WILLIAM SHELLABEAR AND HIS BIBLE

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In the course of twenty-five years in Malaya and Singapore, William G. Shellabear (1862–1947) helped found and develop what became one of Malaysia’s largest publishing houses, translated dozens of books and tracts, and produced a dictionary and grammar as well as the standard edition of the Malay Annals. Yet his most brilliant work in Malay was the translation of the Bible. After retiring from the mission field Shellabear went on to teach at the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford from 1926 to 1932. In that period and in the years after his final retirement he integrated his love of Malay literary forms with his desire to make God’s Word accessible to the Malay people by writing two epic versions of the Bible story entirely in the form of a Sha’ir, or classical Malay poem.

An engineer and soldier by training, Shellabear came to Singapore in 1885 to take charge of a regiment of Malay soldiers involved in building defenses for the harbor. William Oldham (1854–1937), who founded the Singapore Methodist Mission in that same year, nurtured Shellabear’s already strong commitment to missionary work. With the encouragement of Bishop James Thoburn (1836–1922), Shellabear resigned this commission in 1890 and returned to England to master the art of printing and the purchase of materials for a Methodist press. In 1891 he returned to Singapore and immediately began what became his life-work, the translation of Christian literature into Malay and its publication.

From 1891 to 1918 Shellabear dedicated himself to working among the Malay people, who are Muslims. These people made up roughly half of the population of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Earlier efforts during the colonial period had achieved little, but Shellabear remained convinced to the end of his life that the Malays should remain the focus of Methodist mission work in the Malay Peninsula. His personal efforts from 1890 to 1900 were blunted, however, by his heavy administrative responsibilities as Presiding Elder of the Mission, head of the Mission Press, and editor of the monthly Malaysia Message. He was also engaged in literary activities, including a Malay dictionary and grammar. With the cooperation of other missionaries he also prepared a Malay language hymnal in this period. He met regularly with Bishop G. F. Hose of the Anglican

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1This work is still in print, the most recent edition having been published by Fajar Bakti Publishing Co., Ltd. in 1977, the sixteenth printing of that edition in 1986.
church and others to revise the existing Malay Bible which had been prepared a generation earlier by William Keasberry.²

Even where gains were made in Malay evangelism, difficulties arose immediately. Among Malays there was both a rising ethnic consciousness in response to colonialism, and with it a resurgence of Islam. Some converts to Christianity in the 1890s were persecuted so badly they had to flee, and missionaries faced harassment when they visited women and children in the villages.³ Moreover, the colonial government was not sympathetic to evangelistic efforts, fearing the unrest they created.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw new possibilities for mission efforts among the Malays. A rapidly developing road system was giving access to previously inaccessible rural people. The colonial government was increasing its influence over the Malay sultans. Schools were being opened by Methodists up and down the Peninsula with a small numbers of Malays as students. Encouraged, Bishop Hose, Shellabear, and others became convinced that an entirely new translation of the Bible was necessary if work among the Malays was to progress. In 1901 Shellabear was commissioned by the British and Foreign Bible Society to begin working full time to create a new translation of the New Testament.

Differences of opinion about the way in which Malay Christian literature would be used quickly emerged. The Anglican Bishop had proposed a translation “for Eurasians, Chinese, Klings [sic. (Indians)], etc. A simple but grammatical style, such as people of the upper classes use colloquially was wanted.”⁴ Shellabear disagreed. His Bible was to be for Malays, a tool for evangelism as well as a resource for existing Christians. On hearing of Bishop Hose’s statement to the Bible Society, Shellabear wrote that he hoped the new translation would be chiefly for Malays, then Malay-speaking Chinese. It was for this reason that the translation was being prepared in Jawi (Arabic) script. In the early 20th century almost all Malay publications used this script. As far as Shellabear was concerned, Romanized versions of this, and the later Old Testament translation, were for the convenience of proofreaders who found Jawi difficult.⁵

Despite their disagreements, Bishop Hose and Shellabear agreed about linguistic standards. But problems soon arose in the relationship between

³The unpublished papers of both Shellabear and Sophie Blackmore give accounts of various converts from Islam being forced to leave the country. The Life of Rev. W. G. Shellabear, D.D., an unpublished autobiography in the Hartford Seminary Library Archives, 94-95, and Fifty Years of WFMS Work in Malaya, Sophie Blackmore, an unpublished manuscript in the United Methodist Archives at Drew University, 4, chapter 3.
⁴Bible Society Minutes, (The Editorial/Translations Sub-Committee. In the Bible Society Archives, Cambridge University Library), dated July 24, 1901.
⁵Ibid, November 27, 1901 and October 6, 1909.
the Methodists and the members of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). These proved to be omens of future difficulties. The Bible Society had strict rules about the conditions under which translation should take place. They required the translator to live among people speaking the language and to have the use of native proofreaders. These conditions suited Shellabear and he purchased a house in Malacca, a center of Maylay literary culture. But the Methodist Mission, which shared in paying his salary, was never satisfied by restrictions on Shellabear’s residence. Other missionaries were moved frequently and at will in order to manage the growing mission.

