

Review Article

INDIAN WORD LIST

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It is not easy to review a book of this kind,¹ and yet it must be made known as widely as possible because of its importance for the study, translation and distribution of the Bible. The publication of this book opens a new chapter in the meritorious service rendered by the Bible Society. It marks the beginning of an era of the linguistic and theological study of the more important of the Biblical terms. One would hope that it would prepare the way for the production of a more fundamental work such as 'a theological word-book of the Bible for India'.

A careful study of the present book will bring home to anyone how difficult a task it is to translate the New Testament into any of the Indian languages. The undertaking seems wellnigh impossible, chiefly because the New Testament consists of Hebraic material which was being translated inadequately into Greek forms. Further, the peculiarity of the language of the New Testament is the result of a new Hebraic-Aramaic-Palestinian history. This peculiarity of the Christian usage of words proceeds from the remoulding of the meaning which a word bears in the Old Testament. When we try to express the New Testament terms in any of the Indian languages there is always the risk of either doing violence to the meaning of words or departing considerably from the connotation which the Evangelists gave them. The main reason for this is that the Indian thought forms are deeply influenced by Hinduism and to a certain extent by Islam. The mode of Hindu thinking is poles apart from that of the New Testament writers who were for the most part converted Jews. They were struggling to express through the inadequate medium of the Greek language their profound experience of having come to know God through the 'event' called Jesus Christ. And when we translate Greek terms already remoulded by the New Testament writers into the categories that are ready to hand in Indian languages we widen the scope for misunderstanding the message of the Bible rather than translating it faithfully. Perhaps this can be illustrated with reference to the term

¹ *Greek New Testament Terms in Indian Languages*, compiled by J. S. M. Hooper, formerly General Secretary of the Bible Society of India; published by the Bible Society; Rs.12/-.

truth which occurs mainly in the Johannine and Pauline writings, and which is uniformly translated in the Indian languages by means of the cognate terms of the Sanscrit word *sat*. It is the source of a good many misunderstandings though it does not sound unfamiliar to the Indian reader, because it means one thing to the Indian mind but something quite different to the Biblical writer. Each person's conception of truth is bound up with his conception of reality. To the modern mind truth is that which is a fact, and not fiction or counterfeit or illusion. But when ἀλήθεια and ἀληθινός are used in the New Testament to reproduce the Hebrew word 'amn (from 'mn) the whole emphasis is changed. The standard of truth not only took complete control of the noun *truth* but also the verb *to be true* and dominated the whole conception of knowledge.

The Hebrews fixed upon God as the standard of truth. Probably this came about through their understanding of the Covenant relationship to which Yahweh would be true even if Israel were not. Truth was regarded as a part of God's character; He was considered as steadfast and consistent in His nature and dealings with men. The Hebrews were unable to think of the character of God apart from His actions in the world. God would and God must manifest His truth to the world because His nature demanded a vindication of itself. So the truth of Yahweh was the standard of human truth. God acted in a self-consistent manner when He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world. That is God's truth in concrete form. Therefore to know Jesus Christ is to walk in the truth or to do the truth. This idea of 'doing the truth' or 'walking in the truth' is un-Indian, un-Greek and also un-modern, because it does not limit truth to the rightness of knowledge but extends it to the rightness of motive, speech and conduct. It is a rightness based not upon a concept but upon the historical revelation of God. Truth is thus rooted in the character of the living God who is not merely the object of inquiry but also the subject of action. The conception of truth in the New Testament usage is based on the idea of God in the Old Testament: Truth in its fullness is seen in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. Truth in short is the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ—a knowledge which makes men the sons of God. And when ἀλήθεια is translated as *sat* or *satya*, we are introduced to a totally new concept of truth, a static reality perceived by means of the intellect. In this way we for ever stand in the danger of misunderstanding the meaning of the Bible, because of our peculiar Indian historical situation. This is illustrated by a small incident in the trial of our Lord. Pilate said to our Lord half-sceptically, 'What is truth?'; probably he was using the term in the way that Greek philosophy and the culture of his day was using it, namely truth as an intellectual abstraction eluding the grasp of everyone who searches for it. But our Lord makes no answer to Pilate's ques-

tion. This silence of our Lord is most eloquent, because the Evangelist would have us understand something of the absurdity of such a question when 'Truth' (in the Hebrew sense of the term) was standing in front of Pilate hardly a yard away.

When we remember that terms connote different things to different people, the translation of the Bible into any Indian language must be not only an arduous but also a humbling task. One can never be certain whether the thought of the Biblical writer is being rendered faithfully and in terms intelligible to the Indian reader. The marvel is that the translations are as efficacious as they are.

