

# The Story of the Translation of the Bible into Təgre (1877-1988)

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## Abstract

*The members of the Swedish Evangelical Mission who fortuitously were stationed in Eritrea left behind some memorable accomplishments in their more than a century of missionary activities. One of these was the preparation of scriptural works, including the translation of the Bible into four languages. Of these, the Təgre version of the Bible held its vision for over one hundred and eleven years and was carried out by three generations of translators. The strength of the vision, the hurdles its realization had to overcome and the amazing character of the foreign and native translators have not yet been systematically recorded in narrative form. This article attempts to remedy this lacuna.*

**Keywords:** Təgre – Swedish Evangelical Mission – Bible translation – Gäläb

## Introduction

Exactly 135 years ago (counting from 2012), a 15-year-old Təgre shepherd from the Mänsa' group in Eritrea was immersed in the Gäläb River for baptism into his newly discovered faith, by a Swedish man twenty-two years older than he. Sometime after his conversion, the young shepherd was joined by a young Təgrəñña man, two years older than himself, who came running to the Gäläb after witnessing the death of his father, grandfather and uncle in a bloody battle near the highland village of Tsä'azzäga. These two colleagues, in particular the younger, would soon form the core group of workers who laid the foundation for the literature of the Təgre language.

The work of these two colleagues continued. As the elder of them left for theological training in Sweden, the younger continued the work they had begun. They were later joined by colleagues – locals and foreigners – who helped complete their work after 12 years of continuous revision. Marvelous achievements, albeit with some disagreement, were built upon the foundations laid by the first two colleagues. The handover from these first-generation workers to their successors, which continued for 11 decades, was all about realizing a dream: to produce the Bible in Təgre.

One particularly captivating story is that of a foreign scholar who mastered the Təgre language and singlehandedly translated the Old Testament in less

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than 15 years. The vision persisted for more than a century in Eritrea, Sweden, Kenya, the US and Hong Kong, with its last torchbearer passing away in September 2011. If counted from the day of baptism of the shepherd-turned-Bible-translator, the whole process took a total of 111 years (1877–1988) or, to put it more dramatically, nearly 40,515 days.

### 1. The Inception (c. 1878-1890)

Sometime before 1883, the Rev. Bengt Peter Lundahl (1840–1885), the leader of the Ἐἢ Kullu mission station,<sup>2</sup> while he “himself continued to use Amharic

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<sup>2</sup> Ἐἢ Kullu, meaning ‘mother of all’ in Təgre, was the name of the station from which major scriptural and missionary works of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) originated. The name “Ἐἢ Kullu” is often transcribed in many European sources as Menkullu or Moncullo. Professor Adolf Kolmodin, the Director of the SEM who visited the Ἐἢ Kullu station in October 1908, called the station the ‘Mother of our East African Mission.’ Karl Johan Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha: The Roots and Development of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (1866–1935)* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2011), 274. The Rev. Nils Hylander (1861–1929), who was a pastor at the Ἐἢ Kullu station in 1890 and Gäläb in 1891–1892 and who also was sent as an evangelist and served as a pastor in Ethiopia, once described the Ἐἢ Kullu station, designed by the architect and composer Wilhelm Stenhammer (1871–1927), as ‘the most beautiful [station] on the whole Red Sea coast.’ Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 274–75, f.n. 481, 475.

Following successive and heartbreaking deaths, murders and sicknesses in the Kunama area where they had gone on an evangelical mission from 4 June 1866 until January 1870, the SEM pioneers decided to withdraw from there and came to Massawa on 26 February 1870 to recover. They then established a flourishing congregation in Massawa and built a school in 1871. In 1877, the British general and colonial administrator Charles George Gordon (1833–1885) used his own money to buy a piece of land at Ἐἢ Kullu already allotted to the SEM by Munzinger, and gave it to the SEM as a gift on New Year’s Day 1878. Here the SEM mission base was built in 1879, a place where many individuals (or their descendants) who would later have an impact on the religious, social, literary, academic and political history of Eritrea and Ethiopia grew up or met each other. Ἐἢ Kullu served as the headquarters of the SEM until 1891, when it was moved to the highland village of Tsä’azzäga, the place where the indigenous evangelistic movement had started in the 1860s.

The Ἐἢ Kullu station, the pearl of the SEM in Eritrea, was abandoned after the SEM moved to the highlands following the establishment of the Italian colony in Eritrea. The Italians wanted to purchase the base, but the SEM Board in Sweden hesitated until it finally decided to sell the station in 1913, a decision that was never implemented. In the 1930s the Italians repaired the station and used it as a hospital for their soldiers wounded in the Italo-Ethiopian War. After the war the station was again abandoned and continued to deteriorate throughout the British Military Administration of Eritrea; “in spite of the fact that the British authorities had promised to protect the property on the station, the lawless were left to plunder the station, bit by bit.” Nowadays nothing remains at the former Ἐἢ Kullu station except the graveyard in which the tombstone of the hero of the Ἐἢ Kullu station, Petr Lundahl, can be seen; his engraved name is barely legible. Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Uppsala: Offsetcenter ab, 1978), 130–48, 155–58, 161–62, 164–67, 201–3, 214–25, 273–75 etc.; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 132–57. For a brief introduction to Ἐἢ Kullu and its contribution as

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as a medium for preaching and teaching,”<sup>3</sup> had set a young Təgre shepherd named *qäshi* Dawit Amanu’el (1862–1944) the task of beginning to translate the Holy Scriptures into the latter’s native language Təgre.<sup>4</sup> Dawit was the first man from the Mänsa’ group of the Təgre to be converted to Christianity by the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), having been baptized, at the age of 15, by Lundahl in the Gäläb River on 8 July 1877.<sup>5</sup>

Dawit, described by Musa Aron as the father of the Təgre language,<sup>6</sup> began his work by translating the Gospel of Mark, with the assistance of *qäshi* (E) Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən (1860–1930). Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən, born in ‘Addi Täkkäläzzan, the home village of his mute mother ‘Ağiğa<sup>7</sup> but with paternal links to the nearby village of Šəmanəgus Tahətay, was the son of *qäshi* (O)<sup>8</sup> Gäbrä-Mädhən Täsfay (d. 1876), the head priest of Tsä‘azzäga and one of the pioneers of the indigenous evangelical movement, and the nephew of *qäshi* (O) Haylä-ab Täsfay (c. 1846–1876) who was undoubtedly the inspirational leader of the movement.<sup>9</sup> A deacon of the Orthodox *Təwähdo* Church by the age of 12, Təwäldä-Mädhən grew up under the tutelage of his father and his uncle, witnessing the fervent evangelical movement in his family. In 1874, he became a member of the evangelical congregation at Gäläb led by the memorable Finnish missionary Rev. Erik Emil Hedenström (1844–1904), who led the missionary work in the Mänsa’ region.

Following the death of his father, the martyrdom of his uncle and grandfather, as well as the destruction of Tsä‘azzäga, all in the July 1876 battle between the villages of Tsä‘azzäga and Hazzäga, Təwäldä-Mädhən fled to

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an evangelical base in Eritrea, see Wolbert Smidt, “Ĕmkullu”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2 (2005), 274–75.

<sup>3</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 176.

<sup>4</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 303. In his preface to the 1902 New Testament, however, K. G. Rodén states that the translation of the New Testament into Təgre was initiated by the Rev. E. E. Hedenström, the pioneer of the SEM mission at Gäläb, who in 1880 set Dawit Amanu’el and Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən, his students at the time, the task of starting to translate the New Testament into Təgre.

<sup>5</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 215.

<sup>6</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Rosa Holmer, *Twoldo Medben*, 1938 (based on Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən’s narrative), translated into English from the original Swedish by Gustav Arén under the title *Tewolde-Medbin Gebremedbin (1860–1930), Pastor-Educator-Linguist, a Short Biography* (Asmara, reprinted from the *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici*, No. 6/7, 1985–1986), 113–15. A copy of the English translation is with the author.

<sup>8</sup> The identifier “(O)” has been used throughout this article to distinguish native workers who had already been ordained to priesthood or pastoral services in the Orthodox *Təwähdo* Church before they joined the Eritrean Evangelical Church. Similarly, the identifier “(E)” is used to distinguish native workers who had already been ordained to priesthood or pastoral services by the Swedish or Eritrean Evangelical/Lutheran Churches.

