The Story of the Translation of the Bible into Tǝgre
(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 Tǝgre 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: Tǝgre – Swedish Evangelical Mission – Bible translation – Gälāb

Introduction

Exactly 135 years ago (counting from 2012), a 15-year-old Tǝgre shepherd from the Mänsa’ group in Eritrea was immersed in the Gälāb 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 Tagrǝñña man, two years older than himself, who came running to the Gälāb after witnessing the death of his father, grandfather and uncle in a bloody battle near the highland village of Tsä’azzāga. These two colleagues, in particular the younger, would soon form the core group of workers who laid the foundation for the literature of the Tǝgre 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 Tǝgre.

One particularly captivating story is that of a foreign scholar who mastered the Tǝgre language and singlehandedly translated the Old Testament in less...
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 እም እንల gameTime station, while he “himself continued to use Amharic

2 እም እንల gameTime, meaning ‘mother of all’ in ሰግራ, was the name of the station from which major scriptural and missionary works of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) originated. The name “Ethiopian Kullu” is often transcribed in many European sources as Menkullu or Moncillo. Professor Adolf Kolmodin, the Director of the SEM who visited the እም እንల gameTime 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. Niils Hylander (1861–1929), who was a pastor at the እም እንल gameTime 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 እም እንլ gameTime 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, fn. 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 እም እንल gameTime 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. እም እንल gameTime served as the headquarters of the SEM until 1891, when it was moved to the highland village of Tsā’azzāga, the place where the indigenous evangelistic movement had started in the 1860s. The እም እንल gameTime 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 እም እንלת gameTime station except the graveyard in which the tombstone of the hero of the እም እንլ gameTime 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 እም እን пере и its contribution as
as a medium for preaching and teaching,” had set a young Tǝgre shepherd named qǝši but with paternal links to the nearby village of Šǝmanagus Tahǝtay, was the son of qǝši (O) 5 Gǝbrǝ-Mǝdhǝn Tǝstfay (d. 1876), the head priest of Tǝsǝsǝzzǝgǝ and one of the pioneers of the indigenous evangelical movement, and the nephew of qǝši (O) Haylǝ-ab Tǝstfay (c. 1846–1876) who was undoubtedly the inspirational leader of the movement. A deacon of the Orthodox Tǝwahǝdo Church by the age of 12, Tǝwǝldǝ-Mǝdhǝn 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 Gǝlǝb led by the memorable Finnish missionary Rev. Erik Emil Hedenström (1844–1904), who led the missionary work in the Mǝnsa region.

Following the death of his father, the martyrdom of his uncle and grandfather, as well as the destruction of Tǝsǝsǝzzǝgǝ, all in the July 1876 battle between the villages of Tǝsǝsǝzzǝgǝ and Hazzǝgǝ, Tǝwǝldǝ-Mǝdhǝn fled to


3 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisba, 176.

4 Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 303. In his preface to the 1902 New Testament, however, K. G. Rodèn states that the translation of the New Testament into Tǝgre was initiated by the Rev. E. E. Hedenström, the pioneer of the SEM mission at Gǝlǝb, who in 1880 set Dawit ‘Amanu’el and Tǝwǝldǝ-Mǝdhǝn Gǝbrǝ-Mǝdhǝn, his students at the time, the task of starting to translate the New Testament into Tǝgre.

5 Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 215.


8 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 Tǝwahǝdo 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.

9 Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 172–82.
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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.10

In 1883, he was sent to Sweden for theological training. Upon his return to Eritrea in 1887, he went to Ḥargeiggogo, a village 10 km south of ḳīm 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 ṭagre. In December 1889, he went with his wife Amätä-Tsayon (aka Amätu) – the daughter of another indigenous evangelical pioneer qäshi (O) Zărä-Tsayon Muse – to Gäläb to assist Dawit Amanu’el and others in the ṭagre translation work.