With this rather long preamble we may proceed to consider the material presented in the book under review. After a careful study of the contents I am moved to make the following observations :

1. The title 'Indian Word List' printed on the spine of the volume tends to be misleading. The subject-matter of the book becomes plain only after reading the sub-title 'Greek New Testament Terms in Indian Languages', and a further sub-title, 'A Comparative Word List'.

2. It is difficult to determine the basis on which the present word list of about one hundred and twenty words has been made. If the selection was influenced by theological considerations, a number of important words are missing, for example *ναός*, *εικόν*, *ἐκκλησία*, *χάρα*, *σῶμα* (though *σάρξ* has been included), *καρδία*, *ποιμήν*, *ἀνάστασις* and *βάπτισμα*.

Moreover Christianity is a religion of action, involving belief in a God Who acts ; verbs therefore play a large part in the vocabulary of the New Testament ; very few verbs are included in the list, and some very important verbs are omitted, for example *σῶζω*, *ζωοποιέω*, *κηρύσσω*, *διακονέω* and *καταλλάσσω*.

On the other hand some relatively unimportant words find their places in the list, such as *ἄγγελος*, *βουλή*, *γλῶσσα*, *εἴσοδος*, *μῦθος* and *σκληρός*.

3. In going through the renderings in the various languages I am struck by the extent to which Sanskrit has penetrated and influenced most of the Indian languages (with the exception of Urdu). Even the tribal languages such as Santali and Mundari which are generally thought to be immune to Sankritization manifest its influence in a number of places. Under these circumstances one is at a loss to know why renderings into Sanskrit have been excluded. The preface says that Sanskrit has been deliberately omitted. The banishment of Sanskrit is probably based on the widely shared belief that Sanskrit terms do not provide the right clue for rendering Biblical terms formed by the peculiar experience of the Hebrew people ; and yet the 'Indian Word List' goes to show that the Sanskrit influence on Indian Bible translation is ubiquitous. I should have thought that Sanskrit should form, as it were, the frontispiece to the 'Indian Word List'. Omission of Sanskrit from a work like this is something like

producing a European Word List without Latin. But this is an exaggeration and yet not without force ; for most of the renderings of the cardinal Biblical terms inevitably succumb to Sanskrit.

Here it may be useful to refer to a similar work begun over a hundred years back but not completed, by the late Dr. W. H. Mill, the first Principal of Bishop's College, Calcutta. So far as I know there is only one copy of this book, preserved in Bishop's College library. This book sets out to give the Sanskrit equivalents of the important theological terms of the New Testament with explanatory notes. It is only after dealing with Sanskrit that Dr. Mill turns to Bengali. He also carried out a rendering of the Gospel narrative in Sanskrit verse, which alas is incomplete.

When one sees that the renderings in Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya and Telugu are terms derived from Sanskrit the compiler's statement in the preface makes strange reading: 'Sanskrit is deliberately omitted, as it seems doubtful whether its inclusion would serve any but a remote academic purpose.'

4. In an effort to clarify the meaning of the Greek words English renderings are given in seven different versions. The degree of clarity achieved does not, however, justify this pre-occupation with English. There seems to be a similar favouritism shown to Tamil of which five versions including a Roman Catholic one are cited. It does not appear clear why the Roman Catholic version is not given in all the languages because very often the Roman Catholic renderings are most helpful ; this is true of the Roman Catholic version in Telugu, at any rate. In a work of this nature it would be most helpful if a brief linguistic and theological note with special reference to Indian translations had been given with every Greek word ; we should put at the disposal of the translator a judicious summary of the discussion on each of the words listed, as for example, in Dr. Alan Richardson's 'A Theological Word Book of the Bible'.

5. I find that the distinction between *πράγμα* and *ποίημα*, and between *λόγος* and *ῥῆμα* is uniformly buried in the translations. *δικαιοσύνη* is rendered largely as *dharma* and sometimes as *nīthi*. But this looks like one of the New Testament terms which defy accurate translation into any of the Indian languages.

6. Considering that the compiler has executed this difficult piece of work from a remote control he has achieved a notable success. His correspondents have served him well. The spelling mistakes in Tamil are very few, and the pronunciation of words is aided by the use of hyphens and dots. But alas the same cannot be said of the Telugu renderings which abound in errors of every variety. Telugu in this book has been mercilessly murdered. The Telugu language is fully phonetic, with an appropriate symbol for every sound. Thus the 's' sound is represented in three variations, after Sanskrit, as *ç* for *Çakuntala* or *Çiva*, *s* for *sādhu*, and *sh* for *shashti*. It is inexcusable for a Telugu knowing person to write *āçrama* either as *āshram* or

