

A Short History of Japanese Bible Translation

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The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the history of Japanese Bible translation for those who have no or limited knowledge about it by selecting major translation works with notes on them.

1. The Edo Era (16c to 19c)

1.1. Catholic

1.1.1. Xavier's Gospel of St. Matthew (1548)

One of the founders of Society of Jesus, Francis Xavier (SJ, 1506-1552), became a missionary to Asia. After his ministry in India and Indonesia, he came back to Malacca and met a Japanese called Yajiro there in 1547. Xavier sent Yajiro to a Catholic school and Yajiro was baptized in 1548. He continued to learn at the institution and with his help Xavier made an abridged translation of the Gospel of Matthew (『サン・マテウスのエワンゼリヨ』). This was the first Japanese Bible and it is assumed that Xavier brought it with him along with other translated documents when he landed on Japanese soil in 1549. Those translated works were lost.

1.1.2. Fernandez's Four Gospels (1552)

Juan Fernandez (SJ, 1525-1568), who accompanied Xavier to Japan, translated the four Gospels and other documents, such as the Apostle's creed, the Lord's prayer, Ave Maria, the Ten Commandments and the commentaries on those in 1552, but they were all destroyed when the church that held the only

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copy was destroyed by fire in 1563.

1.1.3. The Kyoto version of the New Testament (1612)

It is also recorded that the whole New Testament (『京都版新約聖書』) was published by a Jesuits' college in Kyoto in 1612. However, it does not exist either due to the severe control of the Christian prohibition that began in that year. The relationship between this version and Fernandes' is not known. Prior to this publishing, there were various kinds of passion stories and other documents were read in Japanese in different places, but there was no standard text. Some verses from this Kyoto version seem to be quoted in documents, such as "Japanese Catechism", "the Passion of the Lord", and "the Christian Doctrine" (『日本のカテキズモ』『御主ゼス キリシト御パッションの事』『どちりなきりしたん』) that survived the control.

1.2. Protestant

Under the severe persecution, we could not trace any further development in Bible translation in Japan for three centuries. However the wave of the World Evangelization and the Bible translation in the 18th-19th centuries spurred Japanese Bible translation abroad. We will start with Chinese Bible translation, since a few Chinese Bibles influenced Japanese translation of the Bible to a great extent.

1.2.1. Chinese Bibles

(1) Morrison Milne (1823)

J. Robert Morrison (LMS, 1814-1843) was sent by BFBS to China in 1807. He translated the Bible into Chinese in cooperation with William Milne (LMS) and published it (『神天聖書』) in 1823 in Malacca. It is noteworthy that they also had Japanese in mind as readers, because they knew that the educated class in Japan could read and write Chinese during the period. Morrison's heart for Japan was passed down to Gutzlaff who came to Loochoo and distributed copies of the Morrison-Milne's Bible.

(2) Bridgman-Culbertson (1864)

The Morrison-Milne's Bible was revised by a group of missionaries in 1852

for the New Testament and in 1854 for the Old Testament. It is called the Deligate's Version 委辦譯本. However, American missionaries could not agree with “上帝 Shangdi” as the translation of God. Thus, Elijah C. Bridgman (ABCFM) and Michael S. Culbertson (PN) translated and published 『奮新約全書』 in 1864 in Shanghai. Their translation had a great influence on Japanese translation.

1.2.2. Gutzlaff' Gospel of John (1837)

A Dutch missionary, Karl Friedrich Augustus Gutzlaff (LMS, 1803-1851) translated the Gospel of John into Japanese referring to Morrison's Chinese translation with help of some Japanese fishermen in Macao in 1837 (『約翰福音之伝』). It was published in Singapore at the ABCFM printing office with the financial support of ABS. This is the oldest Japanese Bible in existence and the translation of its John 1:1, “In the beginning there was an intelligent man”, is well known.

