

Re-Establishment of the Christian Church in Mongolia: The Mongolian Standard Version Translation by National Christians

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Abstract

This paper has two main parts: the history of Christianity in Mongolia and the history of Bible translation in the Mongolian language. The history of Christianity in Mongolia and among the Mongols, especially before and during the Mongol Empire, is largely understudied and unknown. I will attempt to show that four tribes, the Kerait, the Naiman, the Onguud, and the Uyghur, who were important parts of the Mongol Empire, had already become Christian, with their own church structures and tradition, by the thirteenth century. Giving the history of Christianity up until the present time, I briefly outline the seven-hundred-year history of Bible translation into the Mongolian language. At the end, I describe the Mongolian Standard Version project, an ongoing activity of Bible translation from the original languages by national Christians.

Mongolia is sometimes called “the end of the world” and is still unknown and exotic for many. We were a closed country under Communist rule for seventy years until 1990 and had no open Christian witness in those years. But in these days God is building—or, properly speaking, re-establishing—his church and is doing a unique work in Mongolia. I will attempt to give a brief overview of the history of Christianity and Scripture translation in the land of Mongolia, particularly in times prior to and during the Mongol Empire, and at the end I will describe a new modern-language Bible translation project, the Mongolian Standard Version.

1. History of Christianity in Mongolia

1. Christian Mongol Tribes in Central Asia

The early history of Christianity in the land of Mongolia is, unfortunately, largely unknown by Mongolians today because of the suppression and alteration of our past history during the seventy years of Communism prior to 1990.¹ Inhabitants of modern-day Mongolia and Central Asia in the pre-Mongol Empire period (the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) were mainly Turkic-speaking tribes. Some of these tribes, sometimes as whole groups, came to the Christian faith between the sixth and eighth centuries through Christians of the Church of the East (known as Nestorians), who traveled via the Silk Road for both missionary and commercial purposes. Here I will limit the history to the Turkic tribes, the Kerait, Naiman, and Onguud, three of the six tribes that formed the Mongol Empire, and the Uyghur tribe, which later became a part of the empire.

The story is told of a king of the Keraites who turned to Christ with his subject people after experiencing a miraculous rescue in a heavy snowstorm.² In about 1009 A.D., ‘Abdishō, Metropolitan of Merw, wrote about the event to Patriarch John, saying that “about two hundred thousand Keraites had embraced Christianity” and

the king had set up a pavilion to take the place of an altar, in which was a cross and a Gospel, and named it after Mar Sergius, and he tethered a mare there, and he

¹ Almost the only work covering the overall history of Christianity in Mongolia is by Hugh Kemp, *Steppe by Step: Mongolia’s Christians—From Ancient Roots to Vibrant Young Church* (London: Monarch Books, 2000).

² Joannes Baptista Abbeloos and Thomas Josephus Lamy, eds., *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum Quod E Codice Musei Britannici Descriptum Conjuncta Opera Ediderunt, Latinitate Donarunt Annotationibusque Theologicis, Historicis, Geographicis et Archaeologicis Illustraverunt* (Leuven: Peeters, 1887), 3:279–80.

takes her milk and lays it on the Gospel and the cross, and recites over it the prayers which he has learned, and makes the sign of the Cross over it, and he and his people after him take a draught from it.³

‘Abdishō then received an instruction to send a priest and a deacon to baptize and instruct the converts and teach them Christian habits, including abstinence from meat during Lent.⁴ The Keraites lived in the Orkhon valley, near the capital of the Mongol Empire, Kharakhorum.

It must be mentioned that the legend of Prester John is connected with the Kerait tribe. Barhebraeus and others have identified the legendary figure with Ung-Khan, Toghrul in *the Secret History*,⁵ because “‘John’ in Syriac ‘Yohannan’ may be a falsification of ‘Ung-Khan.’”⁶

Another populous Turkic-speaking tribe on the steppes of Mongolia was the Naiman, who occupied the modern-day Western provinces of Mongolia. The Mongolian word *naiman* means “eight,” and it is likely that they were Mongolized Turks. It is recorded in both Muslim and Chinese sources that the Naimans were largely Christian.⁷ Li Tang proposes that the Naimans were Christianized through the Uyghur, as they had close contact in terms of language, culture, and trade. After Chinggis Khan conquered the Naiman, he and his sons took wives from them and appointed able Naimans, including many Christians, as officers and administrators.

