REASONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION: THE BIBLE

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The way in which the Bible is written shows that translation is permissible - but we can't say more than that.
Category: Observations

In the fourth of my series on reasons for translating the Bible into minority languages, I'd like to focus on the Bible itself. By that, I don't mean that I'm going to look at passages in the Bible which could be taken to promote Bible translation (more of that tomorrow), I actually mean the Bible as a whole.

Originally, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with a bit of Aramaic) and the New Testament was written in Koine Greek. For reasons that will become obvious, I'd like to focus on the New Testament.

It makes complete sense that Paul's letters were written in Greek. Paul was travelling around the Eastern Mediterranean, visiting lots of different places and writing to groups of Christians drawn from all over the Empire. At that time, Greek was theÂ *lingua franca* of the Empire. Most people would understand Greek and, certainly, anyone who was literate would read Greek. I don't suppose he even gave a thought about it; Greek was the natural language to use in the context he was operating in. However, the case is slightly different when we come to the Gospels. Jesus and his disciples would have spoken Aramaic, yet the Gospels were written in Greek. This means that when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John set down to write their biographies, they had to translate everything Jesus said from Aramaic into Greek. We don't have Jesus' original words, we have a translation. As Lamin Sanneh has said:

The existence of the Gospels demonstrate that there is no fundamental objection to the words of Scripture being translated. We can't extrapolate from this that translation is an imperative, but we can say that it is not forbidden. However, there is need for a word of caution here. The whole point of writing the Gospels in Greek was to reach as many people as possible by using a trade language - not to reach people in their mother tongue. We need to be careful not to push the argument too far.

The second feature to note is that the Old Testament was translated into Greek in Alexandria in the third century BC; a translation called the Septuagint. Interestingly, when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament it very often does so by referring to the Septuagint, rather than to the Hebrew original. I wrote a post on one of the implications of this earlier in the year.Â In other words, the New Testament often quotes a translation of the Old Testament.

So there is clear evidence from the way that the Bible is written that Bible translation is permissible. However, the fact that inspired authors quoted a translation doesn't necessarilyÂ give us the liberty to translate (not unless we are inspired, too) To say that we should translate the Bible into minority languages is another step and we need to actually dig into the text to justify that. More tomorrow.

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