

THE STORY OF THE LUGANDA BIBLE

The Word & the Spirit

Luganda is the most widely spoken native Ugandan language. It is spoken by over 16 million, mainly in Southern Uganda, including the capital Kampala, with about 7 million first-language-speakers in the Buganda region and about 10 million others with a working knowledge.

Matthew was the first part of the Luganda Bible to be published, in 1887, by the first evangelical Anglican missionaries.

Later, in 1893, the first edition of the New Testament followed, with the first complete Bible in 1896. The key figure in their completion, publication and dissemination was George Lawrence Pilkington, one of the most significant Protestant missionaries in 19th C Uganda.

George Lawrence Pilkington (1865 - 1897)

A Man of the Word & a Man of the Spirit

George Pilkington epitomised two crucial objectives that motivated late 19th C evangelical missionary work, the Word and the Spirit:

- An urgency to translate the Word as quickly as possible and to teach literacy to enable as many as possible to read it.
- A deep and growing consciousness of, and hunger for, the ministry of the Spirit in the missionaries' own personal lives, along with an earnest longing to experience that ministry in awakening, converting and sanctifying on the mission fields.

Though only 32 when he went to be with the Lord, Pilkington saw a substantial fulfilment of both these objectives. The seeds of the Spirit and the Word were planted deep in the hearts of early Ugandan believers.

The Word & the Spirit in his Early Years of Conversion (1885 –1889)

In the latter part of the 19th C, an intense hunger grew among evangelical Christians to experience more of the fulness of the Spirit and a deeper sanctification of the Spirit, which was understood as a partaking of the very life of Christ Himself.

Many conferences were held on these themes. For example,

- In 1875, at a conference in Brighton on the promotion of Scriptural Holiness, Asa Mahan spoke on the baptism of the Holy Ghost, "...a baptism not vouchsafed on conversion, but given *after* we have believed."
- Later that year the first Keswick Convention was held, with a similar emphasis on a second blessing. This was understood to be a post-conversion experience of an infilling of the Spirit and an entrance into a higher Christian life through the surrender of one's will to God. It was believed that this would result in a sanctified life where sin no longer had dominion.

Ten years later, these teachings were to play a crucial role in Pilkington's life.

In 1884, he went to Cambridge to study. At that time there was an atmosphere of Spiritual revival there closely linked to the growing hunger for a fuller life in the Spirit.

D L Moody had preached there in 1882, resulting in many conversions and the sending out of the Cambridge Seven with the China Inland Mission. Ever since, Cambridge had been a hotbed of zealous evangelism and missionary enthusiasm.

One of those converted in that Spiritual atmosphere was Pilkington himself (1885).

Significantly, when he first came under conviction of sin, it was the Bible that played the key role in his conversion. It was there that he turned for guidance, praying most earnestly until he received light direct from the Word to his soul.

This surely was what made Pilkington such a champion for the Bible after his conversion, deeply influencing his later ministry in Uganda. Indeed, a friend said: "I never saw him without [a] Bible!" On one occasion, fearing he had neglected the study of his Bible, Pilkington thought he should read the Bible to the exclusion of all other books. On another occasion, he walked three miles just to give a Bible to a gypsy camp. An account of a man who had gone out to convert China with nothing but the Bible left a deep impression on him.

In addition to the Word, the reality of the Spirit likewise deeply impressed the newly converted Pilkington, impacting his future life and ministry from its very beginning.

He had already tasted the Spirit both in the revival atmosphere at Cambridge and in his own personal experience of the inner witness and assurance of sins forgiven. Now he sought to live a consistently holy life of power and victory in the Spirit. He searched deeply as to whether it was possible to live without sin, for, said he, a true Christian is a new creation in Christ, and "he that is born of God doth not commit sin." To be born again is to be born of the Spirit, and the Spirit can give the power to live such a life.

Leaving Cambridge in 1887, he sought unsuccessfully to join the China Inland Mission. Then, in 1889, he joined the evangelical Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) and was sent to Uganda.

His emphasis on the need for the Spirit above all man-made ecclesiastical equipment is seen clearly in his declining to seek ordination. Regarding the study of theology, nothing would shake his firm conviction that to do a Spiritual work as effectively as the untrained Moody, all he needed was the same equipment that Moody had, the Spirit.