In 1904, Täwäldä-Mädhǝn was recruited to work on the ṭagrañña New Testament translation by the man who was the driving force of the early translation work in Eritrea, Dr. Karl Winqvist (1847–1909).11 Undoubtedly the towering figure of the work, Täwäldä-Mädhǝn had an extraordinary linguistic gift: he mastered Tägrañña, ṭagre, Ga’ ṣǝ, Amharic, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, and Swedish, and could tackle texts in English, German, Greek and Latin!12 He was ordained in Asmāra by Professor Adolf Kolmodin (1855–1928), father of Professor Johannes Axel Kolmodin (1884–1933), the prominent Swedish Orientalist and advisor to Emperor Haylā-Salasse,13 on 1 January 1909, making him the first native evangelical worker to be ordained on the African continent.14

Back to the early meeting between Täwäldä-Mädhǝn and Dawit in Gäläb. Their first work, the translation of the Gospel of Mark into ṭagre,15 was

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10 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisha, 185.
12 Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 303,. Dr. Winqvist said that Täwäldä-Mädhǝn had a ‘keen ear and a fine feeling for language’.
15 Voigt holds that the Gospel of Mark in ṭagre was the work of Dawit Amanu’el and Täwäldä-Mädhǝn Gābrā-Mädhǝn. Rainer Voigt, “Bible translation into ṭagre”, Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, vol. 1 (2003), 577. This is possibly due to the fact that Täwäldä-Mädhǝn Gābrā-Mädhǝn “assisted” Dawit ’Amanu’el when the latter was assigned by Lundahl to translate the Gospel of Mark into ṭagre. 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 ወ мн Kullu, in an initial print run of 500 copies.16

Following their work on the Gospel of Mark in Tǝgre, the two young colleagues continued translating the New Testament, drawing on versions of the Bible in Goǝsz, Amharic and Swedish.17 By the time Täwäldä-Mädhǝn 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.18 After Täwäldä-Mädhǝn left, Dawit continued the work alone until Täwäldä-Mädhǝn returned in 1887 and soon joined him in completing the work. In the meantime, Täwäldä-Mädhǝn had prepared a Tǝgre spelling and reading book (reader) which was printed (like the Gospel of Mark) in 1889 at the printing press in ወ мн Kullu. This publication was the first book printed in the Tǝgre language.19 The translation of the New Testament was completed in May 189020 under the supervision of Dr. Winqvist and the first copies were printed in 1892.

The fruits of Dawit’s and Täwäldä-Mädhǝn’s translation labors motivated Dr. Karl Winqvist to encourage Dawit to continue producing more Tǝgre works. Dawit, the man who can rightfully take the credit for pioneering Tǝgre 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, proverbs21 and laws of the Tǝgre.22

16 Arǝn, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 356, f.n. 223.
17 Ibid. 303. Mädhǝn
19 Dege – Unseth, “Tewelde Medhin Gebremedhin”, 877; Rosa Holmer, Twoldo Medben, 129.
20 Arǝn, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 303, 356. Musa Aron writes that the translation was completed in 1889 in ወ мн Kullu. Musa Aron, A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language, 9.
21 Arǝn, 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 Tǝgre were printed in 1895. ዆ም ከ ሀብአያ ከ ከሆብ ወጭ, ወጪ ለማገኝም ለጭወሄ ሚስከት (translated: ‘The Work of Translating Scriptures’), ረአማስ ያስለም, a special edition on the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the messengers of the Swedish evangelical Mission into Eritrea, March 1966, 14.
22 Arǝn, ibid, 353. The legendary Rev. K. G. Rodǝn, 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 Tǝgre, prepared and published, in 1913, the የልት ሰበርን እና የልት ሰበርን, one of the customary laws of the Tǝgre (Rodǝn 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 ëIm 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 ëIm Kullu press was ‘Onäsimos Näsib’s Galata Waaqayoo Gofia Macca (translated Praise Be to God, the Lord of the Multitudes), a small book of 100 hymns published in 1886.23

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.24 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’äqob. 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

23 Arén, ibid, 301–2; Mekuria Bulcha, ‘Onäsimos Nasib’s Pioneering Contributions to Oromo Writing’, Nordic Journal of African Studies 4(1): 36–59 (1995), 40; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisba, 176. As to the Oromo hymn book recorded as the first book published by the printing press at ëIm 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 Onäsimos Näsib, but the “fruit of the joint efforts of Lundahl and Onäsimos”; 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, Kenisba, 177.