In the center of the land once inhabited by the Naiman, in Ulaantolgoi, in Mongolia’s Khovd Province, one Chinese and two Syriac rock inscriptions are preserved as a strong testimony of the Naimans’ Christian faith. The Chinese inscription, although consisting of six largely illegible columns of text, reads “Prince of Gaotang” at the beginning of the text and gives the date as “the eighteenth day of the sixth month of the second year of the Dade era” (July 28, 1298).⁸ The first Syriac inscription reads, “God, whose dwelling place is holy. 1609 of the Greeks,” reminiscent of Psalm 68:5. The

³ Alphonse Mingana, “The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 9 (1925): 310–11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁵ The *Secret History*, written shortly after the death of Chinggis Khan, is a fundamental historic document for the history of Chinggis Khan, the Mongols, and the Mongol Empire. For the English translation, see Urgunge Onon, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2001).

⁶ Mingana, “Early Spread,” 309–10.

⁷ Li Tang, “Medieval Sources on the Naiman Christians and on Their Prince Küchlüg Khan,” in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, 2nd ed., ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang, *Orientalia - Patristica - Oecumenica* 1 (Berlin: LIT, 2014), 263.

⁸ Takashi Osawa et al., “‘As the Mountains Surround Jerusalem’: Two Syriac Inscriptions at Ulaan Tolgoi (Doloon Nuur) in Western Mongolia,” *Journal of Syriac Studies* 18.1 (2015): 193.

Greek dating corresponds to July 28, 1298. The legible part of the second Syriac inscription reads “Jerusalem, the mountains surround her; [and] the Lord surrounds his people” from Psalm 125:2.⁹ Both Syriac inscriptions have a cross beside the text. Such a nonfunerary Christian inscription is a rare find in Central Asia, and currently these are the only ones found within the borders of Mongolia.¹⁰ The second Syriac inscription may or may not be contemporary with the first Syriac inscription,¹¹ but “the choice of the psalm text in this [second] inscription is particularly apt for the location, surrounded as it is by lofty and beautiful mountains.” Since “Prince of Gaotang” was the “title granted to the Christian Ongut Prince George,” who was captured later in the year 1298, it is suggested by the researchers that at least the first Syriac and the Chinese inscriptions were written when his military passed through this mountain pass in the summer of 1298.¹²

The Onguud were a Turkic-speaking tribe living in today’s Inner Mongolia region in China, with a strong Christian faith and a heritage traced back to Saint Sergius.¹³ Tjalling Halbertsma conducted an extensive survey of locating, photographing, documenting, and studying about a hundred different Christian archaeological remains, mainly gravestones, steles, and artifacts, in Inner Mongolia.¹⁴ Some of the gravestones have inscriptions in Syriac, Uyghur, and Chinese, and many artifacts have crosses with beautiful decorations and patterns. Olon-Sume, where there is a city wall and other remains, may have been the capital of the Onguud, with a congregation of the Church of the East and possibly a Catholic church started by John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan missionary, in the late thirteenth century.¹⁵ These archaeological finds from Inner Mongolia are extremely important proof of the presence of Christianity in the medieval period within the Mongol realm.

⁹ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰ The same point is made in Takashi Osawa and Hidemi Takahashi, “Le Prince Georges des Önggüt dans les montagnes de l’Altaï de Mongolie: les inscriptions d’Ulaan Tolgoi de Doloon Nuur,” in *Le christianisme syriaque en Asie centrale et en Chine*, ed. P. G. Borbone and P. Marsone, *Études syriaques* 12 (Paris: Geuthner, 2015), 280.

¹¹ Osawa et al., “As the Mountains,” 197.

¹² Ibid., 196.

¹³ Atwood, however, argues that this strong Christian link and other aspects of their past was successively altered to create ethnic images favorable to the contemporary reigning kingdoms and kings, including the Mongol Empire. Christopher Atwood, “Historiography and Transformation of Ethnic Identity in the Mongol Empire: The Öng’üt Case,” *Asian Ethnicity* 15.4 (2014): 514–34.

¹⁴ Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia: Discovery, Reconstruction and Appropriation*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹⁵ Ibid., 156.

The Uyghur were a Turkic tribe who were conquered by Chinggis Khan and from whom the Mongols adopted the Uyghur-Mongol script. Archaeological discovery of Christian manuscripts at the ruin of a Christian monastery in Bulayiq in Xinjiang province of China reveals the spiritual and linguistic character of the Sogdian and Uyghur Christian community between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. The site provided “over 1100 Christian manuscript fragments,” demonstrating that Syriac was the liturgical language of the Church of the East.¹⁶ The Syriac manuscripts contain mostly biblical texts, the Psalter, and prayer booklets, as well as the legend of Saint George and a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew. The Sogdian texts, written in Syriac script, consist of “Psalms, lectionaries, [and] hagiographical and ascetical texts,” while the Uyghur fragments, written in Syriac and Uyghur scripts, contain “the Legend of the Magi and a wedding blessing.”¹⁷ These fragments show that Uyghur Christians followed the liturgical tradition of the Church of the East, but their prayers were also offered in their own language “as an acknowledgment of the need to make their faith intelligible to those around them.”¹⁸

2. *Yaballaha III and Rabban Sauma*

The period of the Mongol Empire was a thriving time for Christianity because the Mongol kings were tolerant towards all religions, even exempting them of taxes in return for prayers. Furthermore, there was peace and free passage between the East and the West that never existed before.