Controversy also arose with regard to Shellabear’s other literary activities. Both the BFBS and the Methodists sometimes suspected that he was doing work for himself at their expenses. Shellabear maintained that secular literary pursuits were done “on his own time.” But that was a concept Methodists scarcely recognized for one with a missionary vocation. For its part, the BFBS would have preferred his involvement in more conventional recreation which didn’t so obviously benefit from his linguistic research at their expense.6

In 1904 the New Testament was completed and printed in both Jawi and Roman script. A dispute with the BFBS over spelling conventions for the Romanized text was resolved by printing two editions, one in the official government spelling which the BFBS supported, the other in the “Mission” spelling which Shellabear himself had developed. In 1909 an adaptation of the New Testament to the dialect of the Malay-speaking Chinese (sometimes called the Peranakan, or Babas) was completed by Shellabear’s Chinese associates. This marked the end of New Testament translation efforts in Malaysia for nearly twenty years.

Upon completion of the New Testament there was almost immediate agreement that Shellabear should go on to revise the Old Testament, translated by Cornelius Klinkert for the Netherlands Bible Society. To solve any financial difficulties, it was agreed that Shellabear would work for the Methodist Mission, and that the BFBS would pay the Mission for Shellabear’s services once the revision was complete. At this point, a dispute arose with the Netherlands Bible Society agent in Jakarta, L. J. van Wijk, who protested that he had ample stocks of both Klinkert’s Bible and an even earlier translation by Dr. Melchior Leidekker. With the Klinkert translation barely twenty years old, van Wijk saw no reason to create a new version which would make his stock worthless in British Malaya. Launching a twofold attack, Shellabear responded that a whole new translation was called for. He was satisfied neither with Klinkert’s Malay (a criticism which had already arisen in the Dutch East Indies) nor with Klinkert’s use of the current Dutch Bible as a basis for translation. He

6Ibid, March 15, 1905, and previous.
advocated using the Revised Version as an English language basis for translation. Rev. G. P. Graham, a Bible Society member in Singapore, added the argument that with printing in Japan the Bible would cost considerably less than the existing Dutch versions. The BFBS ignored van Wijk and, rubbing salt into the wound, had Shellabear produce an edition of the New Testament according to the Dutch spelling conventions for sale in the British missions in Dutch Sumatra.\(^7\)

By 1909 the bulk of the translation had been done, and Shellabear left Malacca for Sitiawan where he was assigned to oversee the Chinese colonists and Mission Plantation which the Methodists had established on the Lumut River. Proofreading and preparing the text for publication delayed publication until 1912. Several thousand copies were printed in both Jawi script (Old Testament and New Testament) and Roman script (New Testament only).\(^8\)

In the very decades that so much work was being done, interest in Malay evangelism seems to have diminished. One couple, Mr. and Mrs. C. S. Buchanan, spent two years doing medical and evangelistic work among the Malays in 1906–1907. But when they were needed elsewhere, the effort was dropped and never revived. Shellabear himself tried at various times to get out from under his other responsibilities with the Mission in order to do Malay evangelism. The major problem he faced was that most missionary positions were funded through government grants to teacher/missionaries in the Methodist schools, or through the profitable Methodist Publishing House, or through Methodist-owned rubber estates.

In order to return to full-time work among the Malays, Shellabear initiated a scheme whereby he would anonymously donate his own salary (from an inheritance invested in a rubber plantation) so that he could return to Malaya as a Malay evangelist in 1916.\(^9\) But when Shellabear returned from furlough, he found himself assigned as temporary head of the Malacca Anglo-Chinese school. He was upset at this delay in setting up literary work among Singapore Malays. Caught in an unresolvable conflict with W. T. Cherry, the Presiding Elder, Shellabear soon suffered the first in a series of nervous breakdowns. By 1918 neither he nor the mission leaders felt he could ever again work in the tropics. His relations with Cherry, whom he charged with everything from mismanagement to assault, and with Bishop J. E. Robinson, had deteriorated to the extent that even good health could not have permitted him to return. With his departure, Methodist efforts at Malay evangelism virtually ceased.