<sup>9</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 172–82.

Gäläb where he was quickly befriended by Dawit Amanu’el. In 1877 he headed to ‘Aylät, a place of hot springs some 50 km southwest of Massawa where the SEM evangelists had, by the mid-1870s, established a clinic and a school working with the persecuted indigenous evangelical pioneers. At ‘Aylät, he served as an evangelist.<sup>10</sup>

In 1883, he was sent to Sweden for theological training. Upon his return to Eritrea in 1887, he went to Hørggiggo, a village 10 km south of Ĕm Kullu where, stationed at the house of the Rev. Karl Gustav (Gustaf) Rodén (1860–1943), he worked as an evangelist (replacing the elder *qäshi* (O) Sälomon ‘Atsqu) and a translator of the Holy Scripture into Təgre. In December 1889, he went with his wife Amätä-Tsəyon (aka Amätu) – the daughter of another indigenous evangelical pioneer *qäshi* (O) Zär’ä-Tsəyon Muse – to Gäläb to assist Dawit Amanu’el and others in the Təgre translation work.

In 1904, Təwäldä-Mädhən was recruited to work on the Təgrəñña New Testament translation by the man who was the driving force of the early translation work in Eritrea, Dr. Karl Winqvist (1847–1909).<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly the towering figure of the work, Təwäldä-Mädhən had an extraordinary linguistic gift: he mastered Təgrəñña, Təgre, Gə’əz, Amharic, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, and Swedish, and could tackle texts in English, German, Greek and Latin!<sup>12</sup> He was ordained in Asmära by Professor Adolf Kolmodin (1855–1928), father of Professor Johannes Axel Kolmodin (1884–1933), the prominent Swedish Orientalist and advisor to Emperor Haylä-Səlasse,<sup>13</sup> on 1 January 1909, making him the first native evangelical worker to be ordained on the African continent.<sup>14</sup>

Back to the early meeting between Təwäldä-Mädhən and Dawit in Gäläb. Their first work, the translation of the Gospel of Mark into Təgre,<sup>15</sup> was

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<sup>10</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Rosa Holmer, *Twoldo Medben*, 117–36, 141–42.

<sup>12</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 303. Dr. Winqvist said that Təwäldä-Mädhən had a ‘keen ear and a fine feeling for language’.

<sup>13</sup> Professor Johannes Kolmodin is probably better known in Eritrea for his illustrious book, *Zanta Hazqägan Tsä’azqägan* (Kolmodin 1912, 1914, 1915), a collection of the oral traditions of the Hamasen region in the Eritrean highlands. Witold Witakowski, “Kolmodin, Johannes Axel”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3 (2007), 415–16.

<sup>14</sup> Sophia Dege – Peter Unseth, “Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4 (2010), 877; Rosa Holmer, *Twoldo Medben*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Voigt holds that the Gospel of Mark in Təgre was the work of Dawit Amanu’el and Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən. Rainer Voigt, “Bible translation into Təgre”, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1 (2003), 577. This is possibly due to the fact that Təwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən “assisted” Dawit Amanu’el when the latter was assigned by Lundahl to translate the Gospel of Mark into Təgre. Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 303; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 176, 226.

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printed in 1889 at the printing press in Əm Kullu, in an initial print run of 500 copies.<sup>16</sup>

Following their work on the Gospel of Mark in Təgre, the two young colleagues continued translating the New Testament, drawing on versions of the Bible in Gəʼəz, Amharic and Swedish.<sup>17</sup> By the time Təwäldä-Mädhən left in 1883 for further training at the Johannelund Missionary Training Institute in Stockholm, work on their New Testament translation had progressed to the middle of the Gospel of John.<sup>18</sup> After Təwäldä-Mädhən left, Dawit continued the work alone until Təwäldä-Mädhən returned in 1887 and soon joined him in completing the work. In the meantime, Təwäldä-Mädhən had prepared a Təgre spelling and reading book (reader) which was printed (like the Gospel of Mark) in 1889 at the printing press in Əm Kullu. This publication was the first book printed in the Təgre language.<sup>19</sup> The translation of the New Testament was completed in May 1890<sup>20</sup> under the supervision of Dr. Winqvist and the first copies were printed in 1892.

The fruits of Dawit's and Təwäldä-Mädhən's translation labors motivated Dr. Karl Winqvist to encourage Dawit to continue producing more Təgre works. Dawit, the man who can rightfully take the credit for pioneering Təgre literature, then produced a grammar book and a dictionary of 8000 words. He also collected a great number of heroic ballads, dirges, epigrams, songs, stories, fables, proverbs<sup>21</sup> and laws of the Təgre.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 356, f.n. 223.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 303. Mädhən

<sup>18</sup> Təwäldä-Mädhən also prepared the first reader and spelling book in Təgre, *Ktab Fidel Weqran*, which was printed along with Dawit's Gospel of Mark in 1889. Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 356; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 226. However, Bereket attributes the authorship of this book, later improved and reprinted as *Ktab Agazot Weqran* by Musa Aron in 1957, both to Təwäldä-Mädhən and Dawit. Dessale Bereket. "Təgre Language: Strong Base for a Bright Future (Part I)." Nov 18, 2009, [http://www.shaebia.org/artman/publish/printer\\_6005.shtml](http://www.shaebia.org/artman/publish/printer_6005.shtml) (accessed 22 March 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Dege – Unseth, "Tewelde Medhin Gebremedhn", 877; Rosa Holmer, *Tnoldo Medben*, 129.

<sup>20</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 303, 356. Musa Aron writes that the translation was completed in 1889 in Əm Kullu. Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Arén, *ibid*, 303, 356. These collections were systematized by Dr. Karl Winqvist and given to Professor Enno Littmann who included them in his *Publications of the Princeton Expedition to Abyssinia*, 1910–15. Although we cannot be sure of their authorship, a *Bible Story* and a *Catechism* into Təgre were printed in 1895. Əmbayä Habtä-ʼƏgzi, 'əyo Mətrəgvam qədusat Təḥufat (translated: 'The Work of Translating Scriptures'), *Mäl'əkti Sälam*, a special edition on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the messengers of the Swedish evangelical Mission into Eritrea, March 1966, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Arén, *ibid*, 353. The legendary Rev. K. G. Rodén, who was involved in the 12-year-long revision of Dawit's translation of the New Testament and later single-handedly translated the Old Testament into Təgre, prepared and published, in 1913, the *kə'l'e Mänsa'* aka *fəṭṭh Mähari*, one of the customary laws of the Təgre (Rodén 1913a). The then-governor of

## 2. Installing a Printing Press: An Important Springboard for Scores of Literary Works

The visionary leader Lundahl had long planned to encourage the production of indigenous literature and generate employment. He realized from the outset that his literary production goals could not succeed if his Ām Kullu Mission Station did not own a printing press of its own. During his stay in Europe in 1883 he bought a small printing press and recruited a qualified printer. Manually operated and using standard large and small Amharic type, the press, after unforeseen delivery delays, began production in April 1885. It was replaced in 1888 by a larger machine. The first book to be produced by the Ām Kullu press was 'Onāsimos Nāsib's *Galata Waaqayyoo Gofta Maccaa* (translated *Praise Be to God, the Lord of the Multitudes*), a small book of 100 hymns published in 1886.<sup>23</sup>

Although Lundahl's printing press was "more active and influential in many respects," the first printing press in Eritrea had actually been introduced by the Catholic mission in 1863 in Massawa.<sup>24</sup> It was installed by the Italian Lazarist missionary Monsignor Lorenzo Biancheri who succeeded the pioneer of Catholic evangelism in Eritrea and Tigray as well as Ethiopia as a whole, Monsignor Giustino de Jacobis (1800–1860), known locally as *Abunä Ya'əqob*. Biancheri visited Italy and France in 1862, but "the only positive result of his visit was the gift of a printing press with Ethiopian characters, which he

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Eritrea, Ferdinando Martini, subsidized the publication of the *ḵāḵ Māhari*, contributing 1,000 Lire for its printing. The document was also translated into Italian under the title *Le Tribu dei Mensa* (Rodén 1913b) with the assistance of an Italian named Ilario Capomazza. During the visit to Sweden of the Italian royal couple, Rodén personally presented a copy of the Italian version of his book to the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III on June 6, 1913 (Sweden's National Day) in a ceremony in Stockholm. Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 225–26, 234. The author has a copy of the Təgre version of Rodén's work in his possession.