At the end of the thirteenth century, Markos, a Christian Mongol of the Ongud tribe, became the Catholicus of the Church of the East, presiding over the whole see of the church in Asia. Markos was the fourth child of an archdeacon and was well “instructed in the Doctrines of the Church beyond all his brothers.”¹⁹ He dedicated his life to monastery learning and discipline under the guidance of his spiritual master, Rabban Sauma (or Bar Sauma).²⁰

¹⁶ “500 fragments in Syriac, 550 in Sogdian (an Eastern Middle Iranian language) in Syriac script, 50 in Sogdian in Sogdian script and 50 in Old Uyghur (a dialect of Old Turkic) in Syriac or Uyghur script,” Mark Dickens, “Multilingual Christian Manuscripts from Turfan,” *Journal for the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009): 23.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Dickens, “Syro-Uigurica II: Syriac Passages in U 338 from Turfan,” *Journal of Syriac Studies* 16.2 (2013): 317.

¹⁹ James A. Montgomery, trans., *The History of Yaballaha III Nestorian Patriarch and of His Vicar Bar Sauma Mongol Ambassador to the Frankish Courts at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 31.

²⁰ It was common for Turkic Christians to give biblical names to their children. This is the case for both individuals in this story; Bar Sauma, meaning “son of fasting,” was a favored name in the Church of the East tradition after a famous leader from the fifth century.

He managed to persuade his teacher to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and they obtained the royal *paiza*²¹ for their journey. On their journey they stopped at several Turkic towns, meeting Christians, sharing in fellowship, being prayed for and given gifts for their needs. In Baghdad they met with the Catholicus of the Church of the East. They continued their journey toward Jerusalem, but the road was closed because of war and unrest in the area.

In 1281 Markos was elected the new Catholicus of the Church of the East, with the title Yaballaha III. For a Turkic Mongol to oversee the whole of the Church of the East was an important and unusual event in the history of the Eastern and Mongol Christians. Yaballaha III, as the head of the Church of the East and sanctioned by then-reigning Mongol Ilkhanite King Abaga, served faithfully until the end of his life, a span that covered four different successive kings. He was sometimes mistreated, yet he defended Christians from persecution from later kings who embraced Islam.

Mongol Ilkhanate kings had a keen interest in extending the Mongol Empire westward and wanted to take Jerusalem from the hands of Muslims. In this effort they expressed their intention to cooperate with Western kings, and there was much correspondence between different Mongol kings and the West. On one of these missions, Rabban Sauma was sent as a royal messenger because of his language skills and suitability for the purpose. Starting his journey from Baghdad in 1287, he arrived in Rome and met a cardinal, who questioned his doctrinal positions, and spent a month visiting churches and seeing important Christian relics. Continuing his travel, he then met King Louis IX in Paris with gifts from King Aragon. In Bordeaux, he was received by the English king, Edward I, who received the Eucharist from him. On his return journey, he met the newly elected pope, conducting the Eucharist to show the Eastern way, and took letters and gifts back to Yaballaha III and the church.

3. The Linguistic Nature and Spiritual State of the Church

One strong feature that emerges from archaeological finds and Christian manuscripts from Central Asia is the bilingual and even trilingual character of these Turkic Christians. Syriac, as the liturgical language of the Church of the East, played a central role in Scripture reading and worship. The manuscripts from Bulayiq, the rock inscriptions in Ulaantolgoi, and tombstones from Inner Mongolia and other parts of Central Asia all show the

²¹ *Paiza* is a royal tablet permitting the holder to obtain necessary help and supplies along the journey.

key place of the Syriac language in their worship. Yaballaha III was able to read and write Syriac, although he self-deprecatingly acknowledged his deficiency.²² We can see his own handwriting in Syriac in his letter in Arabic to Pope Boniface VIII.²³ Concerning the Ulaantolgoi inscription, the researchers conclude that

someone with sufficient knowledge of Syriac to leave behind such inscriptions as we have—a cleric of the Church of the East, one would imagine, possible a prelate of that church in the company of a Christian prince—was present on at least one occasion towards the end of the thirteenth century at this site.²⁴

The level of fluency in Syriac, however, was not equal in all parts of Central Asia. Pier Borbone writes that “Western Turco-Mongol Christians were more familiar with Syriac, whereas for the Eastern ones the Turkic mother tongue remained dominant even in the religious sphere, despite their adoption of the Syriac script and of the Syriac language in liturgy.”²⁵ Apart from Scripture readings, Christian teaching and instructions would have been in local Turkic languages like Sogdian and Uyghur—as evidenced in hagiographical and ascetical texts in Sogdian, and the wedding blessing and the legend of the Magi in Uyghur.