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installed in Massawa…”25 This press, called Imprimerie Catholique and the
first of its kind in East Africa, was transferred in 1879 to Kärän,26 the center of
the Catholic mission to the Bogos area of Eritrea, and finally to Asmāra in
1912.27 It is worth noting at this juncture that historians agree that the first
book printed in Eritrea was a 48-page Tǝgrǝnña catechism, possibly translated
from an Italian version,28 produced by De Jacobis and Biancheri on the
Massawa printing press and published in 1867.

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

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

25 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisha, 354–56. Its first productions included an
Amharic catechism (1864) and a subsequent Tǝgrǝnña catechism (1867). Richard Pankhurst,

26 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 Aethiopica, 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 Aethiopica,
vol. 3 (2007), 217. Hence, the machine transferred to Kärän in 1879 could have been a
replacement for the press in Massawa.

27 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 Asmāra 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 Asmāra. Pankhurst, “Printing”,
op. cit., 218.

28 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
The title page of the Amharic version, however, which the author saw at the Pavoni Social
Center in Asmāra, indicates that it was printed in Rome, not in Massawa.

29 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisha, op. cit., 319, 475; Ghirmai Negash, A History of
Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea, 69.
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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: Ethiopian, Amharic, Tigrinya, Kunama, Galla, and even Suaheli… 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…”

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, Tawald-Madhan Gäbrä-Madhan, Karl Winqvist and K. G. Rodén) was established to review Dawit’s translation. Mämhär (Teacher) Yashaq Hemmed (according to Arén) / Yashaq Hamod (according to Musa Aron) of Ḥabab (b. 1866) – the first in-patient of the clinic at Ḫm Kullu – served as the committee’s secretary. The committee, predominantly led by Rodén, reviewed the translation with a focus on the Greek original and with reference to Gǝ’az 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 Gǝ’az syllabary, called gǝ’ez (＼ቁ) and rabǝ’ (＼ሬ) respectively, for the distinct vowels [a] and [ä]. Rodén stubbornly insisted on use of the gǝ’ez, whereas others, particularly the local staff, preferred use of the rabǝ’. Rodén, described as “a man of strict discipline and an indomitable will” but also as a person who

30 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, ibid, 302.
31 Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 335–26.
32 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 Tigré Language, 10.
33 In recording the reservations of the local staff regarding Rodén’s obscurantism, Arén writes: “… the Ethiopian members of the revision committee questioned Rodén’s ‘discovery of the correct sentence structure’ and his ‘bold exchange of rabǝ, the fourth alphabet, for gǝ’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 Tǝğrǝ Testament, the second edition of the Tǝğrǝ 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 gǝ’ez for the short ‘a’ sound and rabǝ’ for the long ‘a’ 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,”\textsuperscript{34} “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.”\textsuperscript{35} 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:

\textit{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.\textsuperscript{36}

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

\textbf{Rodén and Sundström: Rivals in Style, Equals in Taking Credit}

The history of Bible translation endeavors in Eritrea (Oromo, Kunama, Tägränña and Tägre) 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 Tägre Bible, a translation credited to Rodén who, it is claimed, was “assisted” by the indigenous scholars Täwälädä-Mädhän, Dawit and others!\textsuperscript{37} It is somewhat surprising that – despite the multiple records attesting to the fact that Dawit Amanu’el almost singlehandedly prepared the draft translation, that Täwälädä-Mädhän played a significant role in the initial and final stages of preparing the draft translation, and that a committee of Tägre experts, Rodén included, worked for 12 years together – still:

\textit{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 Tewolde-Medhin’s remark that the Ethiopian members of the revision committee questioned Rodén’s}

\textsuperscript{34} Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, \textit{Kenisha,} 233.