The Word & the Spirit in his First Period in Uganda (1889 – 1895)

The Word: Bible Translation

Pilkington finally arrived in Uganda in late 1890. But before even reaching there, and before any other of his party had even begun, Pilkington showed such a keenness and zeal to learn and read Luganda that on arrival he was the only one able to speak the language. Why? Because the sooner he mastered the language, the sooner he could give them the Word.

It was quickly recognised that Pilkington's calling was linguistic. He was entrusted with the translation of that which meant so much to him, the Word of God. For him, Bible translation was clearly his first work.

Mackay, a convert of the 1860s revival who arrived in Zanzibar in 1876, had already carried out the very difficult task of committing the Luganda language to writing. He had also made a translation of Matthew which was printed in country, eagerly read, criticised and repeatedly revised and reprinted until a version was produced which was both idiomatic and faithful to the original.

Mackay, however, died in 1890, just before Pilkington reached Uganda. Although, in the meantime Rev E C Gordon had completed Mark and John and commenced Luke, Matthew was the only portion of the Bible actually in print when Pilkington arrived.

In addition to the labours of earlier missionaries, Pilkington's prospective task was made immeasurably easier by the assistance of several very intelligent Ugandan Christians with a good Biblical background from their knowledge of the Swahili New Testament. They were thoroughly practised in translating from Swahili into Luganda, having discussed among themselves the proper rendering of the important Biblical terms and phrases, appealing to the European as to the exact force of the original. For years they had occupied themselves in hammering out a version on a native anvil.

Chief of these Ugandan Christians was a man eminently qualified for such a sacred task, a man who had been willing to die for the Word, Henry Wright Duta. Duta, Pilkington's chief translation assistant, was one of the first Baganda converts. Baptised at Zanzibar in 1882, he narrowly escaped martyrdom in 1885. He was a very clever man who might have been a big chief had he chosen, but preferred the position of a simple teacher.

So, Pilkington had none of the usual difficulties of a first time translator. His was better than a first translation into a new language generally can be, having been beaten out over many years by the best brains among the Baganda themselves, with the help of earlier missionaries. As he said, "There never was anyone who more than I entered into other men's labours."

Pilkington moved quickly.

Building on the foundation already laid, he gave himself wholeheartedly to the sacred task of making available the full Word of God in Luganda. Though he had only arrived in Uganda in late 1890, by February 1891 he had completed the Gospels. Impatient at the prospect of long delays while proofs went back and forward, Pilkington he tried to arrange for these to be printed and available much more quickly than the earlier Matthew edition.

The next task was to translate the rest of the New Testament. By June 1892, working 3 hours every morning on translation, the whole New Testament was completed.

At the same time, he had also been working on parts of the Old Testament (Joshua and parts of Psalms, Genesis and Exodus) as well as aiming to finish the Pentateuch and the Historical Books.

So, in three short years rapid progress had been made towards the goal of putting the whole Word into the hands of the people of Uganda.

But, despite such good progress, by 1893, something was deeply troubling Pilkington.

The Spirit: Revival

The provision of the Bible was one major step in the spiritual progress of young Church in Uganda. But a second step was needed, an outpouring of the Spirit.

What a potent combination, the Word and the Spirit!

The Word and the Spirit are one. Jesus said, "My words are Spirit." Paul said, that all Scripture is given by the inspiration (or, breath) of God. And the breath of God is the Spirit, which is why, when Jesus breathed on the disciples, He said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost."

An outpouring was to follow very quickly. But first came desperation.

Despite external signs of progress, Pilkington was bitterly disappointed by the absence of an inner work of the Spirit like he had witnessed in Cambridge. He was so discouraged he even spoke of giving up missionary work unless something changed. He felt he could not go on. The last straw was the apostasy on one of their readers who said he gained no profit at all from Christianity.

In late 1893, in this frame of mind, after 3 years on the field, Pilkington went alone on a retreat to Koome Island in Lake Victoria. There he read a tract on the secret of a victorious life in the power of the indwelling Spirit. He wrote in his journal that he had a vision and was baptised with the Holy Spirit. His experience echoed the early Keswick emphasis on a crisis event leading to an infilling of the Holy Spirit.

On December 7th, Pilkington returned, a changed man. He had had an encounter with the Spirit. Everyone could see it. His very face told of the reality of the change. It transformed his whole life and ministry.