The influence of the Syriac script was so strong that Turkic languages—Sogdian and Uyghur and eventually Mongol—adopted them with some modifications. Among the manuscript finds, more manuscripts in languages other than Syriac use Syriac script than use the script of the source language. For example, of the Sogdian texts from Bulayiq, 550 fragments are written in Syriac script, while only 50 fragments are in Sogdian script; similarly, Middle Persian and New Persian fragments are written in Syriac script.

The Persian language also must have had a recognized place among the educated and the clergy, especially during the Mongol Empire period. Rabban Sauma wrote his diary in Persian.²⁶ The Franciscan missionary John of Montecorvino, who was stationed in Khanbaliq (modern-day Beijing), had pictures drawn from the Bible with writings in Latin, Turkic, and Persian.²⁷

²² “For I am not even acquainted with your Syriac language, which is a matter of universal necessity.” Montgomery, *History of Yaballaha III*, 44.

²³ Laura Bottini, “Due lettere inedite del Patriarcha Mār Yahbhallāhā III (1281–1317),” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 66 (1992): 239–56.

²⁴ Osawa et al., “As the Mountains,” 198.

²⁵ Pier Giorgio Borbone, “Some Aspects of Turco-Mongol Christianity in the Light of Literary and Epigraphic Syriac Sources,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 19.2 (2005): 17.

²⁶ Montgomery, *History of Yaballaha III*, 25.

²⁷ Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in associa-

It is important to note that there was a specific Turkic word, *ärkägün* (or *erke'ün*, pl. *erke'üüd*), to designate a Christian.²⁸ This word occurs in Syriac, Uyghur, Chinese, Mongol, 'Phags-pa, Armenian, and Persian scripts or sources. The origin of the word is unknown and debated, but it clearly refers to a person of Christian faith. Another word for "Christian" "is *tars* or *t'rs'k* borrowed from Middle Persian *trs'*."²⁹ This widely recognized term with the same meaning in many languages and scripts strongly suggests that Christians were of a sizeable portion in the population and their faith and practice were recognized as unique and different from those of other faiths.

The church in the land of Mongolia and Central Asia had its own clergy and hierarchy according to the structure of the mother Syriac church. In manuscripts and records we come across names of different church offices: metropolitans (Mar George and Mar Nestorius), administrators (Syriac, *sā'orā*), verger or keeper (Syriac, *qanqāyā*), monk, and archdeacon. Borbone states that these terms indicate "the presence of organised Christian communities in specific towns or regions."³⁰ In response to the request of the king of the Keraites, they were given a metropolitan or bishop.³¹

From the historical records we can see that the church had its own teachers and instructors in the faith. The parents of Rabban Sauma "committed him to a suitable teacher, and they schooled him zealously under him in the Doctrines of the Church." Then, based on his education and training, "he was qualified for the order of Priesthood, and he was numbered among the Clergy, and he became Verger." Yaballaha III also in his young age "was instructed in the Doctrines of the Church beyond all his brothers" and became a student of Rabban Sauma.³² This teacher-student relationship with its nature of spiritual instruction shows that spiritual teachers and clergy were well established and recognized by these Turkic Christian communities. Mark Dickens rightly states, "Christianity in Central Asia was not merely a thin veneer over the animistic and shamanistic religious core of the Turkic peoples. There was sufficient spiritual vibrancy and knowledge within the community to support teachers and interpreters of Scripture."³³ On the

tion with the Medieval Academy of America, 1998), 227.

²⁸ See Christopher P. Atwood, "Christianity in the Mongol Empire," *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 107.

²⁹ Peter Zieme, "Notes on a Bilingual Prayer Booklet from Bulayik," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, 2nd ed., ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Tang, Li, *Orientalia - Patristica - Oecumenica 1* (Zürich: LIT, 2014), 171.

³⁰ Borbone, "Some Aspects," 15.

³¹ Mingana, "Early Spread," 306.

³² Montgomery, *History of Yaballaha III*, 28, 30–31.