\textsuperscript{35} Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, ibid; Arén, \textit{Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia,} 357.

\textsuperscript{36} 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 . . .”

\textsuperscript{37} 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…

The title page of the 1902 Tǝgre 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 indigeni
Twoldo Medhen, Davide Emanuele ed altri.

Ullendorff, though not entirely accurate as to the real authorship of the translation of the 1909 Tǝgrǝnna New Testament, was nevertheless right about the real authorship of the 1902 Tǝgre 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-Mädhǝn Gābrä-Mädḥǝn], now working under the guidance of K. G. Roden.*

Later, we will see that Sundström prepared translations of the Book of Psalms and Isaiah in Tǝgre, printed at the SEM Printing Press in Asmāra 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, qäshi (E) Yohannǝs ‘Emilǝyo Musa (d. 1952) and mämhǝr ‘Uğbazgi 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.*

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38 Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 357.
39 Probably misled by a reference to this title page, Voigt states that the entire Tǝgre New Testament “was translated and edited by Karl Gustav Roden with the help of Täwäldä Mädhǝn and Dawit Amanu’el”. Rainer Voigt, “Bible translation into Tǝgre”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1 (2003), 577.
41 Ullendorff, ibid.
42 Ibid, 72.
Rodén and Sundström Proceed despite their Disagreement (~1943)

The entire saga of the production of the Bible and other literary works in TǝGRE was overshadowed by the bitter dispute between Rodén and Sundström on spelling and language forms in TǝGRE. 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 TǝGRE speaking people. With his keen sense for language, he composed hymns and started on the translation of some books of the Old Testament.”

Lundström and Gebremedhin have recorded the dispute between the two men on the TǝGRE language. I have chosen not to paraphrase the text, since it wonderfully tells the story of the conflict between these two linguistic giants:

“Allready 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

43 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisha, 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 Tǝgre words. The disagreement between Rodén and Sundström had, however, a negative impact also on the Geleb congregation, with divisions among its members [emphasis added].”

Undeterred by his linguistic disagreement with Rodén, however, the studious Sundström, who was greatly captivated by his love for the Tǝgre language, produced – among other works – translations of the Book of Psalms and Isaiah into Tǝgre, which were printed in 1925 in Asmāra at the SEM Printing Press. Two prominent native evangelical workers from the Kārān area in Eritrea, qäshī (E) Yohannès ‘Emilayos Musa and mämbər ‘Uqbazgi Mändal, both from the Bälin ethnic group, assisted Sundström in his translation work. Sundström’s Psalms was reprinted in 1931.

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

*With due permission from the colonial government, though with little means, be [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.*

44 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, ibid, 233–35.
45 Musa Aron, A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigré Language, 11; Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 357–58.
47 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.48

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 Gälāb 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 Təgré 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.”49 What determination!

In lauding Rodén’s devotion and his incredible mastery of the Təgré language qäṣbi (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 Rodén, 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.50

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.”51 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 Təgré Bible is a narrative of its own, which will be covered in the succeeding sections.

The Təgré 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 Təgré colleagues and two

50 Ibid.
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foreigners – the Rev. Axel Jonsson52 (1890–1959) and Miss Amanda Haglund –53 he completed the revision in Uppsala sometime around the end of 1928.54 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].”55

