

Translating the Bible into Japanese

STEWART E. LAUER

In the sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries arrived in Japan. Seven decades later, Buddhist rulers expelled the missionaries and required Japanese Christians to recant their faith or die. The Jesuits had completed a translation of the New Testament (NT) into Japanese, but distribution was minimal and no copies have survived.

Japan was essentially closed to the West until 1854, when Admiral Matthew Perry extracted a treaty that allowed Americans to enter Japanese territory safely. Protestant missionaries soon began to arrive, including James Hepburn (Presbyterian) and Samuel Brown (Reformed).

These men, later joined by others, completed the first published Japanese NT in 1880. In 1887, the Old Testament (OT) was added. This translation resembled the KJV. The NT portion underwent major revision in 1917. The Classical Japanese Bible is still in print, but it is very hard to understand for those who are not trained in old Japanese.

THE BIBLE IN MODERN JAPANESE

In 1954, the Japanese Bible Society (JBS) published the Colloquial Japanese Bible, which was significantly influenced by the RSV. Many evangelicals were dissatisfied with it, just as English-speaking evangelicals were unhappy with the RSV.

In the 1960s, the Japan Bible Publication Society, helped by the Lockman Foundation (the publisher of the NASB), produced the New Japanese Bible (NJB). Southern Presbyterian missionary William McIlwaine (older brother of OP missionary Heber McIlwaine) was an important figure in this project, as were several Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ) pastors.

In 1987, the JBS published the New Interconfessional Translation, a joint effort of Roman Catholic and (largely mainline) Protestant scholars. Like the English NIV, this new version often followed the principle of dynamic equivalence—rendering the Greek or Hebrew phrase-by-phrase rather than word-by-word. For example, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1) became “He who knows not God says to his heart, ‘There is no such thing as a god/God.’” Cooperation with Rome occasionally yielded sectarian renderings, such as: “He who divorces his wife, *except when the marriage is unlawful* [Greek, *except for sexual immorality*], then makes another woman his wife commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9).

The NJB, too, has its weaknesses. A product of 1960s scholarship, it often ignores the relationships between clauses in the original languages. Such “discourse analysis,” as it is known, is often key to grasping the flow of thought in a passage of Scripture. Development of this sentence-level grammar for both Greek and Hebrew has greatly advanced since 1970.

While both of these two fairly recent translations represent progress toward more accurately and clearly rendering the Word of God into Japanese, more needs to be done. Sadly, in my opinion, neither version rises to the standard of excellence found in any of the English translations commonly used in OP congregations.

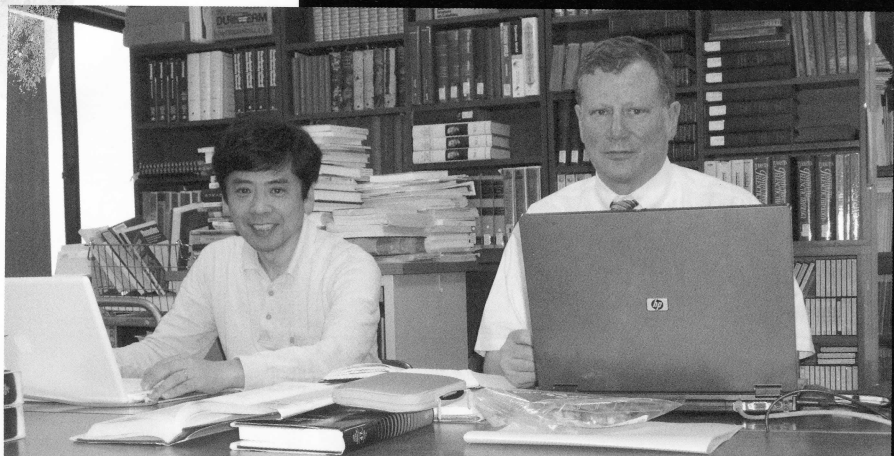
AN INVITATION TO HELP

Over my twenty-five years of preaching and teaching from each of the three major Japanese Bible translations, I have sensed a real need for further

improvement in the Japanese Bible for the long-term health and growth of the Japanese church. Several years ago, I gladly accepted an invitation from the editors of the NJB to evaluate the current (third) edition of the Letter to the Hebrews and identify exegetical problems with a view toward a thorough revision of the whole Bible in the future. Early this year, after the Bible society that now owns the copyright reorganized—becoming the New Japan Bible Publication Society (NJBPS)—the newly formed editorial committee invited me to take responsibility for preparing the first draft of the revision of that epistle.

I am working with Dr. Yo Matsumoto, a linguistics professor at Kobe University, who is also an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Japan and who used to attend the Kita Kobe RCJ chapel when we did. Although he does not read Greek, Dr. Matsumoto specializes in Japanese and English. After I have compared the Greek text of a passage with the current Japanese translation, we meet over Skype for a couple of hours, working out the best Japanese-language solutions to express more accurately and clearly the words of the original in colloquial Japanese. We recently completed Hebrews 5.

Accurately translating the clause-to-clause relationships into Japanese from Greek is particularly challenging since in Greek (as in English) a subordinate clause follows the word it modifies (“the man *who loves God*”), whereas in Japanese it precedes the modified term (“the *God-loving man*”). As a result, sentences sometimes need major restructuring to conform to normal Japanese grammar, and that often puts clauses within a



sentence out of position vis-à-vis other clauses that are, in the original and in English, immediately adjacent. It becomes quite challenging to express smoothly the clause-to-clause relationships that are crucial to rightly following the flow of many biblical passages.

A SAMPLE OF OUR WORK

Here, in English translation, is an example of a passage, Hebrews 3:13–15, that we are proposing to revise:

New American Standard Bible:

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; while it is said, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.”

New Japanese Bible (third edition):

While it is said, “today,” encourage one another daily, and see to it that no one is deceived by sin and becomes hard-hearted. If we hold our initial confidence firmly until the end, we will become sharers in Christ. For it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, you must not harden your hearts as when they provoked His anger.”

New Japanese Bible (proposed):

As long as the day is called “today,” encourage one another daily, and see to it that no one is deceived by sin and

becomes hard-hearted. For if—while it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, you must not harden your hearts as when they rebelled against God”—we are those who firmly hold our initial confidence until the end, then we have already become sharers in Christ.

Careful comparison of the three translations will show that the proposed revision’s interclausal relationships come much closer to those of the NASB than do those of the NJB (third edition).

To supplement the regular work sessions, the editorial committee invites revisers to two three-day work sessions once or twice a year to present and discuss issues and problems that have arisen, particularly those which impinge upon other books of the Bible as well.

The NJBPS is hoping to have the new edition of the NJB ready for publication by 2016. I covet your prayers that I may be diligent and faithful in this task, without neglecting my duties as a missionary-evangelist at the Kita Numazu RCJ chapel. Please pray that the new revision of the NJB will faithfully communicate the import of the original words to the Japanese people today, and do so clearly.

Telenews

Call 215/830-9424, ext. 33, for the latest Foreign Missions news and prayer requests. New editions:
October 1, 15, 29.