³³ Mark Dickens, "The Syriac Bible in Central Asia," in *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected*

basis of graffiti near Samarkand, Uzbekistan, written by a Turkic Christian exegete, as well as an exegetical writing, “Gannat bussāmē” (Garden of Delight), ascribed to a Turkic exegete, Borbone reasons that “even if very little has come down to us in written sources, there was some teaching activity and a related literary production within Turco-Mongol Christianity.”³⁴

Sadly, the Church of the East and the Christian faith rapidly declined and even ceased to exist by the sixteenth century in the land of Mongolia. The factors that caused this decline are not clear. However, the fall of the Mongol Empire, which provided religious tolerance and an environment for religious growth, Lamaistic Buddhism becoming the state-supported religion of Mongolia, assimilation of Christian tribes with other tribes under the Mongol Empire, and the expansion of Islam in Central Asia appear to be strong factors.³⁵

4. The Christian Church in the Modern Era

During the seventy years of the Communist regime that ended in 1990 there was not a single Christian church in the country, and only a few among those studying in Eastern European countries heard the gospel. When Mongolia finally opened up, missionaries and Christian workers were able to come and share the gospel message with Mongolians, who were spiritually hungry. Churches, small Bible study groups, and various kinds of Christian ministries flourished, and evangelism outreach teams went to provinces far and near and rural centers with the *Jesus* film, New Testaments, and some tracts. Missionaries and Christian NGOs worked with street children, poor families, and others who lacked the basic necessities of life in those economically troubled years.

Many of the people who became Christians during these early years were teenagers and young adults in their early twenties. Now, after twenty-five years, much of the leadership of Mongolian churches and Christian NGOs is in the hands of those Mongolian leaders as the declining body of missionaries provides more of a supporting role.³⁶ According to a census conducted

Papers from the Christianity of Iraq IV Seminar Days, ed. Erica C. D. Hunter (Piscaway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 112.

³⁴ Borbone, “Some Aspects,” 10–11.

³⁵ See also Li Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China*, *Orientalia Biblica et Christiana* 18 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 145–49.

³⁶ For more on the Christian church in Mongolia, see Hugh Kemp and Bayarjargal Garamtseren, “Mongolia,” in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope Antone et al., *Regnum Studies in Global Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 565–73.

by the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance in 2015, there are over 30,000 Christians, 527 churches, and 91 Christian NGOs in Mongolia. Various Christian ministries include child care, foster homes, orphanages, hospices, literature translation, media, and ministries for alcoholics, prisoners, the homeless, students, and professionals. One distinctive characteristic of Mongolian Christians has been their enthusiasm for evangelism and mission. From the beginning in the early 1990s, Mongolians were encouraged to reach out and evangelize their own people as they were sent to many rural villages. They were also inspired to pray for, give to, and go to mission fields, especially among the ethnic Mongol people groups in Asia. Now there are Mongolian missionaries in China, Russia, and sensitive areas in Asia. Mongolian Christians are making good use of media for the gospel. There is a well-recognized and respected Christian radio station, Wind FM, with various programs focusing on family and relationship issues. It is the most listened-to radio station in Mongolia. A Christian TV group called AMONG airs Christian programs, news, and testimonies at certain times every week. Both of these media groups have received the National Religious Broadcasters Award (USA) for their excellence and effectiveness in presenting the gospel to the local culture: AMONG in 2015 and Wind FM in 2016. The Mongolian church is young, energetic, spontaneous, and mission minded, and it has much potential and talent. Yet there are areas where earnest attention and work are needed, such as discipleship, spiritual formation, leadership development, maturity, and theological education.

II. Bible Translation in Mongolian

1. Past History

Again, Bible translation in Mongolian is not a recent phenomenon, but spans many centuries. Since Syriac was the language of the Scriptures for Turkic-Mongol Christians, perhaps the necessity of translating the Bible into local languages was seen as less urgent and the needs were different from those of today. Dickens comments,

It is unclear whether or not the whole Syriac Bible was ever translated into Sogdian and Uyghur Turkic, although portions of the former and perhaps the latter were used for readings in church services. The exception is the Psalter, one of the most important parts of the Bible for those living a monastic lifestyle, as is evident from the extant Psalter fragments in Syriac, Middle Persian, Sogdian and New Persian.³⁷

³⁷ Dickens, "The Syriac Bible in Central Asia," 111.

Possibly what can be called the very first written translation of the Bible into the Mongolian language was by John of Montecorvino, who arrived in Khanbaliq in 1294 and with the permission of Tumor Khan built a Catholic church.³⁸ In his second letter, written in 1305, John writes, “I have an adequate knowledge of the Tartar language and script, which is the usual language of the Tartars, and now I have translated into that language and script the whole of the New Testament and the Psalter and have had it written in beautiful characters.”³⁹ This Tartar language is Mongolian, “the language of the ruling people of China at that time.”⁴⁰ The forty boys to whom John taught Latin and for whom he wrote Psalters, hymnals, and Breviaries would have assisted in and used this translation for their spiritual instruction. Unfortunately, no portion of this translation has survived.