Proofread and its printing overseen by qäshi (E) Yosef Ḥəmād (1881–1966),56 the second edition of the New Testament was published at the SEM Press in Asmāra 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) māmhər Musa Aron, was only a year old.57 The native workers who assisted Rodén with the revision were: Māmhər T’imotewos Fayd (Yohannas) (1879–1957) from Mānsa’ bet Šahqān, māmhər ’Al’azar Ḥədād (1871–1964) from Mānsa’ bet Abrero, māmhər Yəšqäq Ḥemmed [Ḥamd] from the Northern Ḥabab region, māmhər Samu’el Et’aman (1881–1940) from the Southern Ḥabab region and qäshi (E) Yosef Ḥəmād from the ‘Asawɔrtə 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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52 A pastor in Gələb 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.
53 Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, ibid, 318; Musa Aron, A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language, 12.
54 Ibid, 12.
55 Ibid, 318.
56 Father-in-law of qäshi (E) māmhər Musa Aron.
57 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 Tǝgre for a minority of Tǝgre-speaking Evangelical Christians?
2. Can Tǝgre-speaking Christians not use the Tǝgrǝngnǝ Bible?
3. Was Tǝgre itself developing or losing ground to Arabic?  

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 Tǝgre Bible be carried on.” The SEM assumed financial responsibility for the project along with the Church of Swedish Mission.  

Rev. Axel Berglund (1912–2005), a veteran missionary who worked among the Tǝgre people in Gäläb and Kärän as well as in Mändäfāra, well-versed in Tǝgre, and Musa Aron, then Secretary General of the ECE, 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 Tǝgre. They would meet again thirty-three years later, when they were commissioned to produce the complete Tǝgre Bible.

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58 Ibid, 15–18.
59 Ibid, 18.
60 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 Svenssson, qǝshi (E) Gǝrmǝ-Tsǝyon Gǝbrä, Dr. Nicola De Perti, qǝshi (E) (then mǝmbǝr) Âmbayä Habbǝ-'Ågzi' (then aged 22), Pastor Mikael Holmer and qǝshi (O) Zǝrǝ-Tsǝyon Muse. The ECE was then established effective as of 26 September 1926 in Âsǝmǝra, with the holding of its First Synodical meeting. The Rev. Jonas Iwarson was elected as the first President of the ECE and qǝshi (E) Tǝwǝlità-Mǝdhǝn Gǝbrǝ-Mǝdhǝn was elected as his Vice-President. Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin, Kenisma, 393–96.

61 Interview with qǝshi (E) mǝmbǝr Musa Aron and Wǝyyǝqǝr Rǝqbu Yosef by the author, Mǝhrǝtǝnsǝe Gǝbrǝmǝryǝm and Sǝlomon Amanǝl, Âsǝmǝra, 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.62 The Tǝgre scriptural books available for reference and to be used as guides were:

1. The 1931 Tǝgre New Testament;
2. Sundström’s 1925 printings of Psalms and Isaiah; and
3. Rodén’s draft translation of the Old Testament.63

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

1. They were “somewhat a [literal] translation”;
2. The Tǝgre used in these books was “good but needed a lot of updating to raise it to a present day Tǝgre which could be accepted and understood by most Tǝgre 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 Tǝgre Bible to be produced, “verbs, according to grammatical structure of Tǝgre, 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 naturalness64 wherever possible.”

It goes without saying that Musa and Berglund referred to Bibles printed in other languages. Both could speak and write in Tǝgre, Tǝgrǝnnǝ, English66 and

63 Musa Aron, ibid, 19.
64 With regard to the meticulousness in the selection of the right words during their review and retranslation work, qǝšbi (E) mǝnhǝr 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 Tǝgre word corresponding to the topographical feature.
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Italian. On top of these, Musa had a working knowledge of Amharic and Gǝǝz 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.\textsuperscript{67} To establish the linguistic patterns and rules for their translation, they took the following approach:

\begin{quote}
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 [gǝǝz] for short vowels and the fourth form [rabǝ] for long vowels was [to be] strictly followed.\textsuperscript{68} Punctuation followed the pattern used in all Tigre or Tigrigna books published by the [SEM] and later by the [ECE].\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

