

The Bible Goes Native

by Mordechai Beck
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Napo Poidi's mother tongue is Bassar. Essosolim Samah's is Kabye. Anam Medjamna's is Lama. All three are from Togo, and those are three of the many languages and dialects spoken in that small West African land. They all want to translate the Bible into their own languages from the original Hebrew and to this end they spent six months in Jerusalem at an institute founded 11 years ago specifically to help people like them. It was in 1990 that Miriam Ronning first heard from Napo Poidi, when she was teaching Bible at the Protestant Institute of Holy Land Studies on Mount Zion. "This was the first time I had received a re-quest to help someone learn enough Hebrew to translate the Old Testament into an African language," she says. "Dr. Napo Poidi has a doctorate in linguistics from the Sorbonne and he phoned me from London, where he had been printing his translation of the New Testament into Bassar... At the time, there was no way I could help him, but I recognized the need and decided to do something about it."

"In Africa alone," says Napo Poidi, "there are 900 languages. When I visited Gabon I discovered they have some 47 languages, only six of which have an alphabet." Another participant, Issifou Korogo, from Benin, reports something similar: "My language of Yom is shared by some 200,000 people - it is one of 51 local languages, not counting the many local dialects. It is possible to go from one village to the next and not be understood." It is no wonder that colonialism found it so easy to subdue the continent. Invariably when the Bible - or at least the New Testament - was transmitted to 'the natives', it was in the colonial language.

"It is not enough for the translation to be accurate," says [Daniel Manjang] of his own work in his native language of Birom. "It must also sound and read naturally." And, adds Samah, even something as mundane as a City Gate or City Wall has an entirely different resonance in Israel than it has in Africa. "When I first came to HBT in 2003," says Samah, "we were taken to see the Mount of Beatitudes. I almost fainted. This is a mountain? In Africa it would be a small hill! This became a sort of metaphor for me. In the Bible, for example, the act of beating one's chest is a sign of contrition, whereas in Africa it's a sign of self-importance!" Appropriately enough, his thesis was entitled: "Cultural and Linguistic Challenges to Translating the Bible."

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