. He was acquainted with classical and modern Pashtu literature. Enevoldsen

was asked to help in revising the Pashto New Testament, 1946 version, but he decided that the time had come for a completely new edition. He left for Denmark in 1972 according to his original plan. Two years later Rev. Enevoldsen visited Pakistan and met Dr Reyburn, consultant of the United Bible Societies. He objected to Rev. Enevoldsen's idea to ask a few Pashto professors at the Pashtu Academy to translate the New Testament into Pashto mainly because Rev. Enevoldsen was in Denmark, and therefore had very limited possibilities to work as a theological consultant with the translators in Pakistan. However Rev. Enevoldsen contacted his friends, the Pashto professors, and asked them to translate the New Testament into modern, everyday Pashto. The three professors agreed to do the work, and in a few months a new translation was done based on the Urdu New Testament, the Pashto New Testament 1968 edition, and the newest edition of the New Testament in modern English. Rev. Enevoldsen compared the manuscript with the Greek while he was visiting Pakistan in 1976 and 1977. During his second visit he approached the Finnish Missionary Society, asking them to form a revision committee to work on the manuscript for one year. The committee was formed including two Pathan converts, a Pashto-speaking pastor Rev. A. Masih, and myself as Chairman. By April 1980 the committee had completed the review of the manuscript, stage I of a three stage process.

Problems and some attempts to resolve them

The situation is practically the same as the one Major Raverty and Rev. Loewenthal had to face in the 1860s, namely there are no theologically educated Christian Pathans who could translate from the Greek text into Pashto. There are very few Pathan converts, and they are scattered all over the country. I just refer to a few of the numerous problems in translating into Pashto.

There are several dialects in Pashto. The Yusufzai is traditionally used in literature. The translators were from three different tribes. They chose a word *vazaq*⁵ in the Lord's prayer for "bread". In Yusufzai it is *ḍoḍai*, but in Mahsud *marai*. The situation became more complicated when Afghan refugees came into Pakistan, for their Pashtu has Persian-based vocabulary, which is understood by educated Pathans in Pakistan, but not vice versa because there are Indian elements in the Pashto spoken in Pakistan which are unfamiliar to Afghans. The review was delayed, because the consultant of the United Bible Societies was unable to visit Pakistan from Beirut or Tehran. Recently he was transferred from Bangkok to Hongkong.

But in spite of this problem it seems that one of the main problems for the revision committee was that, because the New Testament was translated by Muslim, Pathan scholars, and the readers will be Muslim, one can expect some biblical concepts and expressions to be misunderstood in an Islamic context. As was said earlier, Pashto has a large vocabulary derived from Arabic and connected with Islam and its practices, so the revision committee recommended that Arabic words should be replaced by Pashto ones whenever it was convenient and possible, so as to avoid Islamic connotations. For an example, the words "righteousness" and "righteous" (complicated terms in any language) were translated by the Pashto professors *ṣadāqat* and *ṣādiq*.⁶ There are Pashto words *riḵhtumwālī* and *riḵhtun*, which could be used instead of these Arabic-based words. Another example is "the temple" translated into Pashto *bēt ullāh*, which a Pathan connects with the Kaaba Temple in Mecca. The committee suggested, based on the latest Urdu New Testament manuscript, that a term "a large worshipping place", *loi 'ibādatkhāna* should be used.

The other main problem is a low literacy rate of 21.7 per cent in Pakistan⁷. The official language Urdu is taught in schools. It is the medium of education. Because the Pashtu script differs from the Urdu one to the extent that an educated Pathan may be unable to read his own mother-tongue, it follows that the Pashto New Testament should be comprehensible also to illiterate Pathans, who hear it either from a cassette (the newest Pashtu manuscript was recorded on cassettes in Denmark) or from somebody reading it.

The manuscript is said to be rather literal, because the translators, being scholars, may not have found the level of everyday, common Pashtu. But the committee guided by the consultant of the United Bible Societies has made suggestions for modifications and changes.⁸ However, not all of the requirements can be met, and sources are limited, but the aim is to have the best possible translation of the New Testament using current Pashto. The manuscript is in the process of revision, and therefore comments and criticism are appreciated. There are still stages to be passed through before the final printing and publishing takes place.

Notes

- 1) Caroe 1962, pp. 65, 68.
- 2) Caroe 1962, p. 68.
- 3) Caroe 1962, p. 65.
- 4) Enevoldsen 1977a.
- 5) Matthew 6:11, *The Pashtu New Testament*, 1974 (manuscript).
- 6) Enevoldsen 1977b, p. 1.
- 7) *Pakistan Year Book 1979*.
- 8) Reyburn 1978.

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