1.2.3. The Bettelheim's Gospels (1855)

The Loochoo Naval Mission (LNM) sent Bernard J. Bettelheim (1811-1870) to Loochoo, namely Okinawa, in 1846. Before his arrival, he learnt Japanese from Gutzlaff in Hong Kong. He had a strong desire to spread the gospel and had an amazing gift for languages. When he arrived in Loochoo, he preached the Gospel on the streets of cities, such as Naha and Shuri. He also translated the Bible into the Loochoo language under persecution. When he had to leave Loochoo, he published the Gospels of Luke and John, the Acts and the Epistle to Romans (『路可傳福音書』, 『約翰傳福音書』, 『聖差言行傳』, 『保羅寄羅馬人書』) in Hong Kong in 1855 with the financial support of LNM.

1.2.4. Summary

These Bibles, both Chinese and Japanese, were produced by zeal of the World Evangelization and were smuggled into Japan under the ban on Christianity. They would eventually be read by the educated class in Japan.

2. The Meiji Era (1868-1912)

The Japanese Edo government opened the country in 1859. Although Christianity was still prohibited, missionaries came to Japan one after another and some of them concentrated their efforts on Bible translation as preparations for Japanese evangelization. The Edo government was overthrown and came the Meiji Era.

2.1. Protestant

2.1.1. Goble's Gospel of Matthew (1871)

The first person who published the Japanese Bible within Japan was Jonathan Goble (ABF) who came to Japan in 1860. He made a colloquial translation from the Greek original and the King James Version, and published “the Gospel of Matthew” (『摩太福音書』) in secrecy in 1871 in Tokyo.

2.1.2. Hepburn-Brown's Gospels (1872)

James C. Hepburn (PN) came to Japan soon after Japan opened the country in 1859. Together with Samuel R. Brown (RCA) he translated and published the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John (『新約聖書 馬太傳』, 『新約聖書 馬可傳』, 『新約聖書 約翰傳』) in 1872. Hepburn and Brown, who had been missionaries to China and could read Chinese, attempted translation, which could be understood by people in all the social strata while keeping elegance in style. They referred to Bridgman-Culbertson's Chinese Bible, 『新約全書』(1861). There is an alphabets version, and Japanese version.

2.1.3. Meiji Version (1887)

Protestant missionaries who belonged to three mission agencies, PN (presbyterian), RCA (reformed), and ABCFM (congregational) in Japan gathered at Hepburn's residence in 1872 and decided to jointly translate the New Testament. They asked other missions to join them and formed “the New Testament Translation Committee” in 1874 and chose Brown (RCA), Hepburn (PN), Daniel C. Green (ABCFM), Robert S. Maclay (MEFB), Nathan Brown (ABF), John Piper (CMS), and W. B. Wright (SPG) as members. However, Piper and Wright soon resigned from the committee, Maclay could not help much, and Nathan Brown left the committee due to the translation of the term

“baptism.” Thus the main translators were three missionaries: Hepburn, Green and Samuel Brown. Three Japanese, Masatsuna Okuno, Takayoshi Matsuyama and Goro Takahashi, helped the missionaries respectively. Its text was the Greek Textus Receptus and KJV, and they referred to the Bridgman-Culbertson’s Chinese Bible. They completed the New Testament (『新約全書』) in 1880 and it was published by the cooperation of BFBS, ABS and SBS.

The missionaries formed “the Permanent Committee on the Translation, Revision, Publication and Preservation of the Text of the Holy Scriptures” (聖書翻譯常置委員會) in 1878 for the translation of the Old Testament. Hepburn, Philip K. Fyson (CMS), and G.H.F. Verbeck (RCA) along with Takayoshi Matsuyama, Masahisa Uemura and Kajinosuke Ibuka translated the Old Testament and published the whole Bible (『舊新約聖書』) in 1887 by the three bible societies.

The missionaries wanted the translation to be plain and easily understood by anyone since there was no Bible available for ordinary Japanese who could not understand Chinese, while Japanese helpers preferred elegance in style that was akin to Chinese. The result was a unique Japanese-Chinese mixture. The Meiji Version became the most widely-spread Japanese Bible in the Meiji Era. Its writing style considerably influenced Japanese literature and its writing style.

2.1.4. The guiding marks for rendering Chinese into Japanese Bible

The Japanese educated class of those days even considered this Japanese-Chinese mixture vulgar, not to mention the plain Japanese. Thus, the missionaries thought of a way to reach them: they put guiding reading marks to the Bridgman-Culbertson’s Chinese Bible (『訓点 聖書』). This Bible with guided marks was published from 1873 to 1888.

