

The Story of the Malagasy Bible

[p.69]

A carefully revised version of the Scriptures in the Malagasy language has just been printed at the expense of the British and Foreign Bible Society the present therefore seems a suitable time in which to gather up some of the more interesting facts connected with Bible translation and revision in Madagascar. In this paper then we will proceed to sketch in outline for the readers of the **SUNDAY AT HOME** the Story of the Malagasy Bible.

We must first of all go back in imagination to the middle of the seventeenth century, a time of great activity on the part of European nations, eager to found colonies in newly-discovered lands. Among other enterprises the French attempted to gain a footing at the south-east corner of Madagascar. The principal point occupied by them was Fort Dauphine. In the year 1648 two French missionaries, by name Nacquart and Gondree, arrived there, and began to instruct the natives in the Roman Catholic faith. This mission was maintained in spite of many discouragements and hardships for nearly twenty years. The missionaries, we are told, "prepared

[p.70]

catechisms, prayers, confessions to the Virgin Mary, and to St. Michael, and John the Baptist, with the command of the church to abstain from flesh on Fridays and Saturdays;" but we do not read that they translated even one of the Gospels.

This French mission, from causes we cannot now stop to consider, came to an end without leaving any permanent trace upon the natives and the Protestant missionaries who a century and a half later carried the gospel to Madagascar, found it virgin soil. They went to a people without a written language, and without any knowledge of the Christian faith. Both in their literary and in their evangelistic labours they had not to revive a work that was dying out, but to start *de novo*, and seek in their own way to carry out the objects of their mission. To all who study the question, it is perfectly clear that the foundation of the work at present being carried on in Madagascar is not to be sought in their earlier attempts of the French missionaries in the south-east corner of the island, but in the work of the first missionaries of the London Missionary Society in and around Antananarivo, the capital.

Who, then, were these men to whom the Malagasy people owe their written language and their first translation of the Scriptures? They were two Welshmen, and, strange to say, both Davids—David Jones and David Griffiths. The first of these reached Antananarivo in 1820, the second a year later. The late Mr. Cameron describes Mr. Griffiths as a strong, hardy-looking man of middle height, accustomed to work and to overcome difficulties, a man quick in movement and of untiring energy. Mr. Jones, he also tells us, was tall and slightly built, much weakened by early attacks of the Tamatave fever, and easily tired. These two men were the pioneers of Protestant missions in Madagascar.

The main strength of these early missionaries was devoted to educational work, in which they

were vigorously supported and encouraged by King Ràdama I. and by Mr. Hastie, the British agent. But notwithstanding the many claims made upon them by this and other branches of work, they began very early to make a translation of the Scriptures. In this they were greatly assisted by some of their more promising scholars to whom they had taught the English language, and who in Madagascar are still spoken of as "The Twelve;"¹ twelve young men having been selected by the missionaries for the more advanced positions. We cannot now stop to trace the growth of the translation suffice it to say, that by March, 1830, ten years after the arrival of Mr. Jones in Antananarivo, a first edition of three thousand copies of the New Testament was completed. Thus within ten years after their arrival in Antananarivo, these pioneers of missionary work had not only mastered the early difficulties of learning the language and reducing it to writing, but had also given to the people this translation as the first fruits of their labours.

Even at this time much progress had been made in the translation of the Old Testament. In the completion and revision of this work valuable assistance was rendered by colleagues who had more recently joined the mission, viz. the Revs. D. Johns and J. J. Freeman.

The story of the completion of the printing of the Old Testament possesses peculiar interest. Soon after the death of King Radàma I., in 1828, the missionaries saw clear indications of the uncertainty of their position. Ominous clouds began to gather, until at length, in 1835, the storm burst in all its fury, and a bitter persecution began which lasted with more or less violence for twenty-six years. The edict of Queen Ranavàlona I. against the Christian religion was published on March 1, 1835. At this time from Ezekiel to Malachi and a portion of Job remained unprinted. Thus, before the whole of the book was in the hands of the people, it was placed under a ban: an indubitable testimony to the power it had begun to exercise in the island. The wish of the missionaries to complete their work was only intensified by this outbreak of persecution. They toiled unremittingly, nothing daunted by the difficulties that beset them. The hostility of the government to Christianity was bitter and determined. The missionaries were almost deserted by their converts. They could procure no workmen to assist them in the printing. Mr. Baker, as the sheets of the translation were put into his hands, composed the whole himself; and Mr. Kitching worked off the sheets at the press. With trembling haste did the missionaries proceed with their task; and by the end of June they had the joy of seeing the first bound copies of the complete Bible.

Most of these Bibles were secretly distributed among the converts; and seventy remaining copies were buried for greater safety in the earth: precious seed over which God watched, and which in due time produced a glorious harvest. The translators were driven away; but the book they had translated remained. Studied in secret and at the risk of life, this first translation served during more than a quarter of a century of persecution to keep alive faith in the newly received religion. The story of the Martyr Church has often been told, and it is one the world will not soon let die. In this thrilling story one fact stands out with great clearness, viz. that as intense hatred of the Bible was shown by the persecuting queen and her counsellors, so was intense love of the Bible one of the most marked characteristics of the persecuted.

¹ The last of these men, Rainisoa Ratsimandisa, died only a few months since.

Why, some will ask, did a translation so honoured of God need revision? The simple answer to this is that it was a first translation; and those who have studied the question of Bible translation are fully aware that in almost no instance has a first translation stood the test of time. Since 1830 great strides have been made in Biblical scholarship; and at the same time we may, without wishing in any way to slight the grand work of these first missionaries, safely assert that the Malagasy language is better understood now than it was in their days.

