

# The Saga of the Tibetan Bible

*A summary of "God Spoke Tibetan" by Alan Maberly,  
for many years a missionary in Kalimpong, on the border between India and Tibet.*

Dr A. W. Heyde and Mr Pagel, members of the Moravian church, felt called to preach the Gospel in the closed land of Tibet.

Their first attempt to enter the land was from western China. It ended when set upon by bandits and robbed. They then travelled to India and climbed the Himalayas to Darjeeling. This time they were turned back by Tibetan border guards.

Over the next year or so they made repeated efforts to enter Tibet, constantly moving westwards, until in 1858 they came to the Luba Valley near Leh. There they found a small Tibetan settlement around the home of a Tibetan nobleman called Tempu Gergan.

Tempu had been Minister of Finance during the minority of the Dalai Lama. When, a few months after taking power in 1855, the young Dalai Lama was found dead, officials of the regency were suspected of poisoning him. Tempu had fallen out with the State Oracle and when the Oracle accused him in full seance of being the guilty man, Tempu was not surprised. He had made his preparations and was ready. Much of his wealth had already been sent secretly out of Lhasa and he was able to slip out of the building and escape just in time.

The journey from Lhasa to the Luba Valley was arduous, but once outside Tibetan jurisdiction Tempu and his household settled down. Three years later they welcomed the two strangers.

## ***The battle to translate the Bible into Tibetan***

When Tempu saw how disappointed they were at being unable to enter his homeland, he invited them to live with him, promising to teach them the Tibetan language and help them translate their holy book in exchange for their medical skills.

Unfortunately, although the two men quickly became proficient in spoken Tibetan, translating the Bible was more difficult than they had imagined. Little did they then realise that it would be 90 years before the published Tibetan Bible would be available.

In the first place there was the problem of which Tibetan dialect they should use: Tempu and his family spoke the Lhasa dialect, but it was not well understood by people in either east or west of the country. Amdo Tibetan, the eastern dialect, was regarded as barbaric by the people of Lhasa and was even less understood by those in the west.

The solution appeared to be to use Classical Tibetan as found in the *Kanjur*, the holy book of Tibetan Buddhism. But here were still problems. The words of the Kanjur frequently had meanings opposed to Christian ideas. For example,

- The word for "god" referred both to divine beings and also to the living buddhas such as the Dalai Lama. So the Biblical statement "Jesus is God" becomes nothing more than that Jesus is on the same level as any other reincarnation.
- The Tibetan word for prayer included not only the endless chanting of the Buddhist prayer mantra "Om mani padme hum", but also the fluttering of prayer flags or the turning of the ubiquitous prayer wheels.

In addition, Classical Tibetan was rapidly becoming obsolete and would soon be as difficult for the ordinary Tibetan as Shakespearean English for the modern-day Englishman.

In 1885 Tempu's wife gave birth to a son, Sonam. As he grew older he enjoyed listening to the Bible stories told by the two missionaries and became interested in their religion, possibly after hearing his father discuss the Bible with them as they wrestled with the problems of translation.

When Tempu died in 1897, followed a short time later by his wife, the 12-year old Sonam openly declared his intention of becoming a Christian and was baptised, taking the Christian name of Yoseb (Joseph). He asked his missionary friends to send him to school to learn Christian doctrine and Western science.

In his absence Hyde, Pagel and an expert in Oriental languages, Dr Jaeschke, continued to struggle with the translation. They made slight progress, and about this time finished the Gospel of John and had it printed at Kyelang in Kashmir.

When Tempu died Heyde and Pagel felt there was nothing further to keep them in the Luba Valley and moved to Leh, where they established a small Tibetan church. Despite this, however, they were greatly discouraged as their translation of John didn't have much effect. It was difficult for the common Tibetan to understand. People in the east could hardly understand the language and the translation was stilted and difficult to read.

After Tempu died, the missionaries were left without translation help. In the light of the time it took to translate the one book of John, it would take several lifetimes to translate the whole Bible.

When Yoseb finished his education at the age of 21, he turned down the offer of a good position with the British government and returned home, intending to settle on the estate he had inherited. Heyde and Pagel asked him to come to Leh to serve as pastor of the Tibetan church. For some time Yoseb was uncertain what he should do. After a dream he decided to accept the call. He divided his estate among his servants and retainers and moved to Leh.

There he found Dr Jaeschke had died and been replaced by another Oriental scholar, Dr Francke, who was continuing to translate the Bible. He revised the NT, making it a little clearer. But though his efforts were better, they were still not good enough. It still didn't express the Gospel clearly. Yoseb, as well as his pastoral duties, worked with Dr Francke, but progress was very slow and unsatisfactory.

