"EAGLE" IN THE MYANMAR BIBLE

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Judson's translation and its rendering of "eagle"

The first Bible in Myanmar (formerly known as Burmese) was translated by pioneer American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson, and completed in 1834. Judson studied Myanmar extensively under well-educated teachers. U Aung Min, one of his teachers, was formerly a Buddhist priest who resided in the royal court, and was well-versed in both Myanmar and Pali. Furthermore, Judson's Bible translation draft was corrected by U Shwe Ngong, a learned Myanmar. Besides translating the Bible, Judson also compiled a Burmese-English dictionary. Today, the Bible and the dictionary stand as highly regarded classic literature.

In spite of its high reputation, the Judson Version has been criticized for its use of some particular words. One of the most frequently mentioned is the translation of the word "eagle." Critics, including the editors of the "Eagle Edition," say that Judson wrongly translated "eagle" as "vulture." For Judson, "eagle" in Myanmar is *shwe lin ta* and "vulture" is *lin ta*, colloquially pronounced *la da*. Critics prefer *lin yung* instead of *shwe lin ta*.

However, there is no reasonable ground to say that *shwe lin ta* is wrong. Closer analysis of the original word and Myanmar folk taxonomic representations confirms that *shwe lin ta* is an appropriate word choice for "eagle."

Different versions of the Myanmar Bible

Besides Judson's version, there are at least five other translations or editions. The different translations of "eagle" in these versions are compared below.

(1) U Tun Nyein's Version (1906)

U Tun Nyein was a government translator and a member of the Plymouth Brethren Church in Myanmar. He also wrote an English-Burmese dictionary. His translation of the New Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, and Jonah was published in 1906.

(2) BFBS Version (1928)

In 1911, the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) formed a new Bible translation committee, headed by Rev. William Sherratt, who was an agent of BFBS from 1899 to 1933. He was assisted by C. E. Gerrad from the Anglican Church and Rev. George Kya Bin. The project was completed in 1928. This

version is mostly used by the Anglican Church and is also known as the Gerrad Version.

(3) McQuire Version (1933)

The Rev. John McQuire, with the help of U Tha Din (Mandalay), started revising the Judson Version in 1927 and completed the task in 1933. This revision is known as the McQuire Version.

(4) Common Language Version (2005)

The project of the Myanmar Bible in common language was started in 1966. U Sein Pe, well-known headmaster of mission schools and a state education officer, was the translator. The Myanmar Bible in common language was published in 2005.

(5) Eagle Edition (2006)

The Eagle Edition was published in 2006. The editors are not known, and identified themselves only as CRC. Basing their work on Judson's version of the Myanmar Bible, they edited and changed many words, phrases, and sentence structures. The main concern of this edition is probably the translation of the word "eagle," thus the name "Eagle Edition."

Discussion

Based on the following discussion, this paper claims that Judson appropriately used the word *shwe lin ta* for "eagle."

1. Taxonomic representation

The translation of "eagle" as *shwe lin ta* in the Judson Version cannot simply be branded as wrong. People use language to classify and categorize various aspects of the world in which they live (Wardhaugh 1986, 223). If a language identifies hierarchical structures of its popular taxonomies, each successive term has all the components of the higher term plus certain other specific, diagnostic features (Nida 1969, 68). In the case of "eagle," the representation in Myanmar folk taxonomic classification will be discussed from two sources, namely, various Bible translations and dictionaries.

(a) Taxonomic classification in different Bible translations

There are two passages in the Old Testament (Lev 11.13-19 and Deut 14.12-18) where different birds are mentioned by their specific names. Taxonomic classification of those names is, in fact, very complicated in English as well as in Myanmar. In the Judson Version there are twenty different names of birds in Leviticus and twenty-one in Deuteronomy. It shows that Judson is very specific in classifying those birds.