<sup>23</sup> Arén, *ibid*, 301–2; Mekuria Bulcha, 'Onesimos Nasib's Pioneering Contributions to Oromo Writing', *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 4(1): 36-59 (1995), 40; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 176.

As to the Oromo hymn book recorded as the first book published by the printing press at Ām Kullu, Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin have a different story to tell. First, they mention that the book was not solely the product of the labor of Onesimos Nāsib, but the "fruit of the joint efforts of Lundahl and Onesimos"; and second, that the year 1886 given for the publication of the book corresponds to the Julian calendar and equates to *c.* 1894–95 AD. See the description for the picture of the book in Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 177.

<sup>24</sup> Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The Oral and the Written (1890-1991)* (Leiden: Universitet Leiden, 1999), 69.

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installed in Massawa...”<sup>25</sup> This press, called Imprimerie Catholique and the first of its kind in East Africa, was transferred in 1879 to Kärän,<sup>26</sup> the center of the Catholic mission to the Bogos area of Eritrea, and finally to Asmära in 1912.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting at this juncture that historians agree that the first book printed in Eritrea was a 48-page Təgrəñña catechism, possibly translated from an Italian version,<sup>28</sup> produced by De Jacobis and Biancheri on the Massawa printing press and published in 1867.

In 1891, the SEM established itself in Asmära at the boundary between the largely indigenous district of Asmära the city and its southerly Italian quarters. The missionary in charge of the Asmära station was the Rev. Jonas Jwarson (Iwarson) (1867–1947). One of the most important plans for the Asmära mission was to make it a center of printing. In 1895, Nils Karlsson (b. 1851), who worked as a carpenter in Ām Kullu (1889), Bäläza (1890–1891) and Asmära (1902–1910), established a now-defunct printing house in Asmära, to which the physical printing press was transferred from Ām Kullu.<sup>29</sup>

Lundström and Gebremedhin were in no doubt about the pivotal functions of the press:

*One of the most important mission projects in Asmara was the printing press. In the early years of the Eighteen-nineties, the mission was engaged in writing and printing*

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<sup>25</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 354–56. Its first productions included an Amharic catechism (1864) and a subsequent Təgrəñña catechism (1867). Richard Pankhurst, “Printing”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4 (2010), 217.

<sup>26</sup> Pankhurst, however, states that the Kärän printing press was established by French Lazarists; hence, the press at Kärän may not be the Massawa printing press of 1863. Richard Pankhurst, “Printing”, in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4 (2010), 218. It may also be noted here that the press that was brought by bishop Biancheri went out of use a few years after his death. Denis Nosnitsin, “Early prints in Ethiopia and Eritrea”, in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 3 (2007), 217. Hence, the machine transferred to Kärän in 1879 could have been a replacement for the press in Massawa.

<sup>27</sup> Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea*, 69. Richard Pankhurst, however, states that the Kärän-based printing press was moved to the Catholic Mission in Asmära in 1900. He adds that the first secular printing press was established in 1885 in Massawa under the name *Tipografia Militare Massawa* and that the first commercial printing press, the *Tipografia e Libreria Italiana*, was founded in Massawa in 1890 by A. Micheli & Company, followed by the *Corriere Eritreo* printing press in 1891 in Massawa. The still extant and famous Franciscan Printing Press was established in 1912 in Asmära. Pankhurst, “Printing”, op. cit., 218.

<sup>28</sup> It has long been thought that the 131-page-long Amharic version of that catechism (printed in 1850, though it cannot be ascertained whether this year is according to the Ethiopian or Gregorian calendar) was the first document to be printed in Eritrea. See, for instance, Denis Nosnitsin, “Early prints in Ethiopia and Eritrea”, 217; Pankhurst, “Printing”, op. cit., 217. The title page of the Amharic version, however, which the author saw at the Pavoni Social Center in Asmära, indicates that it was printed in Rome, not in Massawa.

<sup>29</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, op. cit., 319, 475; Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea*, 69.

*primers for basic education. The translation and printing of Bible texts and hymn books in Tigré, Tigrinya and Kunama was a further development of this task.*

In 1906, Enno Littmann wrote:

*Asmara is at present the largest and most important station. Here the mission press is established in which many books are printed in several different East-African languages: Ethiopic, Ambaric, Tigriniña, Kunama, Galla, and even Suabeli... From the mere scholarly standpoint, the work of the missionaries in studying these languages and creating written literatures where formerly there were none, is of the greatest value and importance...<sup>30</sup>*

### **Twelve-Year Revision and Final Printing of the New Testament (1890–1902)**

After *qäshi* (E) Dawit finished translating the New Testament in 1890, a committee of four (Dawit Amanu'el, Täwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən, Karl Winqvist and K. G. Rodén) was established to review Dawit's translation. *Mämbär* (Teacher) Yəšəḥaq *Hemmed* (according to Arén) / Yəšəḥaq *Ḥaməd* (according to Musa Aron) of Ḥabab (b. 1866) – the first in-patient of the clinic at Ām Kullu –<sup>31</sup> served as the committee's secretary. The committee, predominantly led by Rodén,<sup>32</sup> reviewed the translation with a focus on the Greek original and with reference to Gə'əz and English versions.

One of the most contentious issues during the revision of the New Testament concerned the choice between the first and fourth orders of the Gə'əz syllabary, called *gə'əz* (ገላዝ) and *rabə'* (ራባእ) respectively, for the distinct vowels [a] and [ā]. Rodén stubbornly insisted on use of the *gə'əz*, whereas others, particularly the local staff, preferred use of the *rabə'*.<sup>33</sup> Rodén, described as “a man of strict discipline and an indomitable will” but also as a person who

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<sup>30</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*, 302.

<sup>31</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 335–26.

<sup>32</sup> Musa Aron confirms: “Nevertheless, it looks that Rodén was more involved in the revision”. Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> In recording the reservations of the local staff regarding Rodén's obduracy, Arén writes:

“... the Ethiopian members of the revision committee questioned Rodén's ‘discovery of the correct sentence structure’ and his ‘bold exchange of *rabe*, the fourth alphabet, for *ge'ez*, the first vowel’.” With Rodén being unwilling to accommodate their comments, “Tewolde-Medhin expressed hope that most readers would nevertheless grasp the meaning of the text.” Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357.

Nearly three decades after the printing of the 1902 Təgre Testament, the second edition of the Təgre New Testament appeared in 1931, a work mainly spearheaded by Rodén. At this time, however, Rodén, possibly also as a result of his bitter arguments with Sundström over many years on this very issue, seemed to have changed his mind and the 1931 version used *ge'ez* for the short ‘a’ sound and *rabə'* for the long ‘ā’ sound.” Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357 (also f.n. 227).



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seemed “to have too strong a tendency to wish to dominate,”<sup>34</sup> “was not prone to yield [in matters of opinion generally and] on this matter in particular and the printing of the New Testament [whose revision was completed in 1900] was delayed for two years when his views finally prevailed.”<sup>35</sup> During a missionary conference held in Bäläza in October 1900, Rodén requested a change in the spelling rules proposed by the local staff. The conference, noting the disagreement between Rodén and the other group noted:

*As brother Rodén did not want to yield in any way, the conference cannot take the responsibility for opposing his wishes. The conference wishes that he be allowed to follow his opinion, even if this is in conflict with the rules laid down by the Board [...], as the indigenous teachers have asked for a definite answer in order not to delay the printing of the NT unduly.*<sup>36</sup>

Rodén’s obstinacy in the matter of spelling and language forms was to trigger further subsequent conflict with another brilliant scholar of Təgre languages, Dr. Gustaf Richard Sundström (1869–1919). In any case, following 12 years of labor, an almost new translation of the Təgre New Testament was printed in August 1902 at the SEM Press in Asmāra.