Then one day Yoseb met an old monk in an isolated temple and overheard him chanting from an ancient book of myths and legends. The dialect appeared to pre-date both Classical Tibetan and the various contemporary dialects. Although nearly forgotten, it was familiar enough to be understood by all and, even better, had words for "god" and "prayer" and other concepts that were free of Buddhist connotations.

Yoseb asked to borrow the book to study its language, but the lama graciously gave it to him, pleased it would continue to be valued after his death. Using this ancient language as their key, Francke and Yoseb worked more quickly on a new translation, a work Yoseb continued on his own after Francke returned to Europe.

In 1935, after 23 years, Yoseb finished the translation. The next hurdle was to have it printed.

### ***The battle to print the Tibetan Bible***

When he contacted the Bible Society, however, Yoseb met a problem. There was no Tibetan typeface. Like the Urdu and Arabic Bibles, the entire document had to be written by hand in a clear, consistent script, and then either engraved or reproduced photographically. There was no

facility in India to undertake such a massive project, so with great trepidation Yoseb sent his precious manuscript to the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in London.

Before committing expensive resources to the project, the BFBS wanted it checked and submitted it to Oriental scholars. In the days before photocopiers, it was laborious and time-consuming to make copies of the manuscript, but this was done. As well as experts from UK universities, the BFBS sent copies to China and India where missionaries and scholars on the borders of Tibet assessed it.

The result was positive. "Never would we have believed a Tibetan text would be so readily accepted by the diverse Tibetan peoples," was the report. However some questions were raised which needed an answer. But before Yoseb could be consulted, World War II broke out and work had to be suspended.

During the war the precious manuscript was sent to Ripon in Yorkshire for safekeeping. One night a 2,000-lb bomb landed outside the cathedral crypt, just 4 feet from the Tibetan Bible! The bomb disposal squad could find no reason why the bomb had not exploded. The sexton was convinced God had protected the ancient cathedral and its contents.

By the time the war ended the BFBS was struggling to rebuild and to carry out other projects that seemed more urgent. Prompted by Yoseb, now 60, the Indian Bible Society (IBS) requested the manuscript be returned to them. Technological developments meant they were now able to handle such work.

They were dismayed to find, however, that Yoseb had used cheap Tibetan paper, which had suffered badly from the effects of time and damp. It had yellowed and it was impossible to obtain a clear picture of the writing. The only solution was to re-write the whole thing on special white paper - but in the aftermath of the war, such paper was in short supply.

Eventually IBS produced their own paper by taking ordinary paper and coating it with a special mixture of chemicals and egg-white. The manuscript and special paper was sent back to Yoseb in Leh to re-write it and make a few necessary corrections.

After 2 years' labour, Yoseb suffered a stroke. Miraculously he recovered but was too weak to continue writing and so two scribes, Gappel and Phunthsog, did the writing at his dictation. After a while they were supplemented by another two, Stobdan and Zodpa, so that it is possible to detect 5 different handwritings in the finished book.

On 11 August 1946, the work was finally complete. 5 days later Yoseb, one of God's great saints, died.

The completed manuscript was sent to Lahore for printing, but the process of preparing the proofs revealed a number of problems, particularly in the final part of the book where pages had been corrected instead of re-written. Chandu Ray, secretary of the IBS, decided to send the proofs back to Leh so that one of the Tibetan scribes could correct them. This involved a 50-day journey by a courier (with another 50 for the return trip).

- Firstly, a Tibetan called Sandrup set off, promising to return in 4 months time. He never arrived. His body was found the following year; an avalanche had overwhelmed him.
- After a long delay another set of proofs was prepared. A second courier, a Christian called Bahadur, set off for Leh. As he crossed the final pass, however, a ferocious storm struck him, leaving him unconscious and deaf from the lightning and thunder that struck all around him. When he recovered he staggered into Leh only to find that water had been driven into the saddlebags and the proofs were but a mass of sodden paper.

- A third set of proofs was sent, accompanied by intense prayer. Despite the rioting and fighting that had broken out as India and Pakistan separated, this parcel was entrusted to the regular postal service and to everyone's relief arrived safely.

As he studied the proofs, Gappel found many minor errors, for example, where the process of reproduction had missed out a thinner or fainter than usual tail to a letter, thus turning it into another sound entirely. He decided he would have to go to Lahore and correct the actual printing plates. Despite considerable opposition from his family, Gappel set out on horseback to travel through the mountains to Lahore.

Months passed and no word was heard of Gappel until a beggar came to the IBS office with a cryptic note quoting the last verse of the Bible: "Come ... quickly come." When questioned, the beggar revealed it had been given to him by an old man (i.e. Gappel) living in a small hut, trapped between the Indian and Pakistani armies and in constant danger from both. As an obvious foreigner, he dared not venture out, but had entrusted his message to the beggar.