His testimony deeply affected both natives and missionaries. Special meetings were quickly arranged for December 8-10th. A spiritual revival resulted with up to 1,000 attending. God was present and hundreds prayed for forgiveness. New Christians stood and testified how they had come to know the Lord. Their beaming faces were sufficient testimony to their change. Even the chiefs were not afraid to confess they wished to accept Christ. One missionary said, "I never so realised the power of the Spirit to save and to work in our midst as at those meetings." Many leading Christians experienced a new power in their Christian life.

Most converts immediately wished to learn to read so they could read the Bible. Special meetings for the deepening of the spiritual life were held the following week.

The effect was felt even among the British-led Baganda army where Pilkington was the chaplain. Their captain said his presence caused the soldiers to behave in a civilised way. He preached to crowds of 1,000 - 2,000 of them several times a day. Some professed salvation whilst Muslims listened eagerly and even their chiefs came to hear.

1894 was by far the most encouraging year to date. The revival, which had started in the capital, spread rapidly throughout Uganda. It was characterised by a rapid increase in conversions, including of many hardened and notorious sinners, increased devotion to Christ, increased lay involvement in evangelism and rapid planting of churches and erection of buildings by the natives themselves.

It spread far and wide in a circle whose circumference was almost 1000 miles.

- The 20 country churches (or reading-rooms or 'synagogues') at the start of the year increased 10-fold to over 200, of which the ten largest held 4,500 and the average around 150. In these there now assembled every Sunday not less than 20,000 in the rural areas alone to hear the Gospel and not less than 4,000 on weekdays.
- The extension into the country saw a 9-fold increase in those under instruction for baptism, from 170 to 1,500.

Significantly, the key factors in this rapid extension were the Spirit and the Word.

Firstly, the Spirit. The catalyst of the awakening was Pilkington's infilling of the Spirit and emphasis on a victorious Christian life of a total commitment in the power of the Holy Spirit. For him, an essential qualification for missionary work was to be full of the Holy Ghost. He said, "I urge every man to accept the power of the Holy Ghost to change his life now. It is only by the fulness of the Spirit in our own hearts that we can really get at the hearts of the people. Let us each maintain by any means, and by all means, and at all times, the fulness of the Holy Ghost in our lives." When telling the stirring account of the Uganda revival, he emphasised the absolute necessity of personal consecration and the direct and supreme work of the Spirit of God.

And the promise of the fulness of the Spirit was as much for the native as for the European. The promise is "to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call". It is surely not without significance that one group of native Protestants were nicknamed, "the people of the Holy Ghost".

An indication of the influence on Pilkington of his remarkable experience on Koome Island may be gained from a letter to his mother just before Whit-Sunday, 1894:

"Next Sunday is Pentecost. Oh, for another Pentecost here, and at home. The people here are hungry and thirsty for the Holy Ghost, they are searching the New and (as far as they have it) the Old Testament to see if these things we tell them be so. I am looking for a wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them. From God has this thirst come in our souls here for the Holy Spirit, and He who gave the thirst is also satisfying it, and will satisfy it to the full. What we want first, middle, and last, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Christ in the heart."

The second key factor in the rapid growth was the Word. The conversions and rededications were almost invariably connected with knowledge of the Word. God put special emphasis on it as the means of the new birth and the quickening of spiritual life.

Candidates were prepared for baptism by learning to read until the Truth of God impressed itself forcibly on their mind by the daily poring over the pages of the New Testament. Pilkington said it was noticeable and deeply instructive that profession of conversion had hardly ever been made by a native who could not read.

A key role in a widespread dissemination of the knowledge of the Word was played by reading houses or "synagogues". Pilkington's plan was to erect these for the giving of instruction in the Word by native trainee evangelists under the direction of more experienced workers, in turn supervised by the missionaries. For six months the trainees were stationed in the mission field returning to the capital for six months' training. These were a leading feature of the work and the mostly Baganda evangelists played a great role in spreading the Gospel and planting churches.

Ever conscious of the importance of the Word, in anticipation of many more converts in the coming year, 1895, Pilkington asked the CMS if it was prepared to supply 100,000 New Testaments in the next 2/3 years. As one of his colleagues said, his mind was

intent on giving his beloved Baganda the Bible in their own tongue. For Pilkington, the power to read the Bible was the key to the Kingdom of God.

In 15 years, the number of baptised rose from 1,100 to 62,000.