With these preparations, translation rules and Tǝgre writing styles at hand, Musa and Berglund started the work in October 1978 “following a chronological order of the books of the Bible.”\textsuperscript{70} 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.”\textsuperscript{71} 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.”\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{66} They used the Revised Standard Version of the English Bible for reference.
\textsuperscript{67} Musa Aron, \textit{A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language}, 20.
\textsuperscript{68} As to the circumstances leading to this rule, see Arén, \textit{Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia}, 357 (also f.n. 227).
\textsuperscript{69} Musa Aron, \textit{A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language}, 21.
\textsuperscript{70} 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…)?
\textsuperscript{71} Musa Aron, ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 21.
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 Gelēb 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 Gelēb to Asmāra for better safe keeping, it was God who guided the whole idea. Can you imagine, just some time after the manuscript was sent to Asmāra, Gelēb was a scene of destruction, fire, murder and theft by the then regime of Haile Selassie [of] Ethiopia. Soldiers came to Gelēb and, with the pretense of the Gelēbites 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 Asmāra. This was definitely God’s plan.

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:

73 Qäshi (E) mähōr 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 Gälāb on donkeys. However, neither Musa nor his wife Ragbu could remember exactly on what day the manuscripts were moved from Gälāb to Asmāra.

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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.75 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]76

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 Yohannas 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 Tǝgré. Similarly, just as the first Tǝ그ǝança syllable book, Sillabario nella lingua Tigrinja, was being published in 1896 in Asmāra, a devastating battle of historic impact was being fought at ‘Adwa between the Italians and Emperor Menilik 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…

75 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.

76 Musa Aron, A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigre Language, 22.
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Herself the daughter of one of the early contributors to the translation of the Tägæ New Testament, qäšbi (E) Yosef Ḥomād, and admittedly inspired by her father’s long years of literary and pastoral work in Gälāb, Ṣawäqär Ṣagbā was already programmed to follow in her father’s footsteps in assisting her husband, Musa. She was born in Asmära, but moved to Gälāb at the age of just six months, when her father qäšbi was sent to Gälāb to serve in the church there. Ṣawäqär Ṣagbā was a progeny of the SEM. When an epidemic (Ṣagbā believes it was cholera) invaded the village where he lived as a child – in the ‘Asawärtä district in Southeast Eritrea – he lost his entire family to the disease and was taken to the SEM base at Ǝm Kullu at the age of just two. 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]. 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].

It was at this point that Ṣagbā’s contribution became vital, as Musa recounts:

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77 She is the child standing by her father’s lap in the picture at Arén, Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 417.

78 Interview with Ṣawäqär Ṣagbā Yosef, 26 July 2011, at the couple’s home in Asmära.

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

80 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 Ga’az, is that today, although the Latin keys on the keyboard are still used, the Ga’az transcription appears both on the computer screen and on the printout. The Musas, however, saw the Latin transcription on the computer screen and the Ga’az 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].  

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.  

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...  

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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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid, 14.
83 Ibid, 25.
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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.\textsuperscript{84}

While waiting for the Tigre 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 Tigre Bible on cassette, as he recalls:

\begin{quote}
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…\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

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:

Rägbo 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.\textsuperscript{86}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 26. However, Voigt states, and Rägbo confirmed in an interview on 26 July 2011, that a new translation of the entire T\textgreek{a}gre Bible ‘reappeared’ in 1995/96. Voigt, “Bible translation into T\textgreek{a}gre”, in Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, vol. 1, 577. There are two possible explanations for this. Either Musa Aron noted the year 1988 in the Ga\textgreek{a}z calendar, which is 1995/96 in the Gregorian Calendar, or the T\textgreek{a}gre Bible was printed in 1988 (G.C.) but was not distributed in Eritrea until 1996 (G.C.).
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 28. Rägbo reflected that although she grew up in T\textgreek{a}gre-speaking Mänsa’ and was married to Musa, a T\textgreek{a}gre-speaking husband, it was as a result of her experiences in the Nairobi-Dallas T\textgreek{a}gre Bible production project that she can now claim to have fully mastered the language. Wäyzäro Rägbo Yosef, interview by author, not recorded, Asmära, 26 July 2011.
\end{itemize}
The Story of the Translation of the Bible into Tǝgre (1877-1988)

87. **The Joy of Finishing**

_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.