### Rodén and Sundström: Rivals in Style, Equals in Taking Credit

The history of Bible translation endeavors in Eritrea (Oromo, Kunama, Təgrəñña and Təgre) reveals a tendency for foreign missionaries to take credit for the work. This characteristic is nowhere more evident than in the case of the 1902 Təgre Bible, a translation credited to Rodén who, it is claimed, was “assisted” by the indigenous scholars Tāwäldä-Mādhən, Dawit and others!<sup>37</sup> It is somewhat surprising that – despite the multiple records attesting to the fact that Dawit Amanu’el almost singlehandedly prepared the draft translation, that Tāwäldä-Mādhən played a significant role in the initial and final stages of preparing the draft translation, and that a committee of Təgre experts, Rodén included, worked for 12 years together – still:

*Characteristically enough, it was a missionary [Rodén] who was given the credit for the new translation; the Tigré New Testament of 1902 was officially attributed to Rodén. Whether this was fair or not may be gathered from Tenwolde-Medhin’s remark that the Ethiopian members of the revision committee questioned Rodén’s*

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<sup>34</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 233.

<sup>35</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*; Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357.

<sup>36</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*, 229–30. However, “Professor Enno Littmann decided to use the fourth vowel of the Ethiopic alphabet whenever the vowel *a* came at the end of the word” and “[t]his was the conviction of Richard Sundström . . .”

<sup>37</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*, 226.

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*'discovery of the correct sentence structure' and his 'bold exchange of rabe, the fourth alphabet, for ge'ez, the first vowel.' Tewolde-Medhin expressed his hope that most readers would nevertheless grasp the meaning of the text...<sup>38</sup>*

The title page of the 1902 Təgre Bible, written in Italian, reads:

NUOVO TESTAMENTO IN TIGRÉ  
Tradotto dal Greco basandosi specialmente  
sull'ultima versione Inglese ed anche Etiopica  
da  
Carlo Gustavo Rodén  
Coll' aiuto dei Maestri indegeni  
Tworldo Medhen, Davide Emanuele ed altri.<sup>39</sup>

Ullendorff, though not entirely accurate as to the real authorship of the translation of the 1909 Təgrəñña New Testament,<sup>40</sup> was nevertheless right about the real authorship of the 1902 Təgre New Testament:

*In 1902 the entire New Testament in Tigre was printed at the [SEM] Press in Asmara. It was the work of the same two indigenous scholars [Dawit Amanu'el and Täwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən], now working under the guidance of K. G. Roden.<sup>41</sup>*

Later, we will see that Sundström prepared translations of the Book of Psalms and Isaiah in Təgre, printed at the SEM Printing Press in Asmära in 1925, six years after Sundström's death. And we will see that, although Sundström was helped in the preparation of these two translations by two prominent native evangelical workers, *qäshbi* (E) Yohannəs 'Emiləyos Musa (d. 1952) and *mämbər* 'Uq̄bazgi Mändal, Sundström once again is credited with sole authorship of the translation. In the words of Ullendorff:

*In both [Psalms and Isaiah], the Revd. G. R. Sundström is stated to be the translator; the names of his indigenous assistants are not indicated.<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357.

<sup>39</sup> Probably misled by a reference to this title page, Voigt states that the entire Təgre New Testament "was translated and edited by Karl Gustav Roden with the help of Täwäldä Mädhən and Dawit Amanu'el". Rainer Voigt, "Bible translation into Təgre", in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1 (2003), 577.

<sup>40</sup> Ullendorff held that the 1909 version was prepared in a collaboration between Dr. Winqvist and *Haläqa* Täwäldä-Mädhən Gäbru, without mentioning the pillar of the 1909 version, *qäshbi* (E) Täwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən. Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible: The Schweich Lectures*, (Oxford: British Academy, 1968), 71.

<sup>41</sup> Ullendorff, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

### **Rodén and Sundström Proceed despite their Disagreement (–1943)**

The entire saga of the production of the Bible and other literary works in Təgre was overshadowed by the bitter dispute between Rodén and Sundström on spelling and language forms in Təgre. Sundström, a graduate in theology and medicine, arrived with his wife in Gäläb in 1898 and soon thereafter he “studied language, culture and traditional beliefs among the Təgre speaking people. With his keen sense for language, he composed hymns and started on the translation of some books of the Old Testament.”<sup>43</sup> Lundström and Gebremedhin have recorded the dispute between the two men on the Təgre language. I have chosen not to paraphrase the text, since it wonderfully tells the story of the conflict between these two linguistic giants:

“Already in 1903 serious disagreements had arisen between Rodén and Sundström on linguistic issues. Their conflict was no longer only a question of different views on linguistic questions. Both were people of strong convictions but they were also men of different temperaments. Rodén was [9 years] older and had served for a considerably longer period. He was a man of strict discipline and an indomitable will. Sundström, on the other hand, was a man with artistic and imaginative turn of mind. The conflict between the two giants was so serious that in October 1903 a missionary conference was called to settle the dispute between them. A summary of the long statement of the measures taken by the conference reads:

*By nature both of them have difficulty in subordinating themselves to each other. Rodén appears to have too strong a tendency to wish to dominate. Sundström is closed in and tends to go his way, without giving enough consideration to his coworkers. And as both of them have independent characters, it is rather understandable that discord has arisen between them. We therefore feel that, in the future, they should be assigned to different places in order that their capabilities may be used to the full and their good qualities allowed to come to the fore.*

Both were urged to confess their shortcomings and ask one another for forgiveness. They did so. For various reasons, the question of their placement could not be resolved until 1913, when the Sundströms moved from Geleb [sic!] to Keren... Prior to the annual conference of missionaries in Eritrea in 1913, a meeting was held on August 27 and 28 of the same year to discuss the placement of Rodén and Sundström. Two alternatives were suggested: The first was to place Rodén in Geleb, where he would be in charge of the station and where he would have some of his material published. Sundström would take up work in Keren and be in charge of the production of literature. The other proposal called for the placement of Rodén in Keren, where he would be

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<sup>43</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisba*, 233.

in charge of the production and publication of literature, while Sundström would be in charge of the Geleb station, where he would be engaged in medical services and the production of literature. It was resolved that the final decision on this matter be left to the Mission Board in Sweden. At the annual conference held in November the same year it was disclosed that the Board had decided that Rodén would be stationed in Geleb and Sundström in Keren. However, no love was lost between the two. Sundström was not prepared to print any material that followed Rodén's system of spelling and Rodén, for his part was opposed to having even some of Sundström's equipment stored in Geleb. *Literature work in Tigré seemed to have suffered from a complete breakdown.* However, at the annual conference in Addi Ugri on October 1–6, 1914, Rodén and Sundström reported that they had come to an agreement on the spelling of Təgre words. The disagreement between Rodén and Sundström had, however, a negative impact also on the Geleb congregation, with divisions among its members [*emphasis added*].<sup>44</sup>

Undeterred by his linguistic disagreement with Rodén, however, the studious Sundström, who was greatly captivated by his love for the Təgre language, produced – among other works – translations of the Book of Psalms and Isaiah into Təgre, which were printed in 1925 in Asmära at the SEM Printing Press.<sup>45</sup> Two prominent native evangelical workers from the Kärän area in Eritrea, *qäshi* (E) Yohannəs 'Emiləyos Musa and *māmbər* 'Uqbazgi Mändal, both from the Bəlin ethnic group, assisted Sundström in his translation work. Sundström's Psalms was reprinted in 1931.<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Sundström, the first and foremost doctor in the Mänsa' district, also composed nearly 200 hymns in Təgre, translated some Old Testament books into Təgre and prepared a collection of sermons and devotions. By the time he died of cancer on 16 June 1919, he had prepared a Təgre grammar and a translation of the Books of Isaiah, Genesis and Exodus into Təgre.<sup>47</sup> He also collected 360, and Dawit Amanu'el presumably another 195, of Professor Enno Littmann's 717 Təgre poems. Arén adds:

*With due permission from the colonial government, though with little means, he [Sundström] undertook the first archaeological excavation of Adulis, the famous port and commercial center of the Aksumite kingdom, and made some important discoveries which aroused such great interest that the Italian authorities ordered their experts to take over. Sundström's medical and ethnographic knowledge came to the fore in some articles on popular medicine and the treatment of illnesses in Mensa.*

<sup>44</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*, 233–35.

