

Lushai Translation of Holy Writ.

[This article is an interesting postscript to the Rev. C. E. Wilson's articles on the *B.M.S. and Bible Translation*, April and July, 1940.]

I WENT out to India in 1890, and was joined by Savidge the following year. Together we reached (North) Lushai in January 1894, after sundry adventures in attempting to gain an entrance. We had picked up a certain amount of the language before actually getting into the country—especially from books which had been written by two Government officials, who had been in contact with the people during the punitive expeditions following head-hunting raids. These officials were Capt. Thomas Lewin and Dr. Brajanath Shaha. It fell to our lot, however, to reduce the language to a system which could be used by the Lushais themselves—for they had no characters of their own, nor any idea how to convey words and thoughts in writing. We used Roman characters, such as we use in English, and were able to follow more or less the system known in India as "Hunterian." This is practically phonetic—every word being spelt exactly as it is pronounced. The Lushais at first would not attempt to learn how to read and write their own language. They declared they were "monkeys," and quite incapable of mastering such a mysterious art. But after a time we persuaded a few young fellows to try, and, to their delight and ours, they proved to be most intelligent pupils. They not only learned themselves, but taught others, and before long quite a number had mastered the rudiments and were clamouring for "something to read."

We began the translation of the Scriptures in August 1895, when we had been in the Lushai country nearly two years. We commenced with Luke, Acts and John—taking them in the order given. These three portions took us two years of continuous hard work, in which we were greatly assisted by Suaka and Thangphunga—the first two Lushais who learned from us the art of reading and writing. They are still both alive. Suaka has become an influential chief, and a fine Christian character and Church leader. Thangphunga was a chief from the beginning, but he has not become an out-and-out follower of Christ.

We commenced translation with LUKE, because we thought

that that would be the easiest of the three books above-mentioned. And we left JOHN till *last*, because we thought that that would be the most difficult. In this we were greatly mistaken, for we eventually discovered that all the writings of John—his Gospel, his Epistles and his Revelation—have a simplicity and beauty of diction when rendered in the Lushai language which is quite remarkable.

The most difficult passage in the above three portions proved to be the first five verses of the Acts.

Luke, Acts and John were published in 1898 by the British and Foreign Bible Society—the first Scripture portions ever printed in the Lushai language. Since then, through the years, the whole of the New Testament gradually followed, portion by portion. But it was not until December 1922 (twenty-seven years from the time when the translation of Luke was commenced) that the New Testament was completed, and bound in one volume with consecutive paging—the whole thoroughly revised. This revision alone occupied five years of almost constant labour.

In 1928 the New Testament was followed by the PSALMS and GENESIS, and in 1932 by ISAIAH. Since then (when I retired) the British and Foreign Bible Society has printed no further portions of the Lushai Bible; but I understand that EXODUS is now being translated in South Lushai.

There is no part of my missionary career which I look back upon with such satisfaction as that in which I was privileged to take part in giving the Lushai-speaking tribes of Assam God's Word in their own beautiful language.

I have mentioned with what ease the writings of John translate into Lushai. The most *difficult*, however, are undoubtedly the writings of the great Apostle to the Gentiles. A glance at the Lushai version of his Epistle to the Ephesians (Chap. III, verses 14 to 19) will give you an idea of this, and will also show you some of the peculiarities of Lushai syntax. If we take the above passage in Lushai and write over each word its equivalent in English, we shall find that the arrangement of those English words is so extraordinary that the reading of them conveys no connected meaning whatever to the English mind. Not only have the words and phrases become inextricably mixed up, but the verses themselves have been split up into many fragments. Commencing with three words in the 14th verse, it jumps to the 17th, then to the 16th, then back to the 14th, then on to the 15th and back once more to the 14th; it then visits the 17th verse for the second time, jumps to the 19th, back for the third time to the 17th, then to the 18th and 19th, and back for the fourth time to the 17th for a single word,

before concluding with another single word from the 18th. Bewildering as this fantastic construction appears to the uninitiated, it is this very thing which gives the translation its beauty and clarity in the estimation of the Lushai hillmen, and conveys to their minds and hearts the identical message which the epistle carried to the Ephesian converts so many years ago.

Here are a couple of stories of the power exercised by the printed Word of God :

I. In a village far from the beaten track in the Lushai Hills there lived a young man named Padea. This was in the days when the Gospel message had not been heard in such out-of-the-way places. He had somehow or other picked up the recently introduced art of reading his own language, and as a copy of Luke's Gospel had found its way into his hands he became interested in the story it told. Whenever he had leisure—especially in the evening—you would have seen him with his head buried in his little book, spelling out the precious words slowly by the firelight. This he naturally did aloud, and his friends became interested too. After a time it dawned upon Padea's soul that the Jesus of whom he read was becoming "a living bright reality" to him; and before long he had become His disciple and was winning his father, brothers and neighbours to a like faith—before any missionary or evangelist visited his village preaching the Gospel. Years later Padea became an itinerant evangelist himself, and is now an ordained circuit pastor in charge of a number of flourishing churches—a man who owned his conversion under God's Holy Spirit to the simple reading of the translated Scriptures.

II. A Lushai copy of St. John's Gospel was given by one of the missionaries to a Thado-kuki man from over the border, who took it back with him to the Manipur State—a district outside the Lushai Hills. The reading of that little book eventually resulted in a number of conversions amongst the Thado-kukis, and the forming of a mission which carried the Gospel message to several other tribes over the Lushai border and won thousands for Christ.

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