

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF BIBLE TRANSLATION IN NORTHERN THAILAND

by Herbert R. Swanson

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The subject set before me initially was "Bible Translation and the Church in Thailand." I've taken the liberty of narrowing that rather daunting topic down to reflections on the history of the translation of the Bible into northern Thai and the impact of its translation on church life. This is an important but little known story. Protestant missions began in Thailand in 1828 and expanded into the North in 1867. By the 1880s the majority of Thai Christians were northern Thai. Northern Thailand has a long cultural and historical heritage of its own, with its own script and a language that some contend is more than just a dialect of central Thai. The American Presbyterians, who entirely dominated northern Thai missions until after World War II, soon realized that they would have to translate the Bible into northern Thai if they were to reach the general populace and the church with the Scriptures. They faced formidable problems in that task, particularly in devising an acceptable type font and then in getting a printing press and its equipment and supplies into the isolated North. They finally set up their Mission Press in Chiang Mai in 1892 and printed their first Scripture portions, Acts and Matthew, in 1893.

By 1895 Presbyterian work had created a Christian community of some 2,000 communicant members. There was a pressing need for the Bible. What I would like to share in this paper are reflections on how the missionaries in the North went about meeting that need and the consequences of the way they translated the Scriptures for the church. A few words about the perspective I bring to this subject may be useful to you. I am not a Bible translator but a church historian. I want to emphasize the word "church" in that title. My focus here is not on the technical and professional details of the translation of the Bible into northern Thai. It is, rather, on the relationship of Bible translation to the church. In the case of the northern Thai Bible, its translation was carried out in the context of the relationship between the missionaries and the northern Thai church and its culture. That context influenced translation and the translation affected that context.

How then did the northern Thai church experience the Bible and what was the role of Bible translators in shaping that experience?

In the first place, the church experienced the Bible in bits and pieces, in fragments. The translation process was slow in the extreme, and the missionaries never did manage to complete the translation of the whole Bible. In the beginning a few missionaries undertook on their own to translate a few books of the Bible, but with the advent of the press the mission eventually set up a translation committee and "farmed out" books to seminary-trained missionaries. Most of these missionaries were busy individuals who could give only bits of time here and there to translation. Communications were excruciatingly slow in those days and just getting the committee together could be a months-long struggle. It took 22 years to complete the New Testament. The mission

finally accomplished the task in 1914 with the publication of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The northern Thai church grew to become of some consequence in the early 1880s, which means that the church acquired a complete New Testament only about 35 years after it came into formation. It was not, for example, until 1906 that it had Galatians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Peter, and the Johannine epistles. Romans was completed in 1910. What does it mean for churches to spend the first thirty years of their existence without Romans?<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament situation was worse. The mission managed to translate only 11 Old Testament books before it suspended translation work about 1920. As of 1905, a quarter of a century after the northern Thai church came into formation, the mission press had published only the Psalms and Genesis. Of the whole prophetic literature, the northern Thai church received only Isaiah (in 1906) and Malachi (in 1919). Again, one must ask what it means to be the church without Jeremiah or without Micah 6:8? What does it mean to have to wait nearly 30 years for the publication of Exodus?

We should not assume, furthermore, that every Christian family or even every group of Christians had in their possession all the books of the Bible printed at any one time. The mission press printed mostly individual Scripture portions for evangelistic distribution, and those portions were used by Christians as well. At various times the press collected all the Scriptures printed to that date into a single volume. Thus some Christians would have a "Bible" with more or fewer books than the Bible of other Christians.

The consequences of receiving the Bible piecemeal were not good. One missionary told the story of how a group of Christians in Chiang Rai in 1900 studied the seven books of the Bible then in print to see if they forbade drinking. They found nothing to dissuade them and so carried on happily until brought up short by the missionary himself.<sup>3</sup> Missionaries at various times complained about the problems of teaching the Bible when much of it was unavailable to their students. It was virtually impossible, for example, to teach the history of Israel. 1 and 2 Samuel weren't printed until 1908 and 1915 respectively. Leviticus, Numbers, Joshua, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles never were translated. Deuteronomy did not appear until 1916.