<sup>45</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 11; Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357–58.

<sup>46</sup> Voigt, “Bible translation into Təgre”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, 577.

<sup>47</sup> Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 72 (see also f.n. I).

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*He also gathered a large collection of Tigré texts: poems, proverbs, riddles, legends and historical traditions.*<sup>48</sup>

Similarly undeterred by his linguistic disagreement with Sundström, the indefatigable Rodén also started in on a draft translation of the Old Testament sometime in the late 1920s in Gäläb and took the work with him to Uppsala. Omitting Psalms and Isaiah, which were printed in 1925, and following the grammatical structure of the 1931 version of the Təgre New Testament, Rodén single-handedly completed a translation of the whole of the Old Testament in 1943 – i.e. at the age of 83 – which he then “copied in his own handwriting in 20 stout, well-bound manuscript volumes.”<sup>49</sup> What determination!

In lauding Rodén’s devotion and his incredible mastery of the Təgre language *qäshi* (E) Musa writes:

*It is remarkable that a single person, alone, away from the Tigré Area could do so much in matters of Bible translation. But Roden, though a Swede, had acquired Tigré in deeper sense. During his life time, he might have used more Tigré than Swedish. The theory that any foreigner never masters a foreign language as well as his own even if he reaches the highest peak of knowledge of a learned language is not completely true in the case of Rodén in Tigré. I would like to point out that Rodén and Tigré have almost become synonym as the years went by. Rodén is not only a Bible translator but the author and translator in Tigré of several text books, religious books and [h]istory books. Most of the existing books in Tigré are credited to him.*<sup>50</sup>

Musa adds: “Since [Rodén] had to use pen, ink and strong paper for his manuscript the whole material was prepared in a single set. There was only one copy of this manuscript! . . . Shortly after, Rodén died leaving behind his valuable manuscript.”<sup>51</sup> The remarkable story of the survival of this manuscript from near destruction and how it reflected on the successful completion of the production of the Təgre Bible is a narrative of its own, which will be covered in the succeeding sections.

### The Təgre New Testament of 1931

Before or at about the time he started translating the Old Testament, Rodén had already decided to undertake further revision of the 1902 New Testament and, assisted in the preparation of the text by native Təgre colleagues and two

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<sup>48</sup> Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 358 (and f.n. 230 and 233). More on Sundström at Bernhard Lindahl, “Sundström, Gustaf Richard”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4 (2010), 767.

<sup>49</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigré Language*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

foreigners – the Rev. Axel Jonsson<sup>52</sup> (1890–1959) and Miss Amanda Haglund –<sup>53</sup> he completed the revision in Uppsala sometime around the end of 1928.<sup>54</sup> Rodén and Jonsson “had made use of seven European and three Semitic translations and *the spelling had been made to conform to Sundström’s views on the subject [emphasis added]*.”<sup>55</sup>

Proofread and its printing overseen by *qäshi* (E) Yosef Hämäd (1881–1966),<sup>56</sup> the second edition of the New Testament was published at the SEM Press in Asmära by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1931 – when one of the two workers who would later complete the production of the Təgre Bible, *qäshi* (E) *mämbär* Musa Aron, was only a year old.<sup>57</sup> The native workers who assisted Rodén with the revision were: *Mämbär* T'imotewos Fayd (Yohannäs) (1879–1957) from Mänsa' bet Šaḥəqän, *mämbär* 'Al'azar Hädad (1871–1964) from Mänsa' bet Abrähä, *mämbär* Yəšaḥq Hemmed [Ḥamd] from the Northern Ḥabab region, *mämbär* Samu'el 'Etəman (1881–1940) from the Southern Ḥabab region and *qäshi* (E) Yosef Hämäd from the 'Asawərta people.

### Complete Revision and Production of the Entire Təgre Bible (1978–88)

This section is mainly based on the late *qäshi* (E) Musa's typewritten memoir of his contribution to the final phase of the translation work and from long personal interviews with him and his wife conducted by the author and his colleagues in 2007.

#### *a. Justifications for Producing the Whole Bible in Təgre*

As the years progressed, the need for the publication of a complete Təgre Bible became increasingly pressing. Through his analysis of the historical, linguistic and demographic realities of the Təgre people and language, *qäshi* (E) Musa, who descends from the Təgre of the Saḥl region in Eritrea, defended the need, in the late 1970s, for the production of a Təgre Bible by responding to a number of typical questions:

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<sup>52</sup> A pastor in Gäläb from 1919 to 1926; he assisted Rodén also in the translation of the Old Testament from 1920 to 1932, and was a mission secretary of the SEM at its headquarters from 1950 till his retirement. Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 475.

<sup>53</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *ibid*, 318; Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 318.

<sup>56</sup> Father-in-law of *qäshi* (E) *mämbär* Musa Aron.

<sup>57</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 11–12.

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1. *Is it worthwhile printing the whole Bible in Təgre for a minority of Təgre-speaking Evangelical Christians?*
2. *Can Təgre-speaking Christians not use the Təgrāñña Bible?*
3. *Was Təgre itself developing or losing ground to Arabic?*<sup>58</sup>

### *b. The Decision Is Made and the Workers Are Selected*

Finally in 1978 the SEM and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (ECE, now the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Eritrea), with the approval of the Bible Society of Ethiopia, decided that “a complete revision of the existing New Testament [of 1931] and Old Testament manuscripts and necessary retranslation work of the Təgre Bible be carried on.” The SEM assumed financial responsibility for the project along with the Church of Swedish Mission.<sup>59</sup> Rev. Axel Berglund (1912–2005), a veteran missionary who worked among the Təgre people in Gäläb and Kārān as well as in Mändäfāra, well-versed in Təgre, and Musa Aron, then Secretary General of the ECE,<sup>60</sup> were entrusted with this task.

Musa and Berglund had known each other since at least 1945. When Berglund was sent for pastoral work to Gäläb sometime towards the end of 1945, Musa, then 15 years old, and 18 years younger than Berglund, was selected to go to Gäläb and teach Berglund Təgre.<sup>61</sup> They would meet again thirty-three years later, when they were commissioned to produce the complete Təgre Bible.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 15–18.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Briefly, the history of the establishment of the ECE is as follows. The SEM Mission Secretary Nils Dahlberg had, during his 1920 visit to the SEM mission in India, proposed the establishment of a local church in India. He then put forward a proposal for a church constitution to the India Field Conference and the SEM Board in Sweden. After his proposal was approved on 09 February 1923, he came to Eritrea with fresh experience of establishing a local church. As soon as he arrived in Eritrea, just before Easter 1925, he rekindled the idea of establishing a local church, a suggestion made by his predecessor Professor Adolf Kolmodin during his visit to Eritrea 17 years earlier. A committee comprising local and foreign workers was then established to draft the constitution. Prominent members of the drafting committee included the Rev. Jonas Iwarson, chairman of the committee, the Pastor Anders Svensson, *qäshi* (E) Gərma-Tsəyon Gäbrä, Dr. Nicola De Pertis, *qäshi* (E) (then *māmbər*) Ĕmbayä Habtä-’Ĕgzi’ (then aged 22), Pastor Mikael Holmer and *qäshi* (O) Zär’ä-Tsəyon Muse. The ECE was then established effectively as of 26 September 1926 in Asmära, with the holding of its First Synodical meeting. The Rev. Jonas Iwarson was elected as the first President of the ECE and *qäshi* (E) Tāwäldä-Mädhən Gäbrä-Mädhən was elected as his Vice-President. Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, *Kenisha*, 393–96.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with *qäshi* (E) *māmbər* Musa Aron and *Wäyṣärö* Rəgbu Yosef by the author, Märhatənsae Gäbrämaryam and Sälomon Amanuel, Asmära, 26 July 2011.

c. *The Work Begins (October 1978)*

It was decided that the ideal place to perform the task was in Nairobi, at the headquarters of the Regional Office for Africa of the United Bible Societies (UBS). Initially, it was hoped that the project would take three years, but it actually continued for ten arduous years. As part of their preparation, Musa and Berglund were given translation training organized by the UBS in Nairobi, following which the two colleagues set up their office with the assistance of UBS's translation consultants.<sup>62</sup> The Təgre scriptural books available for reference and to be used as guides were:

1. *The 1931 Təgre New Testament;*
2. *Sundström's 1925 printings of Psalms and Isaiah; and*
3. *Rodén's draft translation of the Old Testament.*<sup>63</sup>

When they studied these three reference works, Musa and Berglund found out that:

1. *They were "somenhat a [literal] translation";*
2. *The Təgre used in these books was "good but needed a lot of updating to raise it to a present day Təgre which could be accepted and understood by most Təgre speakers";*
3. *The books contained some very long sentences that needed to be made concise and divided into shorter sentences;*
4. *In the text of the Təgre Bible to be produced, "verbs, according to grammatical structure of Təgre, should always conclude a complete sentence"; and*
5. *According to the modern translation technique recommended by the UBS, the final product must "reflect the principles of dynamic equivalence translation emphasizing clarity, closeness and naturalness"<sup>64</sup> wherever possible.*<sup>65</sup>

It goes without saying that Musa and Berglund referred to Bibles printed in other languages. Both could speak and write in Təgre, Təgrəñña, English<sup>66</sup> and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 18–19.