Beginning in the 1760s, German Moravians made an attempt to reach the Kalmucks, an ethnic Mongol group living in Sarepta, Russia. They studied the language and culture of the Kalmucks and attempted some Bible translation, but the effort did not continue long. In the early 1800s the Moravians made another effort, this time working through Isaac J. Schmidt, who later became a famous Mongolist. Schmidt translated the Gospel of Matthew into Kalmuck in 1812 and the New Testament in 1827. Two Buryat Mongols, Nomtu and Badma, helped him translate the New Testament into the Mongolian dialect. Schmidt promoted the new term *Deed* for God instead of the traditional term *Burkhan* because he saw the latter term being equal to Buddha. Though much work went into the translation and many copies were printed, this translation was never widely used.

Four British missionaries sent from the London Missionary Society in 1818 and stationed in Selenginsk, Buryatia, started working on a new translation of the Bible. This team faced many challenges among themselves, family circumstances, health issues, communication difficulties, bureaucracy from the Russian Bible Society, and pressure from the Russian Tsar. However, they persevered until 1840, when the mission was forced to close. By then they had completed the translation of the Old Testament, and the individual books were printed in Selenginsk. After the mission post closed, the New Testament translation was printed in London in 1846, making it the first complete translation of the whole Bible. This translation became associated with the two main translators, William Swan and Edward Stallybrass,

³⁸ For details of the history of Bible translation in Mongolian, see Bayarjargal Garamtseren, “A History of Bible Translation in Mongolian,” *The Bible Translator* 60.4 (2009): 215–23.

³⁹ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 227.

⁴⁰ Yiyi Chen, “A Brief Survey of the History of Chinese Translations of the Hebrew Bible,” *SBL Forum*, n.d., <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=460>.

and came to be known as the Literary Version. This year we are celebrating the 170th anniversary of this version.

The Literary Version and its individual books went through various revisions in the following years, mostly to bring the language into the Khalkha main dialect. In 1872 Joseph Edkins and Joseph Schereschewsky revised the Gospel of Matthew. Then D. Stenberg worked on the revision of the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, as well as Acts, but unfortunately he was murdered during the Boxer Rebellion. F. Larson and A. Almblad also revised the Gospels, Acts, and Genesis and published their work in Japan in 1913. In 1935 J. Erickson and G. Ollen started on a new translation of the Gospels and Acts from a Chinese text. The workers developed into a team consisting of S. Gunzel and three Mongols, Mattai, Genden, Erinchindorj, and were relocated to Hong Kong in 1949. They were able to complete a revised New Testament, which was printed in 1953 in simpler and up-to-date language.

In 1972 John Gibbens, from England, came to then-communist Mongolia as a student and started translating the Bible in secret. He received language assistance from a fellow Mongolian student, Altaa, who later became his wife. Gibbens had a team assisting him in different capacities, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the United Bible Societies provided consultancy and financial support until the New Testament was printed in 1990. This was the first translation in the Cyrillic script, which Mongolia had adopted in the 1940s. The translation came just when the country had opened up, and the new religious freedom could be enjoyed by Mongolians who were spiritually hungry for truth. The language of the translation was easy to understand, and many explanations and elaborations in it helped Mongolians grasp new Christian concepts and terms. The translation, however, drew much criticism for being too paraphrastic, for having arbitrary additions and omissions, as well as for using a new, nontraditional term for God. The complete Bible of this translation was published in 2015.

In response to the lack of confidence in the translation by the Gibbenses, in about 1993 missionaries came together to start a new translation, aiming to be more accurate and to use word-for-word correspondence. A team consisting of missionaries and Mongolians worked from an English text and published the New Testament in 1996, using the traditional terms for God and spiritual concepts. The complete Bible, known as the Holy Bible, was published in 2000, and it quickly became the most widely used translation among churches and Christians. The revised version of the translation was completed in 2013.

2. Mongolian Standard Version

The Birth of a Vision

At a missions conference in November 2001 in Erdenet, Mongolia, Magnus Alphonse, a missionary from Sweden, challenged Mongolian Christians to do certain tasks that could only be undertaken by national believers. One such task was a Bible translation by Mongolian believers into their mother tongue. This challenge immediately struck my heart and changed the course of the rest of my life. Since I became a Christian in September 1992, I have had a keen interest and involvement in the translation of Christian literature and have interpreted for many conference speakers. This Bible translation challenge began to stir and tug at my heart more and more, and I came to the recognition that this was a calling from God, confirmed by discussions with my pastor and friends, and a real, recognized need. By March 2002 my wife Yanjinkham Enkhtaivan and I had made the decision to move in this new direction, and at the end of July I voluntarily resigned from my job in the finance department of World Vision Mongolia.

