



## ORAL BIBLE TRANSLATION

This prayer letter may turn your head a bit; it may challenge your thinking regarding Bible translation. For over 60 years, LBT and our partners like you have devoted ourselves to making sure the Bible is accessible to everyone mainly through the written Word—"Put a Bible in their hands." We value our Bibles here in the West. Our society values books and writing. In fact, when we want communication to be clear and binding, we "put it in writing."

But did you know there are many cultures around the world where writing is not viewed in this way. There may, in fact, be nothing written in their language. Oral means of communication are deemed superior and more reliable than other forms including writing. A person telling a traditional story incorrectly will be corrected by those around him who also know it well.

Most, if not all, of **the people groups waiting yet for God's word in their language are predominately oral cultures.** This may even have been the case for many people groups that now have a written Bible thanks to the efforts of Bible translation partners. (This is not saying the written versions are not beneficial as transcribed languages have gained prestige and vitality through the writing process. God speaks through those translations which are often used in listening groups, but there are definite challenges to using a written form in a society that favors the oral.)

Perhaps oral expression is superior to written forms of communication. Think about it. How often are text messages and emails misinterpreted because there are only words on the page? There are no nonverbal cues such as body language, tone, pitch, space, context (who or what else is around) or other clues to help deliver or receive a clear message. We can put things in ALL CAPS to indicate strong emotion or use an exclamation point, but that is hardly representative of the array of emotions that might be behind it. You could be celebrating: HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Or you could be threatening: TIME TO DIE!

When people use oral communication, it comes in what we call multi-modal communication. There

are those meaningful nonverbal cues listed above that communicate. Ironically, this is also the challenge of oral translation. Our source texts are in written form. What is the correct emotion to portray or what nonverbal gestures will be accurate when nothing is indicated in the text?

To challenge our thinking further, God delivered his Word first through oral means. Moses is credited with writing down the first five books of the Bible, but he was not living to experience those events. They were passed on to him orally. God did not hand Isaiah or Jeremiah a book to proclaim. He spoke; they listened; they gave the message which eventually was written down. There is evidence that the Gospel of Mark was delivered orally before it was written. Just as many of ancient writings are transcripts of oral statements, many of those originating as written documents were intended to be delivered orally.

What does this mean for Bible translation yet to be done? **Oral Bible Translation (OBT) is a growing method for making God's Word accessible in many languages** where a written text might not be effective. However, this is not to say one cancels the other. Translation agencies are now looking at what mode would be more acceptable and useable, as well as encourage the use of Scripture in the language context. Some oral communities want both forms as the written form legitimizes languages of minority people groups. OBT practices are also helping those doing written translations use better methods to get to accuracy and clarity.

There are **two types of oral versions** of Scripture. One that is read and recorded from the written version and another that is oral from the beginning with a possible written form coming from it. With the former, translation teams often find that the translation needs revision for clarity and naturalness prior to recording it. This is part of the reason why we have the teams read the entire text aloud before it is sent to the typesetters. As we work on a written translation, I often ask the team what it will sound like when it is read. What will be most natural? We sometimes change the wording because the audience cannot see the commas or the



quotation marks. We might have to add another “And Jesus said again,” to indicate that he has stopped telling a parable and now is addressing someone. See the Translation Tidbits below.

When teams are working in a project that is oral from the beginning, nothing is written down. The sections of scripture are recorded, then reviewed and revised using computer software designed for this purpose. Oral Bible translations receive the same scrutiny as written ones do before they are produced and distributed.

Before the oral text is recorded, the source text must be “internalized”. As a text is internalized through study and reading various source texts, translators can form the story in their minds and out loud. The better they know the text, the better they can put it in their own words in a natural way. They will use the correct vocabulary, inflection, tone, pitch, etc. that will communicate accurately. Some translation teams who are working on a written version are adopting these methods of internalization to get at a more natural rendering.

If the section of scripture is to be performed, many nonverbal cues need to be incorporated accurately. Even the very act of performing the translation helps people discover meaning, internalize and experience Scripture in ways not easily accessed in the writing process.

The other perk of doing OBT is the community is more closely engaged in the

## TRANSLATION TIDBITS

This came up recently in the Bandi translation. Read 1 Samuel 27:2 below out loud. Who is the king?

So David and his six hundred men went over at once to Achish son of Maach, king of Gath. GNT

So David and the six hundred men with him left and went over to Achish son of Maach king of Gath. NIV

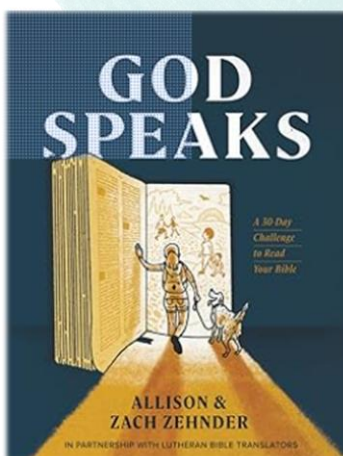
Does the comma in GNT help? Both NIV and GNT are a bit ambiguous and no difference is heard when read aloud. CEV totally reorders to make sure the meaning is clear. Even as we make a written translation, oral strategies are used to ensure clarity and avoid confusion. We know from 21:10 that Achish is the king and not Maach.

David and his 600 men went across the border to stay in Gath with King Achish the son of Maach. CEV

process. Various people are called upon to do the recording and the reviewing. Meaning is discovered and verbalized collaboratively. The insights gathered from producing oral translation are teaching us better practices for written translation as we strive to convey God's Word accurately and naturally.

As LBT moves forward in our mission to make God's word accessible to those who do not yet have it in a language they understand the best, we keep our minds open to methods which will encourage communities to use the Scriptures and be transformed by them. Go to this link to view some of the work going on with OBT.

<https://vimeo.com/1093848384/8d53bac5a4>



Speaking of transformation, Lutheran Bible Translators has partnered with Rev. Zach and Allison Zehnder to produce **God Speaks**, a 30-day devotional journey that **will transform how you read the Bible**. It is perfect for individual study, small groups, or church-wide campaigns. It features daily guided Scripture readings, practical application steps,

and reflection questions. Insights and stories were pulled from the frontlines of Bible translation ministry. For more information, go to

<https://lbt.org/godspeaks/>

O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer's praise!

*Becky*

## PRAYER REQUESTS

- Praise that both the Maan and Dan teams have finished the consultant checking for their entire Bibles. Pray they will be diligent in the next few months to complete all the steps necessary for typesetting.
- Pray for wisdom in decision making concerning translation work starting among the Grebo people.
- Pray for wisdom and clarity as the Bible Society in Liberia seeks out individuals to train to carry on future work as people are getting ready to retire.

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