<sup>63</sup> Musa Aron, *ibid*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> With regard to the meticulousness in the selection of the right words during their review and retranslation work, *qäshi* (E) *māmbər* Musa, in his interview with the author and his colleagues on 23 June 2007, described, by way of example, the care that he and his fellow scholars took in identifying the proper term for a raised structure of land. For instance, when in Matthew 8:1 it reads "when [Jesus] was come down from the mountain," what should be the most appropriate term to translate the word "mountain"? For this, they needed to know, if possible, the geography of the particular area in Palestine where the event described in Matthew Chapter 8 had occurred. They wanted the height of the "mountain" so as to use the most appropriate Təgre word corresponding to the topographical feature.

<sup>65</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 19.



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Italian. On top of these, Musa had a working knowledge of Amharic and Gə'əz and Berglund could consult books in Swedish, German and Greek. Between them, therefore, they were armored with knowledge of nine languages to bring to their work.<sup>67</sup> To establish the linguistic patterns and rules for their translation, they took the following approach:

*Linguistically it was necessary to consult any Tigre book published by the [SEM] and the [ECE] during the past 100 years in order to establish a uniform grammatical and spelling system of the language. In principle the agreement of Rodén and Sundström in matters of Tigre spelling was used as a basis. The principle of using the first form of the alphabet [gə'əz] for short vowels and the fourth form [rabə'] for long vowels was [to be] strictly followed.<sup>68</sup> Punctuation followed the pattern used in all Tigre or Tigrigna books published by the [SEM] and later by the [ECE].<sup>69</sup>*

With these preparations, translation rules and Təgre writing styles at hand, Musa and Berglund started the work in October 1978 “following a chronological order of the books of the Bible.”<sup>70</sup> Initially, they believed that the entire project would require nearly three years to complete, but as they embarked on the work, “they found out that the material did not only need simple revision, but retranslation effort in half of the material. It was therefore necessary to plan a longer time.”<sup>71</sup> The result of their analysis of the materials at hand led them to the conclusion that “while 75 [percent] of the material [the 1931 New Testament, the 1925 prints of Psalms and Isaiah and Rodén’s translation of the Old Testament] needed an extensive revision work, 25 [percent] of the material was [to be] almost a new translation.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> They used the Revised Standard Version of the English Bible for reference.

<sup>67</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> As to the circumstances leading to this rule, see Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357 (also f.n. 227).

<sup>69</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 20–21.

<sup>70</sup> Musa Aron, *ibid*, 20. In this and in the section where he describes Rodén’s translation of the Old Testament (Musa Aron, *ibid*, 14), Musa states that they (i.e., Rodén as well as Musa and Berglund) followed the ‘chronological order of the books of the Bible.’ Did he mean the order in which the different books of the Bible were written (or first put into writing) or the order that the books appear in the Bible (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus...)?

<sup>71</sup> Musa Aron, *ibid*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

*d. The Work Continues for the Next Seventy-Seven Months (October 1978–March 1985)*

Musa and Berglund were ready to tackle the arduous task. As has been mentioned, the basic documents for the revision and retranslation work were the 1931 New Testament, the 1925 prints of Psalms and Isaiah and Rodén's draft translation of the Old Testament. Finding the first two sets, which were already in print, was not a problem. As to Rodén's draft translation of the Old Testament, however, there existed only a single version of the work, contained in 20 well-bound manuscript volumes in Uppsala which had never been copied. What if any or all of these manuscripts were lost or destroyed for any reason in Uppsala or after they were brought to Eritrea? That could have happened had it not been for what Musa Aron describes as God's miraculous intervention. In his words:

*...Rodén had prepared [by 1943] a set of his Old Testament material. This material was the one used by Berglund and Musa as guidance in Nairobi 35 years later. This single set of Old Testament draft manuscript was deposited in Sweden for some years; nobody thought of making another copy of it in case of fire, loss, damage, etc, but God guarded it and [it] was sent to Eritrea and placed at the shelves behind the altar in Geleb church, a single set exposed to possible fire, loss, termites, etc... God keeps his promises, the manuscript was intact.*

*Not only that, when the [SEM] with the [ECE] decided to move the 20 volumes of heavy paper manuscript from Geleb to Asmara for better safe keeping,<sup>73</sup> it was God who guided the whole idea. Can you imagine, just some time after the manuscript was sent to Asmara, Geleb was a scene of destruction, fire, murder and theft by the then regime of Haile Selassie [of] Ethiopia. Soldiers came to Geleb and, with the pretense of the Gelebites harboring the Liberation Front, shot and burned several old and young church members in their homes. Even the Church building in [whose] altar shelves the manuscript was safeguarded was plundered. Other books, and old manuscripts of already printed Tigre books which were in the altar shelves were destroyed, burned or looted. But the Old Testament draft manuscript was safely deposited at the literature department shelves in Asmara. This was definitely God's plan.<sup>74</sup>*

Based on the three sets of scriptural references and other materials, Musa and Berglund began their revision and retranslation work in October 1978, assisted by the experts at the UBS in Nairobi. In Musa's own words:

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<sup>73</sup> *Qäshi* (E) *mämbər* Musa, in his interview with the author and his colleagues on 23 June 2007, recalled that the heavy manuscripts were initially carried from the church in Gäläb on donkeys. However, neither Musa nor his wife Rəgbu could remember exactly on what day the manuscripts were moved from Gäläb to Asmära.

<sup>74</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 22–23.

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*As the translation project proceeded, books which were completed were put in a tentative manuscript and sent out to be tested by Tigre readers for accuracy.*

*Church leaders, Church workers, pastors, college students and laymen read the entire draft manuscript in Asmara, Sudan and Nairobi. The feedback obtained from these people whose mother tongue was Tigre was very useful in checking the manuscript and producing the final material.*

*In March 1985 the revision and translation of the Tigre Bible was complete. Musa Aron and his wife, Regbu Yosef copied the final manuscript by handwriting and Rev. Berglund checked every page and the whole Tigre Bible manuscript was neatly copied in 5000 foolscap papers in three sets.<sup>75</sup> And so, one set was kept at the Berglunds' residence where the team had their project office. The second set was deposited at the archives of the [UBS] headquarters in Nairobi and the third set was kept at the residence of Musa Aron. This was to protect the manuscript from any fire or mishap, it was human precaution... [emphasis added]<sup>76</sup>*

The world is an interesting place, where events of apparently unrelated import and consequence have happened, are happening and continue to happen simultaneously. In the last three months of 1885, Massawa was occupied by the Italians, Emperor Yohannəs of Ethiopia won the Battle of Kufit against the Mahdist army and the great SEM missionary Lundahl died of smallpox. In 1890, the same year that Eritrea was declared an Italian colony, Dawit Amanu'el finished translating the New Testament into Təgre. Similarly, just as the first Təgrəñña syllable book, *Sillabario nella lingua Tigrinja*, was being published in 1896 in Asmära, a devastating battle of historic impact was being fought at 'Adwa between the Italians and Emperor Mənilik II of Ethiopia. And as Musa and Berglund were completing their 8-year-long labor in March 1985, the man who would later be the key figure in the end of the Cold War, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, was assuming leadership of the Soviet Union...