Aside from the fact that the northern Thai church had large, spiritually as well as theologically, important chunks missing from their Bibles, this piecemeal issuing of Scripture caused considerable confusion. It allowed one missionary assistant, for example, to think that the pamphlet containing the Westminster Confession of Faith was a book of the Bible. It caused another Christian to think that the book of Jonah was just a "story book" that was a waste of time to read. It wasn't part of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

I wish I could draw a clearly defined pattern of cause and effect between the fragmentary translation and publication of the northern Thai Bible and the conditions of the present day northern Thai Church. I cannot. That research waits to be done. Two personal observations will have to suffice. The first has to do with the attitude about the Bible this haphazard translation process communicated to the churches. At the time of the completion of the New Testament in 1914, the Rev. D.G. Collins, manager of the mission press in Chiang Mai, wrote:

At the time of printing this report we are printing 2 Corinthians which will complete the New Testament in Laos [northern Thai]. Perhaps it is not wise to report that it has taken more than twenty years to complete it; due wholly to the fact that our overworked missionaries have had their hands more than full with evangelistic and medical work and the translation of the Scriptures has had to be given a secondary place.<sup>5</sup>

By their slow translation of the Bible, the missionaries unintentionally communicated the message that Bible translation was secondary to other forms of missionary work. This also communicated the impression that the Bible itself "could wait." It is a fact that today northern Thai churches, at least those in the Church of Christ in Thailand, pay little attention to the Bible. Until recently it was not unusual to find churches that had only copies of the New Testament. Nor was it unusual to listen to an entire sermon that did not mention the Bible at all. Only rarely did churches engage in formal Bible study. Things have improved somewhat as more and more churches have theologically trained pastors, but even today these pastors complain that church members seem uninterested in the Bible. Undoubtedly there are many factors contributing to this disinterest. I would submit to you as a thesis for further exploration that the slow translation of the Bible and its consequent slow delivery to the churches contributed to that disinterest. It left the impression that Scriptures themselves are a matter of secondary concern.

A second observation I would like to share is that northern Thai churches have long ignored the Old Testament. Churches could go for years, literally, without hearing a sermon based on an Old Testament text. I would add, personally, that it is particularly tragic that the northern Thai church has lost contact with Israel's prophetic tradition. The prophets were central to the development of my own understanding of what it means to be the People of God. One does not hear prophetic vocabulary or concerns in northern Thai discussions on the nature of the church and its role in society. It has, among other things, lost that strong prophetic concern for justice. Again, I cannot demonstrate for you a clear historical connection between this present situation and the piecemeal, fragmentary way in which the northern Thai church received the Bible. Personally, however, I am sure a connection exists:

My first point, then, is that as far as the church was concerned the translators of the northern Thai Bible fragmented Scripture and failed to deliver a complete Bible in timely fashion to the church. *Second*, one cannot help wondering about the quality of the translation the missionaries produced. We should remember they labored under serious limitations and some of them apparently achieved a great deal in trying circumstances. It is likely, however, that those very circumstances frustrated the production of a good translation, even by the standards of their own day. They were not trained Bible translators. They did not have a helpful, smiling UBS adviser to "drop in" from time to time and put them straight. They had few critical commentaries, and I doubt that most of them had Greek or Hebrew texts, although they had all studied biblical languages in seminary and had a strong grounding in biblical studies. They certainly did not have the many translation aids and helpful textbooks available today. They were, furthermore, biblical literalists who believed that Scriptures transcends culture so that translating amounts to finding the "right words" to fit into the appropriate word slots. The King James Version, they believed, communicated to its readers exactly what the original Greek and Hebrew authors communicated to their audiences. Thus, a northern Thai translation based on the KJV also communicated the content of the original texts to its readers.<sup>6</sup> The missionaries were not culturally sensitive translators.

As far as I know, no one has undertaken a systematic study of the northern Thai Bible. I should also admit at this point that I don't read the northern Thai script with sufficient facility to do so myself. Last week, however, I sat with a member of the Payap University Archives staff who reads northern Thai and asked her to read 4 portions of the New Testament for me. They were John 1:1-18, Matthew 5:1-11, Romans 12, and Revelation 2:1-7. This brief sample revealed that the passage in John seemed clear and accurate. The Matthew passage read more like central Thai than northern Thai, and central Thai seemed to influence all the other passages. Numerous identifiable central

Thai words appeared throughout the four passages. The Romans passage included long, awkward phrasing. The Revelation passage contained a multitude of inaccuracies that changed its meaning entirely at points. Taking these four passages as a guide, what one has is a spotty translation. It is quite good at points and unacceptable at others. Missionary records, furthermore, have left with me the impression that the whole is not stylistically consistent. It translates words and concepts in different ways. It is highly likely, thus, that the translation hindered rather than facilitated the communication of the contents of the Bible in northern Thai. The Bible itself was alien to begin with, and this translation only made it all the more obscure and alien.