2.2. Catholic

The Protestant moved forward with Bible translation projects energetically, but the Catholics were slow in the area, because a great number of hidden Christians were discovered in the Nagasaki area. They hid their identity as Catholics due to the severe persecution. The Catholic leadership was preoccupied with ministry for them.

2.2.1. Steichen's Four Gospels (1897)

However, Michael Steichen (MEP) translated four gospels based on the Vulgate Latin Bible in cooperation with Goro Takahashi who helped the Meiji Version. The Gospels were published in 1895 by the Yokohama Catholic Church.

2.2.2. Raguet's New Testament (1910)

A Belgian, Emile Raguet (MEP), referring to the Greek Bible (Nestle?) with the text of the Vulgate, translated the whole New Testament (『我主イエズス・キリストの新約聖書』). His Japanese was viewed even finer than that of the Meiji Version and is still being used. Although it was translated by one individual, it had been treated as the standard Catholic Bible.

2.3. The Orthodox Church: Nicolai's New Testament (1901)

The Russian Orthodox Church sent Ioan Kasatkin Nicolai to Japan in 1861 as a chaplain for the Russian Consulate in Hakodate, Hokkaido. He studied about Japan for 7 years and then he made the first convert, Sawanobe, in 1868. Nicolai went back to Russia and came back to Japan in 1871. Nicolai started translating the Bible with a Japanese called Tsugumaro Nakai and published My Lord Jesus Christ's New Testament (『我主イエス・ハリストスノ新約』) in 1901. Its text was the Slavish Bible and the style was Chinese-like. He referred to the Greek New Testament, the King James Version and Chinese texts of the Bible. The Book of Psalms was translated, but there is no complete translation of the Old Testament.

3. Taisho Era (1912-1926): Taisho Revised Version (1917)

After publication of the Meiji Version, the Japanese language had changed rapidly, and the number of Bible scholars increased. A call for the revision grew. The Permanent Committee on the Translation, Publication and Preservation of the Text of the Holy Scriptures that translated the Meiji Version chose eight translators, four missionaries and four Japanese, in 1909 and 1910. They aimed at a Japanese style that was more colloquial but kept solemnity.

Its text was the Revised Nestle Version published by BFBS and they referred to English Revised Version. Finally “the Revised New Testament” (『改譯新約聖書』) was published in 1917 with the support of the three Bible Societies again: British, Scottish and American. This is generally called the Taisho Revised Version 『大正改譯』, since it was done in the Taisho Era. The New Testament of the present literary version of the Bible is this Taisho Revised Version.

The committee started revising the Old Testament as well, but before its completion, the Second World War ended.

4. After the War (1945~)

4.1. Protestant

4.1.1. The Colloquial Version (1955)

The post-war policy of the Ministry of Education on the national language changed the written style of Japanese dramatically. They limited the number of Chinese characters to be used, brought the writing style much closer to the spoken, and simplified the kana reading system. With this change as the background, the Colloquial Version (『聖書』口語譯) was published in 1955. The purpose of this new translation was to make such a Bible as to be easily understood by the populace, the youth in particular, who would be educated under the new language policy. Its texts were NA 19 & 21 and Kittel 3. This new translation took only three years for the NT to be completed, and 4 years and half for the OT. The reason was, first, the translators referred to the Taisho Revised New Testament that was the finest Japanese Bible translation at that time, and second, the materials produced for revising the Old Testament of the Meiji Version were available for the translators. When published, many from the educated class criticized the new translation as being too vulgar. However, this version was rapidly accepted among Japanese Protestant churches and became the standard Bible for Japanese for decades.

4.1.2. The New Revised Version (1973)

The conservative wing of the Protestant did not accept the Colloquial Version, since they thought that the version had theological biases. They translated and published their own (『聖書 新改譯』) in 1973. Its texts were Nestle 27 and Kittel 3. This Bible is often thought to be the Japanese equivalence of NIV.

4.2. Catholic

4.2.1. Barbaro's Version (1964)

Federico Barbaro (SDB) translated the Bible into colloquial Japanese based on Raguets's and 『口語譯 旧約新約 聖書』 was published by Don Bosco Inc. in 1957. It became the standard colloquial Bible for the post-war catholic.