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 Tǝgre 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 Tǝgre:

_God chose the period of 1877 to 1988, one hundred and eleven years to build up His word so that Tigré 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 Tigré 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 Dawit Amanuel, the pioneer of the Tigré 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].

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 Tǝgre Bibles printed a year and a half later.

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87 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. Mårhatǝnsae Gâbrǝmaryam, who prepared and delivered a wonderful lecture on the concept. Mårhatǝnsae also used Leonardo da Vinci as an example in his teaching.


89 Musa Aron, _A Short Documentation of the History of the Bible in the Tigré 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 Ga’az, 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. 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, ‘Ansāba 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 Balin ethnic group are bilingual in Təgre, and the Kunama and Nara ethnic groups use Təgre as the language of intercommunication.

Sālah Maḥmud identifies seven traditional dialects of Təgre: Barka (or Bäni ‘Amār), Sāḥl (or Ḥābah), Marya Tsällam, Mānsa’, Marya Qāyāh, Betґuq and Sāmhar, all named after the groups that speak them. He conducted a dialectical survey of five Təgre dialects (i.e., all except Marya Tsällam and Betґuq) in 1997 to select a commonly understood and accepted dialect and to identify and treat potential dialect problems.

Historically, Sālah Maḥmud notes, it was the Evangelical and Catholic missions who first put Təgre into writing. Because they were mainly confined to the Mānsa’ region, these missions would naturally produce their Təgre writings in the Mānsa’ dialect. He adds that, although the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) tried to develop Təgre as a written language, predominant use of the Mānsa’ dialect continued because most of the EPLF radio broadcasters used the Mānsa’ dialect. It was not until Sālah Maḥmud’s systematic dialectical survey in 1997 that reliable data was established to discern the similarities and variations in the traditional dialects. To conduct his survey, Sālah 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

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90 Ibid, 5–6. For the geographical distribution as well as historical, social and administrative set-up of the Təgre people, see Ministry of Justice, sar’atā mahdāran ḥaggaš babalān ḥabrātāsāb ĺertra (translated: Administrative, Legal and Cultural System of the Eritrean Communities) (Asmara: Francescana Printing Press, 2011), 12–15.
93 Sālah Maḥmud, ibid, 47.
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).

Salāḥ Māḥmud concluded: “The study thus shows that the dialectical divergence among the dialects of Ṭāğre 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 Bānī ‘Āmār), Saḥl (or Ḥabab) and Mārya Tsāllam; (b) the Sānḥit dialect which contains Mānsa’, Mārya Qāyḥ and Betẖuq; and (c) the Sāmḥar dialect (Ibid, 70). He also added:

[ıt]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 Ṭāğre dialects can be understood by others (Ibid, 71).

This conclusion is only buttressed by the experience with the Musa-Rāqбу-Berglund Tāğre Bible. By way of precaution regarding the issue of dialect, the United Bible Society branch office in Nairobi initially printed the complete Musa-Rāqбу-Berglund book of Genesis in Tāğre and distributed it to Tāğre 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 Tāğre version of Genesis was that the Musa-Rāqbu-Berglund text was intelligible to any Tāğre 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 Tāğre speakers. 94 The final version of the Tāğre Bible, it might therefore be concluded, safely passed the crucial test of dialect. Musa Aron summed up this conclusion: “The Tigré speaking people of these days can understand up to 80 [percent] of the Tāğre used in the 1902 Tāğre Bible.”

When the author brought a sample of the Musa-Rāqbu-Berglund Tāğre Bible (Gospel of Mark Chapter 1) to Salāḥ Māḥmud95 to check the dialect, as expected Salāḥ Māḥmud identified it as the Mānsa’ dialect. Salāḥ Māḥmud

94 Interview with Musa Aron and Rāqbu Yosef, 23 June 2007.
95 Interview with Salāḥ Māḥmud by the author, Asmārā, 3 August 2011.
confirmed that the Musa-Rågbu-Berglund Tagre Bible is readable for an ordinary Tagre speaker.

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