


Translating *missio Dei*: Indispensable Bible translation in God's mission

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Missio Dei, particularly from the 1952 International Missionary Council perspective, highlights God's unmerited grace, which invites broad human participation in the realisation of salvation (Σωτηρία) and the kingdom of God (Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ). The achievement of these goals depends on divine providence and the involvement of churches, including but not limited to the vital ministry of Bible translation. The crucial role that Bible translation plays in mission is to overcome barriers that distinguish the nations of the world and to reconcile them towards the fulfilment of the purposes of *missio Dei*. Although Bible translation remains an indispensable component of mission, its critical importance has received little to no scholarly attention. Once Bible translation is no longer viewed through the lens of mission, it is likely to dissolve into mere translation activities that are incompatible with the *missio Dei*. There is, therefore, a need for research that uncovers this indispensable function in the overall work of the *missio Dei* and in the realisation of its goals. Based on available literature, this article highlights the importance of Bible translation in the context of the *missio Dei*. Complexity theory is used to accentuate the interactive nature of Bible translations in mission context. Further research is needed to develop a holistic framework that fully integrates Bible translation into the context of the *missio Dei*.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article expands the interdisciplinary discourse between translation studies and theology by addressing the central importance of Bible translation work within missiology.

Keywords: *missio Dei*; mission of God; Bible translation; the Great Commission; total salvation.

Introduction

Although figures such as Karl Hartenstein (1894–1952) and Karl Barth (1886–1968) played important role in shaping the discourse surrounding *missio Dei*, the term itself followed the International Mission Council (IMC) from 1952. The understanding of the *missio Dei* from the perspective of the IMC conference in Willingen in 1952 forms the core understanding of mission theology in its entirety. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the groundbreaking works of missiologists such as Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998), David Bosch (1929–1992), and living giants such as Jürgen Moltmann (1926–) and Darrell Guder (1939–). The political unrest resulting from the Chinese Communist Revolution (1945–1949) and the aftermath of the Early Cold War (1945–1952) forced the Willingen Conference to engage in a self-critical assessment of the challenges faced by missions around the world. This moment forced the church to recalibrate its understanding of mission theology in relation to this political turmoil (Vera, Bach & Kenley 2013). In addition, this led to serious questions being asked about the place of God and the Church in mission (Scherer 1958:165). Consequently, this conference emphasised the Trinitarian basis of mission, and effectively grounded mission within the nature of the Triune God (Kemper 2014:70). This conference not only affirmed the triune God as the acting subject or principal missionary in his own mission, but also sought to clarify that the church, faith communities and other human entities are collectively called to participate in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit (Engelsviken 2003:482; Flett 2014:69–78). In the words of Kemper (2014:70), 'To say that God is missionary is to say that he sends, first, Son and Spirit, and then his church, but then also creation itself'. To elaborate further, Konz (2018:336) stated, '*Missio Dei* theology asserted that God can be understood as essentially missionary, and thus human missionary activity should be understood as a participation in this divine activity'. Above all, this conference demonstrated the complexity of the *missio Dei*, which consists not only of church participation, but also of the cooperation of different entities to achieve salvation and the Kingdom of God as the primary goals of the *missio Dei*.

The work of Bible translation remains important in the context of the *missio Dei* for various reasons, such as to enhance accessibility, contextualisation, language preservation and interreligious dialogue. In other words, the work of Bible translation ensures that the *missio Dei* is contextualised, and its primary objectives are accessible to different communities. Even at the level of interreligious dialogue, the work of Bible translation enables host communities to participate in the realisation of the *missio Dei* without renouncing indigenous identity, languages and culture. In many ways, this reflects what Bosch (2011:28) meant by mission, which is to dissolve alienation, break down walls, and transcend boundaries between individuals and groups. Although the task of translating the Bible should normally be counted among the important contributions to achieving the goals of the *missio Dei*, its centrality or criticality in this regard seems to have received little if any scholarly attention. Consequently, relying upon literature review, this article will use complexity theory to demonstrate the importance of Bible translation in the economy of the *missio Dei*. It is argued that the function of Bible translation remains crucial to both central objectives of the *missio Dei*, firstly, making inroads for total salvation, and ultimately, the long-awaited inauguration of the kingdom of God. The question inherent here concerns the role of Bible translation. What role does it play towards the formation of missional activities pursuant to achieving the above-mentioned objectives of the *missio Dei*? To answer this important question, it is argued that theologians, in particular missiologists, ought to embrace the interdisciplinarity of missiology. It is no surprise that Eugene Nida enlisted various academic scholars to engage in various aspects of Bible translation theory and practice. He did this because he was fully aware of the impact of Bible translation in other academic fields, including in missiology. Missiology as an interdisciplinary field should seek ways to recognise the criticality of Bible translation to ensure timely achievement of *missio Dei* goals. Contribution of other fields, such as Bible translation, must be sought after and be nurtured simply because of their significant contribution towards achieving the objectives of the *Missio Dei*.