*e. What an Exemplary Couple Can Do: The Printing, Typesetting and Cassette Recording of the Complete Təgre Bible by the Musas (March 1985 – July 1988)*

After completing the revision and retranslation work in 1985, the Rev. Axel Berglund, then seventy-three years old, had to return to Sweden with his wife. Musa remained in Nairobi with his wife Rəgbu, who assisted him in the remaining stages of typing, proofreading and printing in what turned out to be a three-year journey.

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<sup>75</sup> According to Musa Aron, the rules of Bible translation require that at least three copies of the translation manuscripts must be prepared and kept separately, if possible in three different countries.

<sup>76</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 22.

Herself the daughter of one of the early contributors to the translation of the Təgre New Testament, *qäshi* (E) Yosef Hämäd, and admittedly inspired by her father's long years of literary and pastoral work in Gäläb, *Wäyżäro Rəgbu* was already programmed to follow in her father's footsteps in assisting her husband, Musa. She was born in Asmära, but moved to Gäläb at the age of just six months, when her father *qäshi* was sent to Gäläb to serve in the church there.<sup>77</sup> *Qäshi* (E) Yosef was a progeny of the SEM. When an epidemic (Rəgbu believes it was cholera) invaded the village where he lived as a child – in the 'Asawərta district in Southeast Eritrea – he lost his entire family to the disease and was taken to the SEM base at Ām Kullu at the age of just two.<sup>78</sup> He grew up under the care of the SEM, where the missionaries made him an adept servant of the gospel.

As the preparation of the Musa-Berglund version neared its end, it was discovered that it would be impossible to print the whole Bible in Ethiopia, as originally planned. Musa continues his narration:

*As an alternative, a couple of printing presses that print in Ge'ez were contacted in Italy [the Vatican, and still another at Oxford].<sup>79</sup> But the volume of the work could not be accommodated. Therefore, a beautiful idea of using a computer solved the problem. A small computer was bought by the supporting missions and Musa Aron [and his wife], after a short [six months] training at the [UBS and] Summer Institute of Linguistics [(SIL)] workshops, started to use it. The entire keyboarding was done in Nairobi at the [SIL] headquarters. The [SIL] developed a conversion programme by which one can keyboard in Latin letters and print in Ge'ez script. The result was what was needed in Tigre. The Musas had to establish a combination of Latin consonants and vowels to define the required Tigre letters. The system appeared complicated at the beginning, but as they went deeply into it, they found it acceptable and practical. Of course what they saw at the screen of the computer was a phonetic representation of Tigre in Latin letters, but the print was Tigre in Ge'ez script [emphasis added].<sup>80</sup>*

It was at this point that Rəgbu's contribution became vital, as Musa recounts:

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<sup>77</sup> She is the child standing by her father's lap in the picture at Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 417.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with *Wäyżäro Rəgbu* Yosef, 26 July 2011, at the couple's home in Asmära.

<sup>79</sup> Musa Aron also added that printing in Ethiopia might have been possible, but the political situation of the time precluded it.

<sup>80</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 24. So the difference between the system used by the Arons (or the Musas, to use Musa Aron's description of himself and his wife) and modern computer input of Gə'əz, is that today, although the Latin keys on the keyboard are still used, the Gə'əz transcription appears both on the computer screen and on the printout. The Musas, however, saw the Latin transcription on the computer screen and the Gə'əz appeared only on the printout.

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*To facilitate the work, Musa had the help of his wife Regbu in dictating him the material so he could concentrate on typing the Latin equivalent of the Tigre sound. This system had been very useful. Again, on the proofreading process, both had to read the material once on the screen of the computer, twice on the printed material and finally on the corrected printed material. Still, at the end of the keyboarding of the whole Bible, they ran a wordlist of every book and checked each [such] word that appeared [on the screen] in every book. This system [which took the couple a year and 8 months to complete] helped them to correct any word which could have been misspelled during the proof reading [emphasis added].<sup>81</sup>*

How meticulous, how grueling! The result of this painstaking effort of proofreading was:

*Finally, the chapter and verse checking programme was run and anything which was missed was corrected, and at the end several hundred neatly printed pages of the whole Tigre Bible were ready to go to Dallas to help the experts with the typesetting.<sup>82</sup>*

Another four months of demanding typesetting awaited the Musas at the SIL Center in Dallas, which Musa recalled:

*... and so both Regbu and Musa had to go to Dallas to help the experts there with the typesetting. They stayed in Dallas from June 14 to September 25, 1987. A lot of the typesetting preparation involved much programming, so the first month they had to converse a lot with Mr. K. Hubel who was in charge of the project. During that month they had to check the way the computer diskettes were prepared, run the chapter/verse checking again, determine rules for breaking Tigre words, deciding on the general format and layout of the pages, choosing the best model for the poetry part, distribution of foot references in their respective place, preparing of maps etc... When all these programmes and items were ready, then the typesetting was started. As each book was typeset they had the chance to read the whole Bible again for eventual errors in spelling, spacing, column length, page control, book sequence and etc... Finally the whole Tigre Bible was typeset in 1,131 pages with several maps and short wordlist at the end...<sup>83</sup>*

Three sets of diskettes were prepared and kept at the UBS office in Nairobi, at the Musas' residence and in Dallas. Musa has nothing but praise for Mr. K. Hubel, the man in charge of the typesetting, and Miss B. Alvarez, the lady responsible for the page markup and editing the material for typesetting. He describes the last lap, the printing:

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 25.

*Finally, the [UBS] instructed the [SIL] Dallas to send the Tigre typeset material to Stuttgart, West Germany, from where it was handed to a printing press in Hong Kong. It was decided to print 3000 copies at the first printing with the possibility of future reprints at the request of more needs. The Tigre Bible was therefore printed in Hong Kong and shipped to Massawa, Khartoum, Stuttgart and Nairobi for distribution through the Bible Societies of each country to the Tigre speakers found at home and abroad.<sup>84</sup>*

While waiting for the Təgre Bible to be printed in Hong Kong, however, the Musas embarked on a task never before attempted in the Bible translation projects in Eritrea: to record the entire Bible on cassette. Musa was once again assisted by his wife in recording more than 1000 pages of the Təgre Bible on cassette, as he recalls:

*While waiting for the printed Tigre Bible, the [SEM] decided that the whole Bible be recorded on cassettes, cassettes that will bring the word of God to the aged, the illiterate, the blind, also to people visiting clinics, to congregations and youth groups etc...<sup>85</sup>*

The task was undertaken by the Nairobi office of the Portable Radio Ministry (PRM) International in cooperation with the UBS. The PRM provided free studio time and all the technical support needed for the project. The SEM financed the project with funds raised at the initiative of Rev. and Mrs. Berglund. Musa continues:

*Regbu and Musa Aron, with the expert guidance of the PRM technicians, recorded the whole Tigre Bible in male and female voices with short musical bridge between books, chapters, and sections. The result was 67 cassettes of 90 minutes each collected in 5 albums.*

*And so through the help of the Lord the printed Tigre Bible and the recorded Tigre Bible in cassettes became a reality in 1988. We praise the Lord.<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 26. However, Voigt states, and Rəgbu confirmed in an interview on 26 July 2011, that a new translation of the entire Təgre Bible ‘reappeared’ in 1995/96. Voigt, “Bible translation into Təgre”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, 577. There are two possible explanations for this. Either Musa Aron noted the year 1988 in the Gə’əz calendar, which is 1995/96 in the Gregorian Calendar, or the Təgre Bible was printed in 1988 (G.C.) but was not distributed in Eritrea until 1996 (G.C.).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 28. Rəgbu reflected that although she grew up in Təgre-speaking Mänsa’ and was married to Musa, a Təgre-speaking husband, it was as a result of her experiences in the Nairobi-Dallas Təgre Bible production project that she can now claim to have fully mastered the language. *Wäyṣäro Rəgbu Yosef*, interview by author, not recorded, Asmära, 26 July 2011.