Education and Training

The next necessary step was to receive proper training. My prayer was for the best possible training and equipping for the task to do the best possible translation. While applying and waiting for the right doors to open for schooling, I took on the leadership of the Bible dictionary translation project that was providentially assigned, after proper procedures, to an NGO from my church. This project was preparation for my future work, and after two years we saw the publication of the first Bible dictionary in Mongolian. Just as the project was nearing its end, I was awarded a full-tuition scholarship from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and other sources of funding to enable me to start the Master of Divinity program. In August 2004, my family, with two small children, left for schooling and training that would continue for another nine years. After I had completed the master of divinity and master of theology degrees at the seminary, God opened a wonderful opportunity for me to study in a PhD degree program at the University of Cambridge, in the UK. My research topic—text critical research between the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and the Masoretic Hebrew text in one of the most complicated passages in the Old Testament—was ideal, but very challenging training for fulfilling the vision of translating from the original languages. During these years of studies God also provided for my family to study in a six-month-long special program for national Bible translators at the Home for Bible Translators under the auspices of the

Hebrew University in Jerusalem. By God's grace and provision, I completed and successfully defended my PhD thesis in December 2013. All the schooling and training I was blessed to receive was the best combination I could ask for and was definitely an answer to our prayers.

Implementation of the Mongolian Standard Version Project

In November 2013, we commenced the Mongolian Standard Version (MSV), a project of the Mongolian Union Bible Society. By naming this translation the Mongolian Standard Version, we hope that it will be a standard and exemplary translation of the Scriptures for Mongolian speakers in Mongolia and elsewhere. Furthermore, we aim to implement and follow standard procedures, checks, and reviews for this version.

About the Mongolian Language

The Mongolian language belongs to the Altaic family of languages and has three million speakers in the country of Mongolia. The Halh is the only official dialect for written Mongolian in Cyrillic script and is understood by speakers of all dialects in the country.

Project Goals

For the MSV we have the following five goals:

1. To translate from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts
2. To be faithful to the source texts
3. To use natural and proper Mongolian grammar and expression
4. To be clear and understandable
5. To make the final product easily listened to

Current Bible versions in the Mongolian Cyrillic script (Mongolian Union Bible Society Holy Bible, 2000; Kitamura New Testament, 2005; Mongolian Bible Society Bible, 2015) are either translated from a secondary language or hard to be verified as coming from the original languages. For some versions, there were justifiable historical reasons to translate from a secondary language, such as urgent need and lack of necessary resources and personnel. Although such versions meet the need and may be acceptable for a time, they should not be considered standard for all time. When the necessary conditions and personnel are there, it is (and should be) the standard to translate Scripture from the original languages.

We are translating the Old Testament from the Masoretic text and the New Testament from the Greek New Testament produced by the United

Bible Societies. The Old Testament will be translated first because it gives the chronological and biblical foundation and builds the necessary vocabulary for the New Testament.

There are many weaknesses in translating from a secondary language. When one is translating from a translation, it becomes hard or impossible to recognize, understand, and properly translate the original phrase, word play, emphasis, simile, comparison, parallelism (especially in poetry), and many other linguistic features. Depending upon the characteristics of the secondary language and other cultural differences, we are quite often not able to see these linguistic features in the original through the translation in the secondary language.

Due to the limitations inherent in all translation, a translator is sometimes forced to choose between competing options. One who then translates from that second language has to live with the option taken by the first translator. But when a translator is able to see the original meaning in the original language, then he or she is able to express the intended meaning using his or her own judgment appropriate in that cultural setting and language. Sometimes it may be necessary or even better to take an option different from the one chosen for the secondary language translation. This is the reason we want Mongolian translators equipped with original language training to be able to see the original words, sentence structures, emphasis, and poetical and other features that are only visible in the original. When the translator sees these characteristics, he or she is encouraged to come up with a translation that will have similar feel, effect, structure, and character in natural Mongolian.

Furthermore, because Mongolian culture is nomadic, similar to ancient Hebrew (or Middle Eastern) culture, it brings an advantage and closeness to translate from the biblical Hebrew, which is three quarters of the Bible text. There are many similarities between the two cultures, making it easier for the translator to understand and translate the worldview and cultural values of ancient Israelites. Less is lost when a translation takes place between two similar cultures, that is, nomadic to nomadic, in comparison to going from nomadic to sedentary and then back to nomadic.

The requirement for a translation to be accurate applies to all translations. If a translation is made literally (i.e., word for word), especially from a secondary translation, there is great danger of producing a wrong or unintended meaning and effect. The right and intended meaning comes from a whole sentence within its context, not from “correctly” translated individual words. In other words, the emphasis for accuracy is not so much on properly translated individual words as it is on the meaning from the whole sentence.