\(^8\) *Ibid.*, December 9, 1908 and April 19, 1913.
\(^9\) A brochure entitled: *Mohammed or Christ* can be found in the United Methodist Archives explaining this plan. Reference is made to “an anonymous donor.” From later correspondence, there can be little doubt that it was Shellabear’s own estate which was to provide funding.
But Shellabear was far from finished with Malaysia. In 1920 he was given a teaching position in Islamics and Arabic at Drew University and was eventually made a Professor in the College of Missions. In 1926 he went to the Kennedy School of Missions in Hartford, teaching in the same fields and editing the journal *Moslem World*. Even after his retirement in 1932 he continued a personal campaign to encourage American Methodists to evangelize Muslims generally, and Malays in particular. Although his ideas were not popular with mission leaders in Malaysia, his message generated interest in the Mission Board in New York and among the young men whom he helped to recruit for Malaysia or influence through training at Hartford or Drew. Some of these became the nucleus of a group which from 1920 up to World War II fought the influence of the schools in the Mission and pressed for Malay evangelism.\(^{10}\)

Shellabear also personally maintained links with various Bible societies, keeping alive interest in production of Malay Bibles. Beginning in 1923, he served as promoter and catalyst in an effort to produce a "union" Bible for use among Malay speakers in both Indonesia and Malaysia. The Britain and Foreign Bible Society and the Netherlands Bible Society, often rivals in the production of Malay language Bibles, came together with Shellabear's urging and formed a committee in the Dutch East Indies to do a joint translation based upon Shellabear's existing work and that of Klinkert. Shellabear was to be one of the proofreaders and editors.\(^{11}\)

That this effort bore fruit slowly, was in part due to Shellabear himself. Even when he was working virtually alone in Malacca, Shellabear had been a meticulous translator with strong opinions about what constituted a good translation. These traits were manifested again in a flat refusal to accept any translation which was not in what he regarded as "pure" Malay, the Malay of the old Johore-Riau kingdom and most of the Malay Peninsula. Indeed he had seen the Union Bible primarily as a revising and updating of his own translation. The Netherlands Bible Society, on the other hand, wished to include enough of the dialect variations found in the whole Malay archipelago (stretching from the Celebes to Ache) to make the new translation useful everywhere. The NBS also argued (successfully in the end) that since they needed to have a version of a well established Malay-speaking church with a two-hundred-year history of reading existing translations, any new work would have to take into account established conventions familiar to their readers.\(^{12}\) In the end, the new translation was only half completed before the outbreak of World

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\(^{10}\) The conflicting views of where missionary efforts should focus are most clearly articulated in articles on Education and letters responding found in the May and August-September issues of *The Malaysia Message*, 1936.

\(^{11}\) *Bible Society Minutes*, loc. cit., August 15, 1923.

War II. It went on to become the standard for some thirty years in Indonesia.

In the Malay Peninsula, however, it was never adopted. The rift between Shellabear and the Netherlands Bible Society translators had become so great that he used his influence in Britain to scuttle any plans by the BFBS to replace his own translation. In Malaya, Shellabear’s son-in-law, Robert Blasdell, also pressed for reprints of Shellabear’s Bible, despite endorsements for the Union Bible by two of the foremost Malay scholars on the Peninsula.\(^{13}\)

While the Union Bible was being prepared in Indonesia, Shellabear had already developed a new idea for presenting the Gospel in Malay. He conceived of a project of surprising scope. It would include two very long Malay Sha’irs (epics in verse form): *Verses on the Kingdom of God* and *Verses on the Loving Prophet*. The former would tell the Bible story from the beginning through the life of Jesus and the founding of the church. The latter would focus on the life of Jesus and his teaching. Shellabear was convinced that the sha’ir format, so dear to the Malays, would win their attention where the Bible itself had failed.

The work on these projects extended from 1924 until late 1933. They were published piecemeal both as individual books and in excerpts in the *Khabar Melayu*, a Malay language supplement to the magazine *Malaysia Message*, then under the editorship of Robert Blasdell. Initially, the sha’irs were printed in Jawi script, with *Verses on the Loving Prophet* published in Medan in Dutch Romanized spelling in 1933. *Verses on the Kingdom of God* was apparently never published in Romanized form, although English language summaries were appended to the first edition.

The beauty of Shellabear’s poetry is obvious. The use of Malay literary conventions and the measured rhythm of the sha’ir convey an impression of Jesus moving in a Malay world, without any change to the substance of the story. Yet it is impossible to judge exactly how effective these works were. By the time they were available for distribution, the Methodists had few points of contact with the Malay population outside the schools (where it was forbidden to carry on evangelistic activities among Malays). Colporteurs were engaged to distribute most of the literature, and there is no record of its effect in Malaysia.

Shellabear died in 1947 at the age of eighty-four. But this did not spell an immediate end to his work. Robert Blasdell arrived back in Singapore shortly before his father-in-law’s death and immediately began preparing new editions of all the works to replace those destroyed during the Japanese occupation. New editions were issued in 1948—in the case of the poems, for the last time. Other works were reprinted up until shortly

\(^{13}\) *Ibid*, January 3, 1934 and April 4, 1934.
after the independence of Malaya from Britain in 1957. From that time forward the sensitivities of the dominant Malay community toward evangelistic activities became so acute that further efforts at republication were not attempted. At the same time, the churches in practice rejected the Malay language in response to its being forced on the minority ethnic groups as the national language. The Bible (in Jawi script) was reprinted by the Bible society up to 1971 in Singapore, where Malays were a small minority. In that year work began to replace it with a new translation. Until it became available in 1988, Malaysians speaking the national language were forced to use an Indonesian translation of the Bible.

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