Chandu Ray asked the new Pakistan government for help, but with the fighting all along the border, officials declared there was nothing they could do. Ray therefore decided he would have to travel to Kashmir himself. He travelled by train to Amritsar - a perilous decision, as one side or the other regularly stopped trains and either all the Hindus or all the Muslims were massacred. The fact that Ray was a Christian would, in the turmoil, be little protection.

There was a regular flight from Amritsar to Srinagar, but as Ray waited in the airport lounge with his ticket in his hand the government announced all flights were cancelled. He immediately prayed and then spoke to the airport manager, pointing out that such a last-minute cancellation meant a lot of angry passengers who would, at the very least, demand a full refund of their tickets. The manager, who did not have that much money, quickly declared that the flight would proceed after all and that the announcement would apply only to future flights.

Ray then made his way to the fighting line near where the beggar had told him Gappel was hiding. Presenting himself as an official of the IBS he obtained permission to distribute Christian books to the soldiers and gradually worked his way closer to the front. When evening came, he was very close to No-man's Land and accepted hospitality from a squad of soldiers. As they sat around the campfire he handed out copies of the Gospels and explained the power of the Christian book. Seeing his words received a ready reception from the bored soldiers, he told first how the Bible had changed his own life and then told the story of the Tibetan Bible.

One of the Indian officers was sufficiently intrigued to offer to take Ray across the bridge into No-man's Land to look for the scribe, at the same time hinting that failure to find him would result in a charge of spying with the inevitable death penalty. Fortunately Gappel and the corrected proofs were still there and the officer escorted them back to the Indian lines. As they parted he remarked that Ray's name had made him suspect he was from Pakistan and he had decided on taking him to search for the scribe to test whether he was an honest man or not.

Back in Srinagar, however, the government ban on civilian flights had come into effect. The road journey was difficult, dangerous and long, so Ray went to the government official in charge of issuing permits and told him the story of the Tibetan Bible. Initial anger and suspicion at the presence of a Pakistani gave way to amazement and he gave him the required passes for the daily flight to Delhi.

Once in Delhi, a different problem arose. Gappel was used to the coolness of 10,000-foot mountains and the dry heat of the plains struck him like a blow. He quickly became feverish and it seemed he would die! Ray and other Christians prayed to God for help and that afternoon the monsoon rains, normally as regular as clockwork, started several weeks early. Gappel revived sufficiently to catch the train to Lahore.

Lahore is slightly cooler than Delhi, but it was still too hot for poor Gappel. He grew increasingly distressed. By afternoon, when the air was still and even the crows drooped in the shade gasping for breath, Gappel was clearly heading for heat stroke. In desperation Ray contacted the ice factory and had a truckload of ice delivered to the IBS office. The room where Gappel worked was lined with huge blocks of ice and with the fan stirring up a hurricane of freezing air the scribe set to work, beaming happily.

A sense of urgency possessed everyone at the press. As Gappel corrected each plate it was rushed away and fitted to the printing press. The manager and workers laboured for 12 hours a day to keep the pages pouring from the press and Gappel himself worked even longer, often as much as 20 hours a day.

90 years after Heyde and Pagel first began to translate the Word of God, the finished book was ready!

Gappel stoutly refused to risk his life in the "devil machines" of plane and train. He bought a pony and set off for Leh with his saddlebags filled with Bibles. He was received with joy by friends and family who had long given him up for lost, and then entered the church to give thanks to God.

For the very first time a Tibetan Bible was opened on the pulpit and the words of life were read to an eager and expectant congregation.

### **Postscript**

Why did God permit so many years to pass before His Word was available in Tibetan? In part, no doubt, the delay was because the devil so actively hindered the work. It is no exaggeration to say Tibet was the devil's kingdom. His power was actively displayed. The fanatical opposition of monks and government meant that foreigners - including missionaries - were excluded from the country and printed literature sent in was either destroyed or ignored by an illiterate population.

Ten years after the Bible was printed, the Chinese communists invaded Tibet. They committed fearful atrocities, actively destroying monasteries and temples and massacring monks and nuns. Within a few short years the centuries-old power of Tibetan Buddhism was effectively ended.

Now Chinese Christians are preaching the Christian gospel in Tibet and a newly literate population is reading the Tibetan Bible.

There are now new translations being worked on that should be more accurate and readable.

Although the Tibetan church is still small, it is growing. For security reasons it is hard to find information on current missions in Tibet. But there are small pockets of evangelical meetings. There are also unconfirmed reports of several small house churches in Lhasa and around Tibet. Although the work is still slow with the Tibetans, It is possible there has been more success reaching them with the Gospel in the last 10 years than in the rest of history.

Over half of all Tibetans live outside the Tibetan Autonomous region. In these pockets of Tibetan communities, there are small house churches growing. The largest is in Gansu province and is reported to have 200 members.

The efforts of the first missionaries laid the foundation and planted the seeds. Without the years spent translating the Tibetan Bible, there would be no Scriptures to give the Tibetans in current missionary work.