The following table shows how five related birds of the same family (Hope 2005, 127) are translated by six different English authorities (four Bible versions, KJV, RSV, GNB, NIV, and the scholarly treatments of Driver and Hope [ERH]) and the five Myanmar translations.

	nesher (Gk: *aetos*)	*'ozniyah*	*rakham*	*'ayit*	*peres*
English translations					
KJV	eagle	ospray	gier eagle	fowl/ ravenous bird	ossifrage
RSV	eagle/vulture	osprey	carrion vulture	bird of prey	vulture
GNB	eagle/vulture	not clear*	not clear*	vulture/hawk	not clear*
NIV	eagle/vulture	black vulture	osprey	carrion bird/ bird of prey	vulture
Driver	griffon	short toed eagle	osprey	falcon	bearded vulture
ERH	large vulture or large eagle	black vulture	Egyptian vulture	carrion bird	smaller eagle or vulture
Myanmar translations					
Judson	*shwe lin ta*	*pin le lin ta*	*thein*	*nyet ye*	*lin yung*
BFBS	*shwe lin ta*	*lin ta pa nyi*	*thein*	*khin paoh*	*lin yung*
McQuire	*shwe lin ta*	*lin ta pa nyi*	*thein*	*khin paoh*	*lin yung*
Common	*lin yung*	*zi kuat*	*nyet kyi wunpu*	*nyet kya*	*thein*
Eagle	*lin yung*	*pin le lin ta*	*thein*	*nyet soe*	*lin ta/ lin yung*

Table 1. Five related birds in different English and Myanmar translations

(b) Taxonomic classification in different dictionaries

There are at least three prominent English-Myanmar dictionaries. They are (1) Judson's dictionary, (2) U Tun Nyein's dictionary, and (3) the Myanmar Language Department dictionary. The following chart shows transliterations of the different renderings of "eagle," "vulture," "hawk," and "falcon."

Dictionary	**eagle**	**vulture**	**hawk**	**falcon**
Judson	*shwe lin ta*	*lin ta*	*lin yung*	*thein*
Tun Nyein	*lin yung*	*lin ta*	*thein*	*thein*
Myanmar Language Department	*lin yung*	*lin ta*	*thein*	*thein*

Table 2. Four related birds in three Myanmar dictionaries

The U Tun Nyein and Myanmar Language Department dictionaries are identical in their lexical rendering of "eagle," "vulture," "hawk," and "falcon." Both prefer

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* GNB does not translate the Leviticus and Deuteronomy lists one-for-one, so it is difficult to say which English word translates the Hebrew words.

lin yung for "eagle"; however, there is no clear demarcation between "hawk" and "falcon." Judson has more specific words than the others for all four different birds.

Therefore, the above taxonomic analytical research reveals that Judson's classification represents the distinctions among the types of birds better than other Myanmar Bible versions and dictionaries.

2. Context in which the word is used

The Hebrew word *nesher* and its equivalent Greek word *aetos* (in LXX as well as the New Testament) can represent either a specific or a generic bird. According to Hope (2005, 127), *nesher* can be considered as an inclusive name for (1) the lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotus negevensis*), (2) the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), (3) the imperial eagle (*Aquila heleiaca*), (4) the steppe eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*), and (5) the black or Verreaux's eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*). At the same time, *aetos* can also refer to "vulture" or "eagle" (Newman 1988, 746), depending on the context in which the word is used.

In the Old Testament *nesher* occurs at least twenty-eight times and in the New Testament *aetos* occurs five times. In some occurrences, the word refers to a specific bird and in others the word is used in figurative expressions.

In the context of Lev 11.13 and Deut 14.12, it is necessary to translate their particular names because the birds are specifically mentioned as unclean birds. However, for figurative expressions, the same word can be translated as either "vulture" or "eagle." For example, the word *nesher* or *aetos* in Prov 30.17, Matt 24.28, and Luke 13.37 is appropriately translated as "vulture" because "vultures are more likely to be found around a carcass than eagles" (Johnson 1951, 549). In contrast, Isa 40.31 says "they shall mount up with wings like a *nesher*." In this figurative expression, *nesher* is the comparison, "Those who wait for the Lord" is the object of comparison, and "mount up with wings" is the similarity. In this context, it is appropriate to translate *nesher* as "eagle" rather than "vulture," because although both birds are noted for their ability to soar upwards, the vulture has many more negative associations because of its carrion-eating, and is therefore a less suitable translation.