When, after the reopening of the mission in

[p.71]

1862, and especially after the great expansion of the work consequent upon the burning of the idols in 1869, missionaries began to look forward to the future, they felt that it was incumbent upon them to make some attempt to give to the Christians of Madagascar a more accurate and idiomatic version of the Scriptures. In 1872 a conference of missionaries, representing the five Protestant societies at that time working in Madagascar, was held in Antananarivo; and proposals for a revision were submitted to the British and Foreign Bible Society. This society generously accepted the whole pecuniary responsibility of the undertaking, and a Revision Committee was formed and began its work in the following year.

The writer of this paper was, in accordance with the wish of his co-workers, appointed principal reviser and chairman of the Revision Committee. It was his duty to prepare a preliminary version as a basis for the committee's work, and also to act as editor and give practical effect to all the committee's decisions.

The committee consisted of eight foreigners (English, American, and Norwegian) and three natives. The first meeting was held on Dec. 1, 1873, and the work was completed on April 30, 1887. Many changes took place in the personnel of the committee during the progress of the revision, and only two Europeans and one native remained members from its formation till its dissolution. Deducting interruptions, the time actually spent on the revision was about eleven years, of which nine and a half were spent on the first revision, and one and a half on the second and final revision.

During the greater part of the time, the committee met every Wednesday, and held morning and evening sittings of three hours each. Progress was at first but slow, sometimes not more than twelve verses being revised in a day; but the speed gradually improved, and the work averaged from sixty to eighty verses per day. The revision took a longer time than had been anticipated, and made large demands upon the patience of those engaged in it. But it had in it much that was pleasant and attractive, and served as a bond of union among missionaries of different communions. There were on the revision committee Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Independents, and Friends; and the union of these in common work gave an easily appreciated answer to the taunt of the Jesuits, who delight to talk of "the five different religions" introduced into Madagascar by Protestants. The natives see clearly that whatever divisions exist among these missionaries, all are at one in their loyalty to God's word, and in their desire that the churches of Madagascar should possess as accurate and carefully considered a translation of it as modern

scholarship renders possible.

From first to last native help has been sought on all points of idiom and phraseology. A good Malagasy dictionary exists, one that has recently been greatly enlarged and improved by the Rev. J. Richardson, and a copy of this always lay on our table; but, as a matter of fact, it was but seldom opened, because seated at the bottom of the table was a living dictionary in the persons of our three native helpers. We felt increasingly the value of their help, and the second revision was in the main entrusted to them, working under the superintendence of the principal reviser. The whole Bible was once more read through with a view to the removal of anything harsh in style, and to make it as simple and harmonious as possible. If in future years it should be found that a version acceptable to the people generally has been produced, very much of the credit will be due to the patience and zeal of these native helpers.

Prayer and painstaking, we are told, will accomplish anything. In this revision work neither has been spared. The labour of twelve years has been given to it, and the best critical aids within the reach of the revisers have been constantly used. Much prayer has also been offered to Almighty God for the success and usefulness of the work. Every meeting was opened with prayer, and work thus begun and continued in prayer was suitably closed with a public thanksgiving service. This was held at the suggestion of the native brethren. The place of meeting was the stone memorial church at Ambònin Amparnarìnana—the church built just on the edge of the precipice over which fourteen Christians were hurled in the year 1849, because of their love to God's word and their unwillingness to renounce the Saviour that word had made known to them.

To this meeting the Queen of Madagascar sent His Excellency Rainilaiarivòny, the Prime Minister, with a message of thanks to all who had taken part in the work. He told us in his speech of the deep interest that had been taken in this revision by the late queen, Ranavàlona II, the first Christian Sovereign of Madagascar, and how, taking that special interest in maintaining the purity of the language which is so often noticed in those of noble birth, she had often spoken of the revision to the natives engaged in it, and had occasionally herself suggested to them certain suitable expressions. He also told us that the present Queen, Ranavàlona III, bid him say how thankful she was that a work that would tend so greatly to benefit her kingdom was at length completed. What a lesson of patience and hope is this! From this very spot had Christians at the command of the first Queen Ranavàlona been hurled over the rocks because of their loyalty to God's word; and now, thirty-eight years afterwards, another Queen Ranavàlona takes part, by her representative, in this service of rejoicing and thanksgiving that her people will soon possess an improved translation of the Bible for which their fathers suffered so much. Truly God teaches us to wait patiently for Him.

During the last year the work of printing this new version was proceeded with, and it is now completed. The printing has been done in clear and readable type by Messrs. Richard Clay and Sons. In a few months copies of the new Bible will be in the hands of Malagasy Christians. All friends of Madagascar will re-echo the wish

[p.72]

William E. Cousins, "The Story of the Malagasy Bible," *Sunday at Home* 35 No. 1814 (Feb. 2nd 1889): 69-72.

that this new translation may do much for the building up of the Christian community in that land. There are already more than a quarter of a million of nominal Christians there; and in some 1500 congregations and in nearly as many schools will this book be used. The past history of Madagascar has done much to awaken the sympathy of British Christians; let all then breathe a prayer that the future may be not unworthy of all that is noble and inspiring in the past and that this new version of the Bible may be a potent factor in bringing about a result so devoutly to be desired.

William E. Cousins

This document is in the Public Domain. Prepared for the Web by Rob & Michelle Bradshaw.

<http://www.victoriansunday.org/>