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### *f. The Joy of Finishing*<sup>87</sup>

*A warning concerning youths wishing to be painters*

*Many are they who have a taste and love for drawing, but no talent; and this will be discernible in boys who are not diligent and never finish their drawings with shading.*<sup>88</sup>

These are words of advice recorded in the notebooks of one of history's most popular painters, if not the most popular, Leonardo da Vinci, a man himself known more for his unfinished than his finished works. My intent here is not to write about da Vinci or the concept of finishing what one starts, but simply to highlight the joy that the Musas and the Berglunds must have felt when they held the printed, finished Təgre Bible in their hands. This is how Musa expresses the joy and feelings that he and his wife experienced in July 1988 at the end of the 111-year-long journey to produce the Bible in Təgre:

*God chose the period of 1877 to 1988, one hundred and eleven years to build up His word so that Tigre speakers could have a Bible in their mother tongue.*

*On July 8, 1988, while I was drafting this documentation, I got a telephone call from the [UBS] Headquarter in Nairobi announcing the good news that an advance shipment of 20 Tigre Bibles have arrived at their office. It was like a dream, I run with my wife to the office and collected the box of Bibles.*

*Well printed and bound Bibles they were! We spent the whole day looking here and there through the pages of the printed Bible. It was one of the most beautiful days of our life.*

*But my story does not stop here. Immediately I recalled that Davit Amanuel, the pioneer of the Tigre Bible translation, was baptized on July 8, 1877, exactly one hundred and eleven years to the date before the printed Bible's arrival in Nairobi from the printers in Hong Kong. The coincidence is amazing. We were simply excited by the coincidence, and we praised the Lord for the fulfillment of His promises [emphasis added].*<sup>89</sup>

The Musas found around 12 mistakes in the first set of 3000 Bibles which arrived from Hong Kong. These mistakes were corrected in the second set of Təgre Bibles printed a year and a half later.

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<sup>87</sup> I have borrowed the concept of finishing an assignment from the teachings of my good friend and colleague in all the stages of my preparation of this article, Mr. Märhatənsae Gäbrāmaryam, who prepared and delivered a wonderful lecture on the concept. Märhatənsae also used Leonardo da Vinci as an example in his teaching.

<sup>88</sup> *The Complete Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, vol. 1 translated by Jean Paul Richter (1888), 170 (note 482).

<sup>89</sup> Musa Aron, *A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language*, 29.

## On the Choice of Dialect

The art of selecting the most representative dialect or combination of dialects is one of the most crucial tasks in translation work, particularly in the translation of such an important book as the Bible. This requires careful consideration of the commonalities and differences among the dialects, to ensure the widest possible dissemination of the translated work. The paragraphs below explain the status of the Təgre Bible from the perspective of dialect choice.

Təgre, a Semitic language stemming from Gəʿəz, is spoken by people living all along the Eritrean coast of the Red Sea (except the Southern areas of the Red Sea) as well as the Western and Eastern lowlands of Eritrea.<sup>90</sup> It is one of the three languages categorized under the North Ethiopic branch of the South Peripheral group in the Semitic family of languages. It is spoken in the Northern Red Sea, ‘Ansäba and Gaš-Barka regions of Eritrea, as well as in Eastern Sudan. About one-third of Eritreans use Təgre as their mother tongue, 70 percent of the Muslims of the Bəlin ethnic group are bilingual in Təgre, and the Kunama and Nara ethnic groups use Təgre as the language of intercommunication.<sup>91</sup>

Saləḥ Maḥmud identifies seven traditional dialects of Təgre: Barka (or Bāni ‘Amər), Saḥl (or Ḥabab), Marya Tsällam, Mänsa‘, Marya Qäyah, Betḡuḡ and Sämhar, all named after the groups that speak them.<sup>92</sup> He conducted a dialectical survey of five Təgre dialects (i.e., all except Marya Tsällam and Betḡuḡ) in 1997 to select a commonly understood and accepted dialect and to identify and treat potential dialect problems.

Historically, Saləḥ Maḥmud notes, it was the Evangelical and Catholic missions who first put Təgre into writing. Because they were mainly confined to the Mänsa‘ region, these missions would naturally produce their Təgre writings in the Mänsa‘ dialect. He adds that, although the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) tried to develop Təgre as a written language, predominant use of the Mänsa‘ dialect continued because most of the EPLF radio broadcasters used the Mänsa‘ dialect. It was not until Saləḥ Maḥmud’s systematic dialectical survey in 1997 that reliable data was established to discern the similarities and variations in the traditional dialects.<sup>93</sup> To conduct his survey, Saləḥ Maḥmud used 321 words identified by the Summer Institute of Linguistics as well as 326 words listed in Aki’o Nakano’s *A Vocabulary of Beni*

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 5–6. For the geographical distribution as well as historical, social and administrative set-up of the Təgre people, see Ministry of Justice, *sər’atä məḥdäran ḥəggən babälən ḥəbrätäsäb ’erätra* (translated: *Administrative, Legal and Cultural System of the Eritrean Communities*) (Asmara: Francescana Printing Press, 2011), 12–15.

<sup>91</sup> Saləḥ Maḥmud, “Təgré Dialects”, *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, IV, No. 1 & 2 (2005), 46.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 45, 47; Maria Bulakh, “Təgre language”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4 (2010), 895.

<sup>93</sup> Saləḥ Maḥmud, *ibid*, 47.



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*Amer Dialect of Tigré*, along with his own list for comparative purposes. Finally the data obtained from this and his other parallel studies (phonological differences, lexical differences, speed and suprasegmental features, intelligibility levels, impressions of speakers of each dialect etc.) were analyzed and interpreted (Ibid, 52–69).

Saləḥ Maḥmud concluded: “The study thus shows that the dialectical divergence among the dialects of Təgre is narrow and intelligibility between the dialects generally high . . .” (Ibid, 70). On the basis of the proximity between the various dialects, he divided them into three major groups: (a) the North and West dialect which contains the Barka (or Bāni ‘Amər), Sahl (or Ḥabab) and Marya Tsällam; (b) the Sānḥit dialect which contains Mānsa‘, Marya Qāyah and Betḡuḡ; and (c) the Sāmhar dialect (Ibid, 70). He also added:

*[t]he analysis of word lists, phonological differences and isoglosses, recorded text testing and impressions of the interviewees do not reveal serious obstacles to communication . . . [and] the major differences . . . are predictable and everyone is aware of them (Ibid, 70–71). (...) The high intelligibility levels among the various dialects and the existence of a written variety which is already commonly understood suggest that selecting a specific dialect for the purpose of standardization is unnecessary. Any text written in any of the Təgre dialects can be understood by others (Ibid, 71).*

This conclusion is only buttressed by the experience with the Musa-Rəḡbu-Berglund Təgre Bible. By way of precaution regarding the issue of dialect, the United Bible Society branch office in Nairobi initially printed the complete Musa-Rəḡbu-Berglund book of Genesis in Təgre and distributed it to Təgre speakers in Eritrea (then part of Ethiopia) and other countries. Save for minor comments on some vocabulary, the overall impression of the readers of the Təgre version of Genesis was that the Musa-Rəḡbu-Berglund text was intelligible to any Təgre speaker. With this confirmation, the three colleagues continued their preparation of the other books of the Bible, more or less in the Mānsa‘ dialect, while the United Bible Society continued intermittently to send selected books of the Bible to be read by Təgre speakers.<sup>94</sup> The final version of the Təgre Bible, it might therefore be concluded, safely passed the crucial test of dialect. Musa Aron summed up this conclusion: “The Tigre speaking people of these days can understand up to 80 [percent] of the Təgre used in the 1902 Təgre Bible.”

When the author brought a sample of the Musa-Rəḡbu-Berglund Təgre Bible (Gospel of Mark Chapter 1) to Saləḥ Maḥmud<sup>95</sup> to check the dialect, as expected Saləḥ Maḥmud identified it as the Mānsa‘ dialect. Saləḥ Maḥmud

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Musa Aron and Rəḡbu Yosef, 23 June 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Saləḥ Maḥmud by the author, Asmāra, 3 August 2011.

confirmed that the Musa-Rægbu-Berglund Təgre Bible is readable for an ordinary Təgre speaker.

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