Thus, not only did the northern Thai church receive only a portion of the Bible, but it also received a translation of doubtful quality. A foreign flavor seems to suffuse the translation. The translators, apparently, sat before the KJV and central Thai texts and worked between these and northern Thai as they tried to find the right words to fit into the proper word slots. An aside here concerning the modern day standard Thai translation of the Bible may be of some help to us. The process for translating the Bible, published as a full Bible in 1973, was far superior to that used by the missionaries in northern Thailand. Even so anglicisms remain, since the translation was based on the RSV. Native language speakers state that the "product" doesn't feel like Thai. It contains strange and awkward usages. The northern Thai version, it is likely, is all the more plagued with such problems.

The *third* point I would like to make is that the missionary task itself inserted itself into the translation process in an unhelpful way. The missionaries had a deep commitment to evangelism, that is the conversion of northern Thailand to Christianity. Daniel McGilvary, the founder and guiding light of the mission for over 40 years, stated in 1869 that missionary work is "the great work of the church." The Great Commission of Matthew 28 places a duty and obligation on the whole church.<sup>7</sup> The missionaries frequently stated that everything they did they did for conversion of the northern Thai. This included the translation of the Bible, which they used first and foremost as a tool for evangelism. The missionaries understood the importance of the Bible for the life of the church, but they always started with evangelism and this included the order in which they translated the Bible as well. Thus, the first books to come off the press were Acts (1893), Matthew (1893), Luke (1894), John (1894), Psalms (1894), and Genesis (1898). Only the Psalms seem to have been translated for the use of the churches rather than for converting nonbelievers. The New Testament epistles, essentially a literature for church life, were translated late, and the Old Testament prophets, who show the people of God in unflattering light, were almost entirely omitted. The primary exception was Isaiah. It was a favorite book of the missionaries because they believed that Isaiah chapters 40 and following contain prophecies about Jesus and promises of God concerning the ultimate victory of Christianity over heathenism.

The failure of the Presbyterian missionaries to use the Bible to train the church confirmed for the church the "fact" that its primary use was for evangelism. In 1910, the Rev. John Freeman admitted that the northern Thai churches required more thorough and systematic instruction in the Bible than they received. He stated that the mission simply did not have the force to carry out that instruction.<sup>8</sup> One of the clearest patterns that emerges out of the history of the northern Thai church is that during the missionary era local churches and groups received very little Christian education. The evangelistic mandate pressed hard on the missionaries and they directed much of their efforts in rural areas to founding new churches and gaining new converts. They gave relatively little time to pastoral work. They spent relatively little time teaching the Bible to the churches. This pattern of activity made a strong impression on the churches. The Bible, they

learned, is essentially a tool for evangelism rather than for the nurture of personal and communal Christian faith. The translation process reinforced this impression by translating first those books useful to the life of the church.

The Bible the northern Thai church received, then was incomplete. Its translation was of dubious quality. It was an evangelist's Bible. To this list we should add a *fourth* point. The Bible "belonged" to the translators.

As native language speakers of English and theologically trained clergy the translators had freer access to the Bible than their northern Thai assistants and local church members. Thus, while they employed northern Thai-speakers to assist in translating the Bible, the process remained visibly under their direction and they themselves did most of the work of translation. Rural Christian groups seldom heard biblical preaching except when itinerating missionaries visited them. They came to associate the Bible and all Christian learning with the missionaries, first, and with missionary-trained assistants, second. In a very real sense, the Bible went on iteration with the missionaries — the translators — as they visited the rural groups. It literally came out of the city to visit them and returned to the city when the missionaries left. It did not belong to the church. It belonged to the missionary, the translator.

