

VI. *An Excellent Mongolian Bible Translation*

Although Bayarjargal's assertion is true that modern translated publications commonly "give a 'foreign' and translationese feeling"⁴⁸ to the Mongolian language, we must again confirm that the Bible Society of Mongolia's 1990 New Testament and 2015 *Bibli* are definitely not in that category of translation. Please consider the following: In October 2016, during a drive to Hentii Province, two Mongolians discussed the pleasing qualities of the 2015 *Bibli*. One young man remarked that he heard this new Bible for the first time read aloud at church camp and the following Monday went straight to the local bookstore to buy one for his family. He added that he and his wife now love this translation, since its words go straight to the heart and they feel like they are reading the Bible for the first time.

The 2015 *Bibli* effectively responds to lessons from Mongolian Bible translation and missions history. It is a meaning-based translation which is tightly rendered, based on the original languages, and conveys Bible meaning accurately, clearly, and beautifully in natural Mongolian. Its terminology communicates Bible meaning distinctly from dominant Mongolian Buddhist meanings, a strategy that proved surprisingly effective in the early 1990s. It is our hope that many Mongolians will come to trust Christ through this excellent Bible translation.

Response

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My response follows the order of John Gibbens's questions (hereafter Gibbens).

I. In Mongolia in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, there has been a search for the source of true Mongolian identity, a search commented upon by Mongolist scholars. I believe such a phenomenon is no surprise and even expected when a nation's identity and history have been seriously altered and rewritten for a political agenda for so long. However, my characterization of the history of Christianity in Mongolia is not based on these "ethnic values" and "cultural past" (to use Gibbens's wording, 228). I want to specifically emphasize that my references are not ethnic and cultural, but historical. Since the past history of Christianity in Central Asia has only recently

⁴⁸ Bayarjargal, "Re-Establishment," 64.

received the attention of scholars and researchers, I wanted to bring up related historical and archeological facts; the existence of Turkic-Mongol tribes who had Christian faith, ecclesiastical structure, and spirituality in the Church of the East during the Mongol empire, Markos's leadership of the Church of the East, and translation of the Scriptures into Mongolian are all little-known historical facts. They establish the historical roots of Christianity in Mongolia.

II. In the strict sense of the term, Gibbens is right in his statement that “post-1990 Christianity among ethnic *Outer Mongolians* is a brand-new advance and not a re-establishment” (227, emphasis added). Indeed, the term *Outer Mongolians* signifies the division of Mongolia into Outer and Inner Mongolia in the first half of the twentieth century. In my article, however, I have used the term “Mongolians” in the broad sense to refer to both today's ethnic Mongolians and their ancestors. At the outset, I wrote, “I will attempt to give a brief overview of the history of Christianity and Scripture translation *in the land of Mongolia*” and stated that “inhabitants of modern-day Mongolia and Central Asia in the pre-Mongol period ... were mainly *Turkic-speaking tribes*” (emphasis added).¹ These Turkic-speaking tribes were a large part of the Mongol Empire.² Thus they are ancestors of present-day Mongolians. Their history, whether ethnic or religious, is a part of the history of all Mongolians. The ethnicity of today's Mongolians is a result and amalgamation of intermarriage and mix between many Mongol and Turkic tribes, especially during the Mongol Empire within the royal families, on ethnic, social, cultural, and linguistic levels. The history continued with wars, relocation of people, subjugation, foreign oppression, and so on. To expect today's Mongolians to have the same ethnicity as past Mongolians would be impossible and anachronistic. The ecclesiology, liturgy, and function of the Church of the East in the past centuries were distinctly different from those of today's Christian Church, especially the Protestant evangelical church. However, I have purposely used the term *Christian Church* to include all, despite their shape and form, who claim Jesus Christ as their only Savior and Lord. Therefore, the presence of Christianity in the land of Mongolia today is a re-establishment of the Christian Church and not a brand-new advancement.

¹ Bayarjargal Garamtseren, “Re-Establishment of the Christian Church in Mongolia: The Mongolian Standard Version Translation by National Christians,” *Unio cum Christo* 2.2 (October 2016): 50.

² Ibid.

There is no doubt that the 1990 Bible Society of Mongolia New Testament was widely read and greatly used for God's purposes in the early 1990s, but it must be remembered that it was the only Mongolian translation readily available at that time.

III. and IV. Gibbens's third point concerns the use of the term *Burkhan*, and the fourth point asserts that such use confuses Mongolians. He states, "By 2010, Mongolians were observed to commonly say that Buddhism and Christianity are the same and that the *Burhan* of the Buddhists and the *Burhan* of the Christians are the same" (233). As a Mongolian, I do not think this generalization is true for most Mongolians, and it can be acceptable for some only in the sense that the message of Christianity (or any other religion) is the same as that of Buddhism (or vice versa), despite what term(s) they may use. Furthermore, the origin of the term *Burkhan* is debated; *Burkhan* can refer to Buddha but does not mean Buddha and Buddha is not the only reference. The term *Burkhan* is a general term that can also be used in reference to a deity, mother, parent, nature, force, spiritual power, and so forth, just as the English word "God/god" can be used in various religious settings. Thus, Gibbens is in error when he states that the "past Mongolian Bibles borrowed Buddhist religious words, including Buddha for God" (232). These translators did not use the word Buddha, but *Burkhan*; they are not the same. Furthermore, Gibbens is not correct in saying that Mongolian Christians are trying to "to make 'Buddha' mean 'God'" (233). They are not using the word "Buddha," but "*Burkhan*." Today no Mongolian Christians use the word "Buddha" to refer to the God of the Bible. Certainly there is no such effort to change the meaning of the word "Buddha."

The point that the use of the term *Burkhan* might cause confusion to Mongolians could be a legitimate concern, but in reality, the whole Christian context, biblical teaching, and worship completely rules out this possibility. It will be informative to read Gibbens's own validation of this point, but unfortunately his PhD thesis is embargoed for consultation until year 2032.³ A few odd individuals might think that Jesus is Buddha, but I have yet to see a group of Mongolians thinking so. Tens of thousands of Mongolians have come to biblical faith in Jesus through a translation using the term *Burkhan* and their lives are transformed by Jesus. The goal of our Bible translation is the same: to present the biblical meaning in accurate, clear, and natural language.

³ <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b3261785~S5> Shelf mark: not available for consultation before 1st October 2032.

V. The 2015 Bible Society of Mongolia *Bibli* contains transliterations of some proper names that markedly differ from the Hebrew original; the reproducing of unpronounced letters (e.g., the final *h* [ה] in biblical Hebrew) seems to indicate a secondary source language. This is my personal opinion, however, and does not have to be accepted. I have informed the writer of the article, “A New Chapter for the Bible in Mongolia,” about the incorrect information that the Mongolian Standard Version is the first translation from the original languages, but the correction has not appeared yet.⁴

⁴ See “A New Chapter for the Bible in Mongolia,” March 31, 2016, American Bible Society, <http://news.americanbible.org/article/a-new-chapter-for-the-bible-in-mongolia>.