The work of this contribution can be divided as follows: Firstly, the complexity theory is presented as a perfect theory that reveals the complexity of the *missio Dei* manifested in the missionality embodied by the triune communion, the Great commission encompassing participation of the faith communities, the Church and including the role that Bible translation plays interactively in achieving *missio Dei*'s goals. Secondly, it presents the *missio Dei*, particularly from the perspective of the Willingen Conference, which is well defined as the all-encompassing mission of God that indiscriminately invites human participation in the attainment of its ends. Thirdly, it underscores the historical interconnectivity between mission and Bible translation, or missionaries and Bible translators, so to speak. Fourthly and lastly, it concludes by accentuating the criticality of Bible as a tool in the work to achieve the objectives of the *missio Dei* in a timely manner.

Complexity theory

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in exploring complexity theory as the best method that allows experts from different fields to examine and better understand different systems as they interact to achieve a unified goal contained within a greater system. Anderson (1999:216) defined it from an organisational perspective and pointed out that it represents a real way to simplify complex systems by examining their component parts. In a situation where a complex system consists of several components, complexity theory is used to establish the number of components required to achieve a course dictated by the complex system. Perhaps putting it in a much simpler form, Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2020:11) put it as 'A complex system includes one or more populations of agents, elements, or components, which are numerous and diverse, and which connect and interact in different and changing ways'. This means that analysis of dynamic interactions and feedbacks of system components involved in achieving the overall system goal is at the heart of complexity theory. To this very end, Pearce and Merletti (2006:515) stated: 'They are also characterized as involving non-linearity and feedback loops in which small changes can have striking effects that cannot be understood simply by analyzing the individual components'. In the words of Anderson (1999:222), 'A defining feature of complexity is that self-organisation is a natural consequence of interactions between simple agents'. Similarly, Pearce and Merletti (2006:515) explained that complexity in this regard involves the study of interconnected actions that interact simultaneously to allow the whole system to organise itself to achieve its unified goal. As if to explain it further, Cairney (2012) stated:

Complexity theory suggests that we shift our analysis from individual parts of a system to the system as a whole; a network of elements that interact and combine to produce systemic behaviour. (p. 346)

The logic of this understanding suggests that the organisational behaviour of a complex system can be understood through a holistic analysis of the contributing behaviour of its constituent elements (Murray 1998:286). In other words, the performance of the overall system cannot be understood by examining its general identity or isolating components, but rather by examining the interaction and contributing effects of each integral component. From this, it can be established that complexity theory facilitates exploration of system components in their interaction towards accomplishing the overarching objective of the all-encompassing system like the *missio Dei*, as shown below.

Analysis of the *missio Dei* through complexity theory would primarily commence with the acknowledgment that the involvement of the triune God in mission, which encompasses the embodiment of God the Father (*missio Pater*), the Son (*missio Christos*), and the Holy Spirit (*missio Spiritus*), denotes the inherent framework of divine communion or interconnectedness from which salvation history arises. Secondly, the enlisting of human participation

in the form of individuals (*missio hominum*), religious communities, church mission (*missio ecclesiae*), world politics (*missio politica*), and even the integrated roles of agencies such as Bible translation underscore the complexity of *missio Dei*. Thirdly, the missionary connectedness that the *missio Dei* conveys, from the phase of salvation as the primary goal to the inauguration of the kingdom of God as the secondary and definitive objective, points to the inherent complexity of the *missio Dei*. This means that all mission frameworks, including but not limited to *missio pater*, *missio Christos*, *missio Spiritus* and the involvement of all human components, work together systematically to achieve the objectives of *missio Dei*.

Missio Dei

Missio Dei is a Latin theological expression that can be translated generically as God's mission and encompasses the active participation of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit throughout salvation history. While the coining of this concept can be traced back to before the life of St Augustine (Engelsviken 2003:482), it regained its popularity in the field of missiology in the second half of the 20th century after the 1952 conference of IMC in Willingen, Germany. Although it might be interesting to detail the history and development of this concept, it is not covered in the limited scope of this article. Conversely, the reader can consult seminal works by missiologists such as David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, Tormod Engelsviken, and many others to learn more about this concept. It should be emphasised, however, that this conference confirmed mission as the work of salvation and sending of the triune God in the world (McPhee 2003:6). That is, mission in its entirety springs from the nature of the triune God and not of the church or any human entity. As Flett (2014:69) puts it, this conference acknowledged that: 'the triune God is in and for Godself missionary'. Consequently, this conference was drawn to considering the presence and relevance of God's mission beyond church boundaries. However, like what is said above about the coinage of the *missio Dei* concept, while the 1952 IMC conference is rightly credited with restoring the popularity of *missio Dei* as a missiological concept, other previous IMC conferences had already paved the way with reflections underscoring the gradual transition from a church-centred to an all-encompassing mission theology.