I would like to share with you two images that have stuck with me in recent years. The first comes from a rural Christian church in Nan Province. This church was founded right after World War II, and during an interview a founding member of the church described its early life. She told how the group had only a New Testament. Sunday worship consisted of a hymn or two and a prayer or two. One of the literate men would then read a portion, at random, from the Bible, and the illiterate elder would say a few words about what the passage meant. This was their only activity from week to week. Once or twice a year a missionary-led team from the city would visit them for a week and, among other things, teach them some Bible. Her words were graphic as she stated, "When they came things were better. But when they left we went back to the way we were before." The second image comes from a church here in Chiang Mai Province. One of my colleagues wrote the history of the church, and in a meeting with their council afterwards we discussed some of the things she learned about them. In the evening, I asked them why in the past they never had Sunday school or Bible classes except when seminary students did field work with them. Why didn't they do these things for themselves? One woman replied immediately, "We didn't have the courage. We were afraid we'd teach wrong." In the cases of both these churches, even in the 1950s and 1960s they were still waiting for people from the cities to come out and loan them the Bible.

If we return to Freeman's explanation that the missionaries lacked time to teach the Bible to the churches, the striking thing about that explanation is that he assumed that the missionaries had to do it themselves. They had to teach the Bible themselves. They had to translate it themselves. If time permitted, we would have to spend considerable time reflecting upon the impact of missionary ethnocentrism on the church's relationship to the Bible — and on the process of Bible translation itself. Suffice it to say, that the missionaries long failed to empower the northern Thai church to lead itself, teach itself, or even to participate meaningfully in the translation of the Bible. It never occurred to the missionaries that any one else but they could translate the Bible into northern Thai. By their own attitudes and approach to the Bible, including its translation, they themselves communicated to the church a feeling that the Bible was beyond its competence.

These are, then, in summary, the four points discussed above: *First*, the northern Thai church received an incomplete Bible. The church, furthermore, had to wait decades for what it did receive. *Second*, the quality of the translation of the northern Thai Bible was uneven. *Third*, the translators' view of Scripture and its uses determined the order of translation and which books were translated at all. The needs of the church influence the process of translation only secondarily. *Finally*, the translator retained "ownership" of the Bible. The church associated biblical literacy with social status, urban prestige, and the authority of the translators themselves.

Now, somewhere among the readers is a person who is thinking, "Come on now, isn't there something positive to be said? This is not balanced. It doesn't sound at all fair to the missionaries." There in lies a problem I have not yet figured out how to deal with. The 127 men and women who served in the Laos Mission, as it was known, between 1867 and 1920 were committed Christians, some of whom had an impressive Christian faith. They worked in trying circumstances. They brought considerable Christian love to people on the margins of society, lepers, those accused of demon possession, and the very poor. They introduced medical practices that improved the lives of tens of thousands of people, and they carried out the first organized social relief campaigns in northern Thailand — during times of famine. In hindsight we can say that they were people of their time, and alien to the people and their culture.

I would like to close with a story. Things could have been different. The story is about the Rev. Evander McGilvary, the son of Daniel and Sophia McGilvary, the greatly respected founders of the Laos Mission. As a young man, Evander felt a calling to translate the Bible into northern Thai, and he prepared himself for that task at Princeton Seminary. He returned to Chiang Mai in 1890 as a Presbyterian missionary, and he brought along critical commentaries and a good knowledge of the biblical languages. He hired a capable, scholarly northern Thai to assist him. People, furthermore, liked Evander McGilvary and he quickly proved himself a worthy son of his great father and mother. For those who know something about nineteenth-century American Presbyterian church history, however, will know that early 1890s were an unhappy, divisive time for American Presbyterians. They were debating the issue of biblical inerrancy, and in 1893 the Presbyterian General Assembly declared inerrancy to be the true doctrine of the church. Evander, after some soul searching, felt compelled to withdraw from the mission. He was not willing to risk himself to the tender mercies of the Presbyterian Church in those volatile times. He left in 1894, having completed little translation.<sup>9</sup>

Evander McGilvary, as far as I know, was the only missionary who came to Thailand with a vision for translating the Bible. He was the only one who equipped himself for that task. His leaving was a wrenching, divisive experience for the mission. No one else agreed with his view of the Bible, but one faction was willing to tolerate it if only he would continue to translate. One leading missionary, however, argued that he should stay only if he agreed to keep his mouth shut and not spread his views among the Christians. Evander left. He eventually became a well-known philosopher in the United States. The bitterness of this experience, however, drove him entirely out of the church. Evander's story is a sad one — for him and for the northern Thai church as well. He was a competent, insightful man who spent his childhood in Chiang Mai. One suspects he was less of an alien here than were other missionaries. His translation would most likely have been a good one, culturally more sensitive and professionally more competent. That bright possibility which did not happen, highlights the less happy reality that did.