4.2.2. Franciscan Version (1958-2001)

Studium Biblicum Franciscanum was established in Tokyo in 1957 with the primary purpose of translating the Bible from the original languages. Because the scholars of the Institute joined the translation team of the interconfessional bible (see below), their translation project was delayed. Their New Testament was completed in 1978 and the Old Testament in 2001. Its official book title is 『聖書 原文校訂による口語譯』 (The Bible: colloquial critical version based on the original languages).

4.3. Interconfessional Bible

4.3.1. Interconfessional New Testament (1978)

With the Second Vatican Council's encouragement for the interconfessional translation between the Catholic and the Protestant, many Bible Societies started the Bible translation with Catholic scholars. It also happened in Japan. Its text was the UBS 3 and BHS. This project had "the populace" in mind as readers and followed the Nida's dynamic equivalence theory faithfully. They completed the New Testament (『新約聖書 共同譯』) in 1978.

4.3.2. New Interconfessional Bible (1987)

However, in the process of this translation, the mind of the translators started to change. They became more interested in formal translation. The church

leadership was critical toward this translation too. They preferred the translation suitable for the church service. Thus, the team started a new translation with the main purpose to be used at church. This is the New Interconfessional Bible with emphasis on the formal correspondence. They also tried to express genre differences with varying degrees of success. Its text was UBS 3, BHS, the Göttingen version of the LXX for the Apocrypha and the Vulgate for the Latin Ezra. The team consisted of 46 translators, 19 editors, 11 editorial board members, and 6 Japanese stylists. Because the team had so many members and the structure of the editing process was complicated, the translation took much longer than expected. The whole Bible, including the Apocrypha (『聖書 新共同譯』), was published in 1987, and has been the most widely used Bible in Japan from that time on. It is used by the Catholic Church and Protestant churches except for the evangelicals. Japan Bible Society celebrated the 20th anniversary of the New Interconfessional Bible this year and has sold 10 million copies over the past two decades.

5. Other modern translations

There are translations other than the above. The living Bible by Word of Life, Inc. that is an evangelical publisher; the Bible published by Iwanami Publishing Company translated by a group of scholars; personal translations including Masao Sekine, Toraji Tsukamoto, Reiji Oyama, Kenzo Tagawa, Akira Izuta and others.

An interesting move in the past several years is dialect versions: the Gospel of Matthew in the Osaka (central Japan) dialect, and the Four Gospels in the Kesen (northern Japan) dialect.

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Abbreviations of Mission Agencies and Bible Societies

ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Congregational Church, USA)
ABS	American Bible Society
AMF/ABF	American Baptist Missionary Union, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society
CMS	Church Missionary Society (Church of England, Low Church)
LMS	London Missionary Society
LNMI	Loochoo Naval Mission
MEFB	Methodist Episcopal Church (North)
MEP	Paris Foreign Mission (La Société des Mission Étrangères de Paris)
PN	Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church (North)
RCA	Board of Foreign Missions of (Dutch) Reformed Church in America
SBS	Scottish Bible Society
SDB	Salesians of Don Bosco
SJ	Society of Jesus
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Church of England, High church)

<Abstract>

일본 성서 번역의 약사

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일본 성서 번역의 역사는 16세기 중반 프란시스 사비에르(Francis Xavier)에 의해 시작되었다. 기독교는 곧 일본의 지배자들에 의해 금지되었고 그 금지는 300년 이상 지속되었다. 그러나 세계 복음화와 성서 번역의 파도는 19세기 모퉁이를 돌면서 극동 지방에 도달했고 다양한 버전의 일본 성서들이 번역되어 일본으로 밀수되었다. 일본이 문호를 개방하였을 때, 선교사들이 와서 일본 지식인들의 협조 아래 번역을 시작하였다. 그 때 이래로, 개신교, 카톨릭, 그리스 정교회는 많은 버전의 일본 성경을 만들어 냈다. 현재 가장 많이 받아들여지는 번역은 개신교와 카톨릭 학자들이 함께 번역한 『신공동역 성서』이다.