These meetings were the precursor to the Bazukufu (the awakened) born-again fellowships still alive among elderly Anglicans in Uganda today.

Furlough in Ireland: The First Complete Luganda Bible (1895/96)

Pilkington had now introduced the Baganda to the life of the Spirit and made available to them the complete New Testament (by 1896 there were 10,000 in circulation). One more task remained if he were to leave to his adopted people a full inheritance. Work on the Old Testament had to be finished and a complete Bible published.

In November 1895, Pilkington arrived home in Ireland for his furlough. He did not return for a holiday or to relax, however.

His aim was to complete the translation of the Old Testament and to see it published. He had translated a considerable part while in Uganda with the Minor Prophets being contributed by a colleague. Pilkington finished the remainder in Ireland with the help of copious notes made before leaving Uganda, in association with Henry Wright Duta.

His sister described his diligence in completing the sacred task:

He worked systematically setting himself a task for each day ...He worked for hours standing surrounded by commentaries, the finished parts of the Bible and his notes. He translated and wrote as his sister read... He generally worked without much pause for conversation, he never would allow one to grow slack for a moment. Not only was he himself whole-hearted in whatever he undertook, but he inspired others to be so; it seemed as if half-heartedness could not exist in his presence. He worked generally for six or eight hours a day, and ... when the family was away, he reached an average of ten hours a day. When a book was translated it had to be carefully revised, sent to the printer, the proofs received back, revised, and again sent to the printer, then once more carefully looked over before the final printing.

On furlough, Pilkington testified at the Keswick convention of the work of the Spirit in his own life and that of the Uganda Church. From there he went for a few days to a Christian boys camp. He was in his element, going for bicycle rides with the boys. But even there he was revising the Uganda Bible, pressing boys into service by getting them to read to him from the English Bible, whilst he had the Luganda before him.

When not working on the translation, he was generally talking over plans for the extension of the Kingdom, especially in Uganda and neighbouring countries. In the last months of his furlough, he was constantly making plans as to how the missionaries might move on to new ground, leaving the work already established to natives. The evangelisation of the whole world was ever before him.

Return to Uganda (1897)

In October 1897, Pilkington left for Uganda, deeply satisfied at having finished the task.

In the 12 months after his return there were sold 1,100 Bibles, 4,000 New Testaments, 40,000 copies of Bible stories and 13,500 copies of Matthew's gospel. Demand was so high that at times the supply could not keep up. As soon as a new consignment arrived, all the books would be bought. They were sold as close to cost as possible, treasured by the owners and read with much zeal.

2,000 men and 400 women distributed the Scriptures as far away as Toro, Bunyoro and Eastern Congo. Often one well-worn Bible or New Testament in an ordinary person's hand was enough to facilitate the teaching and conversion of non-believers. People would gather in small groups under trees and inside churches or other buildings to hear the Word of God in the Luganda Bibles. Hundreds were prepared for baptism.

His Departure (1897)

When he arrived back in Uganda, there was unrest in Busoga. A number of fully trained and armed Sudanese Nubian mercenaries brought in by the British who were settled there had mutinied.

Pilkington accompanied his beloved Baganda soldiers as they went to quell the mutiny. But he was shot in battle and died on December 11, 1897. He was only 32.

His death was universally mourned. The Ugandan fighters wept as he was buried, as if he was one of them. Three months later was reburied with military honours in Namirembe Cathedral.

A moving testimony to Pilkington's role in the provision of the Luganda Bible came from Henry Wright Duta, his faithful companion in translation, "You see this is what makes all of us Baganda so sad. Where is another Englishman to give himself as he did to this work of translating? "

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It may seem that his death was premature. But, like John the Baptist, he had fulfilled his course. He had brought to his adopted country two precious jewels, of lasting value, the two things that had motivated and inspired him throughout his Christian life, the Word and the Spirit.

Through his untiring labours, the full Luganda Bible was now available, and through his hunger for the fulness of the Spirit, his people had experienced the supernatural dimension of Christianity in which men taste the very life of God.

Through the ministry of George Pilkington, they had tasted of the heavenly gift, been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and tasted the good word of God (Hebrews 6.4-5).

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For more information on George Pilkington, see:

http://www.archive.org/stream/pilkingtonofugandaflem00harf/pilkingtonofugandaflem00harf_djvu.txt