Our third goal of using natural and proper Mongolian grammar and expression comes from the sad present reality. When a nation is suddenly open to a vast amount of information and knowledge from other languages that were not accessible before and needs to obtain information and knowledge from them, that nation is under pressure to translate and transmit all that information into the local language and culture, generally from English. Mongolia has gone and is still going through this experience. In many scientific fields, as well as in Bible and Christian literature translation, Mongolians have to translate many new and unfamiliar terms and concepts. When a nation is under such an inflow of translated information and knowledge, the local language is negatively affected, its naturalness lessened to some degree, word order and proper sentence structure impeded. It is not rare to see “foreignized” Mongolian in newspaper reports, advertisements, and media where the individual words are Mongolian but together they give a “foreign” and translationese feeling. This is exactly what we want to avoid in the MSV. We aim to use natural and proper Mongolian grammar and expression to give as closely as possible the meaning and effect in the original language. This will require us to use a balance of Mongolian phrases, collocations, and expressions, all the while thinking about how we would say this naturally in Mongolian.

Using natural and proper Mongolian grammar and vocabulary will help us to produce a clear and understandable translation. It becomes challenging to translate some extremely long Greek sentences, especially in the Pauline epistles, that are connected by participles one after another. Mongolian does not have a participle equal to those in Koine Greek. Another difference is that while Mongolian sentence structure is subject-object-verb, Koine Greek has a more or less flexible order, and biblical Hebrew is verb-subject-object. In these and other cases, it will be better to break long sentences into shorter sentences, repeating the verb instead of giving a long, convoluted sentence in Mongolian. Clarity and understandability is more important than keeping the same sentence structure and length as in the original language.

The fifth goal of the MSV is that it be easily listened to. There are many cases where the Scriptures will only be heard and not read, even in church settings. In fact, most cultures are oral, meaning that most of the communication and exchange of ideas takes place orally. Teachings and sermons are more often heard than read. More and more people are choosing audio books over text-printed books in this age of busyness, and more time is being spent in driving and commuting between home and work. Hearing the Bible read out loud allows the naturalness of the translation and how

well it is written to be assessed easily. Therefore, listening to the translation read out loud will be an important part of our checking process. To test and refine our translation, we will be producing an audio recording of individual books even before the final version and making the necessary changes.

Translator Training

To produce a translation that meets the above goals we are concentrating our efforts on training and equipping our translators. Since we as a young church do not have people already trained and equipped with biblical languages for Bible translation, the only option for us has been to take nationals with some translation and foreign language-learning experience and teach them all the necessary skills on the job. Hiring of translators was preceded by voluntary biblical language training for three to six months, and only after passing exams and an interview were the candidates offered a contract with a request to make a long-term commitment. We have been providing training in biblical Hebrew, translation theory and practice, Mongolian language grammar, translation software, biblical geography, and cultural studies.

In particular, I want to mention our biblical language training. As I have experienced the benefit myself while studying in Israel, I have been putting emphasis on reading the text out loud. We also listen to an audio recording of the Hebrew Bible. Reading and listening to your own reading helps you memorize and retain vocabulary much better than just visual reading (or recognition) of the text. I encourage the translators to memorize words by their sounds as well as by their spelling.

Project Stages and Organization

The project has two main stages: the Old Testament translation, 2016–2023, and the New Testament translation, 2024–2027. The sequence of books to be translated has been determined on the basis of the level of the translators' skill, book genre, and readers' needs. Thus we are translating in the following order: historical books, minor prophets, Pentateuch, wisdom, major prophets, Gospels, Pauline epistles, general epistles, and Revelation.

The project has a permanent advisory committee, with five to seven representatives from the Mongolian church, theological educators, language and translation experts, pastors, leaders, and representatives from Christian ministries to give external support and input for the translation.

For fundraising efforts, we encourage Christians to sponsor verses, \$35 US per verse. This has been a practical and motivational method for interested individuals and entities.

Project Progress and Outcome

Thus far we have been able to implement the project as planned. This year we are working on the translation of the books of Joshua, Judges, Genesis, and Exodus. For a quick and cost-effective response, we will upload our translation drafts to the project website (www.msv.bible) as drafts are completed, and will conduct an online readers' survey.

Through this project we hope to making resources and tools available for Mongolian Christians to study biblical languages and the Bible. The material used in teaching translators biblical Hebrew is being developed into a textbook in Mongolian and is already used at a local Bible school as the course book. We plan to develop Hebrew–Mongolian and Greek–Mongolian dictionaries.

All glory to God!