Judson consistently translated *nesher* and *aetos* as *shwe lin ta* throughout the whole Bible. The recent translations rendered *nesher* and *aetos* as *lin ta* in some contexts and as *lin yung* in many others. As mentioned earlier, *nesher* and *aetos* cannot be translated as having just the single meaning *shwe lin ta.* Based on the context, these words can also mean *lin ta.*

3. Language change considerations

The Judson Version is now more than 175 years old. It may be expected that certain words, including *shwe lin ta*, would be archaic. As we have seen, the earlier versions, such as Judson, Tun Nyein, BFBS, and McQuire, used *shwe lin ta*, whereas the recently translated versions—Common Language and Eagle Edition—used *lin yung*. However, it is surprising that critics never brand *shwe lin ta* as an archaic word. Instead it is regarded as a wrong translation. Therefore,

to claim that *shwe lin ta* is archaic is not a strong argument. Language change does not appear to be a factor in the usage of *shwe lin ta* in Myanmar.

4. No reasonable ground for changing the word

As shown in Table 1, the word "eagle" is rendered *lin yung* in the Common Language Version and the Eagle Edition. The following explanations suggest that the change from *shwe lin ta* to *lin yung* is not based on reasonable grounds.

(a)   Rev. U Aung Khin, one of the committee members for the Common Language Version and a prominent Christian leader, was consulted about the changing of the word *shwe lin ta* to *lin yung*. At first he said, "It seems that Judson never knew the word *lin yung* in his time." When Lev 11.13 and Deut 14.12, where both *lin yung* and *shwe lin ta* occur, were discussed with him, he paused and said, "I thought that Judson did not know the word *lin yung* . . . but he did." The translator as well as the committee members of the common language Myanmar Bible seem not to have made a thorough study of how Judson used the words *shwe lin ta* and *lin yung*.

(b)   On the other hand, in the Eagle Edition, the editor(s) just randomly cut the word *shwe lin ta* and replaced it with *lin yung*. As a result, in Deut 14.12, *lin yung* occurs twice, because *shwe lin ta* is replaced by *lin yung* but *lin yung* remains unchanged. In Isa 40.39, the editors forgot to delete the word *shwe* in *shwe lin ta*, so it now reads *shwe lin yung* instead of *lin yung*.

Unless and until there is a more convincing argument based on scholarly research, there is no reason to change the word *shwe lin ta* to *lin yung* in the Myanmar Bible.

5. Language preference

For the critics, language preference seems to be the only reason for changing the translation of "eagle." Ross says that prototypical concepts in any culture can be a great constraint for language choice (2003, 134). When people have their own preference for any given word choice, there is a constraint on semantic variation or restriction in level of prototype. Fundamental concepts can become associated with certain words, and these concepts may influence people's choice to use or not to use them in particular contexts.

In fact, in Myanmar the concept "vulture" – *lin ta* has a very strong negative connotation. The vulture is considered ugly and unclean because it is a carrion-eater, and of bad character. To call someone *lin ta* is a very grave insult. For Myanmar speakers, *shwe lin ta* literally means "golden vulture." Though gold has a positive meaning, it cannot supersede the negative connotations of vulture. It seems, for the critics, due to such a strong negative concept, *lin yung* is much more preferable than *shwe lin ta*.

Conclusion

When used to denote a particular bird, and especially in lists, the word *nesher* (or *aetos*) is most appropriately translated into English as "eagle" and into Myanmar as *shwe lin ta*. When it is used in figurative expressions, there are two possible meanings. When the connotation is positive the word refers to an eagle, and when
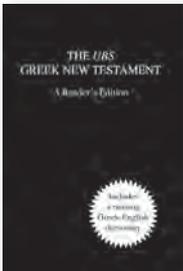
it is negative, to a vulture. In Myanmar, there is no problem with translating this latter type of reference as *lin ta* "vulture."

The only valid reason for preferring *lin yung* appears to be the rather subjective negative connotations attaching to *lin ta*. Judson's scheme provides for differentiation and classification of a wider set of birds. Since his translation of "eagle" as *shwe lin ta* is not archaic in any sense, it is therefore the best choice.

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