
This well-crafted and highly informative study challenges the notion of Bible translation as an endeavor removed from domains of politics, social movements, or identity formations. It does so by examining key moments in the Bible’s translation into Tamil, a major south Indian language. Contrary to claims made by some that Bible translation validates the universal claims of Christianity or that translation always invigorates indigenous cultures or preserves them from colonial displacement, Hephzibah Israel draws attention to contentious social and political factors that steered the history of the Tamil Bible. Translation was not an antiseptic process engineered by European language technicians and their native informants. On the contrary, translation, she argues, gave rise to different “language registers,” each voicing competing notions of Tamil Protestant identity.

This book makes a strong contribution to a growing body of South Asian scholarship that highlights the spoken and written word as a site of cultural assertion and identity formation.1 It is widely recognized that Protestant missionaries, through their translations, printing presses, and propaganda catalyzed other forms of expression through print, including organized opposition to Christian missions. What is less known is how Bible translation itself, far from being insulated from wider socio-cultural developments, was profoundly shaped by them. In particular, Israel’s work draws attention to how caste politics and the “pure Tamil movement” affected Bible translation and the responses of Tamil Protestants to new translations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the first language into which the entire Bible had been translated in India, the Tamil Bible became an important reference point for other translation projects. Israel notes an important difference between the translations of the eighteenth century German Pietists and those of the nineteenth century Anglicans. German Pietists certainly grappled with cultural and theoretical issues of translation, but did so while focusing on Tamil alone. The Anglican missionaries who came a century later, however, tried to standardize translation methods to be “applied broadly across all Indian languages” (38). Bible translation in the nineteenth century became a way to show evidence of missionary gains in the field, to raise more funds, and to effect more conversions. The pursuit of uniformity in translation methods coincided with the pursuit of a uniform Protestant reading community (42). Key moments in the history of the Tamil Bible, however, would derail this quest for uniformity.

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Translators grappled with the question of how words that captured key Protestant doctrines were to be rendered in Indian languages. Could words for God, atonement, or sacrifice be rendered consistently and accurately in Indian languages? A pervasive nineteenth century belief was the view of Sanskrit as the civilizational root and source language for all Indian languages. Because of this belief, Protestant missionaries came to regard Sanskrit as the language from which to derive a core sacred vocabulary. If key Protestant concepts were tied to a Sanskrit root, they could be grafted into a Tamil translation of the Bible with the best chance of retaining the intended meaning. In the process of comprising a sacred vocabulary, however, a highly grammatical and formal written language register was fused with a more common, spoken language register. The result was something that came to be referred quite pejoratively as “missionary Tamil” or “Christian Tamil.” Reactions to this Tamil would come from the Dravidian movement, which espoused a devotion to “pure Tamil” and sought to liberate Tamil from Sanskrit hegemony.

Decision-making in translation was guided by two principles that often worked in tension with each other, namely the desire for relevance and the desire for difference or uniqueness. Protestants wanted to avoid words they saw as too indelibly tied to “heathen” worship. At the same time they did not want to use words that were so unfamiliar that they estranged the Bible from the local population (116). Israel’s discussion of two words for God in Sanskrit, tevan and paraparan reveal the paradoxical manner in which Sanskrit words were “baptized” into Protestant usage. The more rarely used word paraparan referred to the Supreme, or transcendent, God who was beyond reach. The word tevan, by contrast (the singular form of tevar), referred to the various gods of the Hindu pantheon. Somewhat paradoxically, Tamil Protestants by the late 19th century came to prefer the singular tevan to paraparan for God. Israel uses this to illustrate how community interests and perceptions often trumped purely etymological factors in determining how missionaries translated sacred words.

A key figure who stood in the midst of this battle over the proper language register for the Tamil Protestant community was the poet, Vedanayakam Sastri. The author devotes considerable attention to Sastri’s criticisms of Charles Rhenius’s early nineteenth century translation. Sastri decried the new translation because it embraced what he called Cutchery Tamil, which mixed Tamil with other south Indian languages and wedded it to “colloquialisms, region-specific words, and low-caste registers” (133). Sastri’s defense of a certain kind of Tamil for Bible translation, Israel argues, went hand in hand with his defense of caste hierarchy. Defenders of the new translation, however, seemed to resonate with aspirations for greater mixture between castes and a more democratic appeal of the Bible.

The strongest contribution of this book stems from the author’s command of Tamil and ability to draw from a wide range of examples to illustrate ties between language registers and Protestant identity. Her findings clearly debunk any myth of translation as a smooth, uncontested process that always results in cultural renewal and the expansion of community. From where exactly does this ideal derive? While it may be prevalent in defenses of the missionary enterprise by missionaries themselves (both nineteenth and twentieth century), it is not entirely clear beyond this who her scholarly interlocutors might be. Lamin Sanneh, for instance, clearly stresses the important roles played by Africans in the translation