As indicated above, the restoration of the concept of *missio Dei* has commendably spawned a voluminous literature examining its implications. Consequently, this contribution is devoted exclusively to the missiological literature, which describes the *missio Dei* in a way that reveals its complex nature, characterised by the complex interplay of multiple missionary activities to achieve its goals. There are very few contemporary missiology scholars like Thinane (2022:1–8) who, as the title of his work indicates, 'Missio Dei through complexity theory: Complexity to total salvation' endeavoured to consciously emphasise the complex character of the *missio Dei*. However, of course, it cannot be denied that there are several missiologists whose work may have implied the complexity of the *missio Dei*, albeit not in so many words.

For instance, several scholars including Daugherty (2007), Flett (2010) endeavoured to explore the complex nature of the *missio Dei* by considering what Carter (2016) would refer to as the missionality of trinity or what Youn (2018) would call *missio Dei trinitatis*, which essentially underscores complex divine missionary activities as embodied by triune members in the world. Beyond the Trinitarian component, missiologists such as Konz (2018) have described the complexity of the *missio Dei* in light of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20, somewhat consistent with (Bosch 2011:28) who underscored the all-inclusive character of the *missio Dei* stating: 'His mission is one of dissolving alienation and breaking down walls of hostility, of crossing boundaries between individuals and groups'. Almost similarly, or as if to emphasise this complexity in relation to the calling of the church, Arthur (2013b) observed:

So the church's mission is a subset of a larger whole mission that is it is both part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world. (p. 1)

Consequently, or in keeping with the important work of these scholars in endeavouring to unveil the complex nature of the *missio Dei*, the following sections will consider and integrate the crucial role of Bible translation. Strategically, Bible translation is fundamental to the realisation of human participation, bringing or availing Scripture into the native language of each human participant, thereby single-handedly opening doors to further and continued human participation in the *missio Dei*. In this way, the Bible translation not only translates the Word, but also translates the *missio Dei* in its entirety into the vernaculars.

Missio Dei through the Great Commission

Although the Triune God enlisted human participation in the *missio Dei* throughout salvation history as recorded from the Old Testament to the New Testament, among the biblical instances recording such divine invitations, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 is exceptional. According to Shore (2006:322), Matthew 28 has become an important text and a source of inspiration for most Christians as they reflect on their missionary commitment to the world. On a slightly broader level, and in contrast to its scriptural prototypes, the Great Commission opened doors for human actors to collaborate and interact in order to achieve the goals of *missio Dei* (Konz 2018:333). In other words, the missionary mandate of the Great Commissions recruits an unprecedented human participation in the redemptive work of the *missio Dei*. Mission as expressed or advocated in the commission of Matthew 28 encompasses far more than the proclamation of the gospel faith but invites an all-encompassing commitment to the goals of *missio Dei*. Since the missionary commission includes the clear proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God not only through evangelism but also through the reading of Scripture, it can be argued that the commission of Matthew 28 called for a Bible translation. In other words, the task of taking the gospel to other cultures

through Bible translations has always been seen as a key part of fulfilling the commission's mandate. Accordingly, the following section attempts to interpret Matthew 28 as an open invitation to practices such as the Bible translation to participate in the fulfilment of the *missio Dei*.

As suggested above, the missionary mandate of Matthew 28:16–20 marks an important moment in salvation history when God's mission was unlocked to the participation of all the nations of the world. Similarly, Hertig (2001:343) speaks of this commission as representing a turning point in the history of salvation, when the wall separating tribes, Jews and Gentiles is torn down to indiscriminately include all people in God's mission. While some interpreters of the great commission argue that the Greek *panta ta ethne* translates into: 'all the Gentiles', most scholars generally believe the correct translation of these words is: 'all the nations', 'all peoples' signifying the unrestricted form of mission (Meier 1977:94–102; Sim 1995:19–48). In this work, however, the main purpose is merely to mention that the directive here commands the Lord's disciples to disciple all nations that are inherently composed of 'the other', be it all the nations or Gentiles (non-Jews or nations of the world that were not Hebrew). Whatever aspect of ministry the disciples are to facilitate, whether baptising, teaching, or making disciples, involves missionary collaboration and extension of mission to others. Similarly, giving attention to the phrase: 'teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you', Hertig (2001:343) underlined that this phrase stipulates the content of what is to be passed on to others within the framework of the mission. Somewhat consistent with this understanding, Konz (2018) considered the Great Commission as a secondary framework encompassing human participation in the fellowship of Trinitarian missionary collaboration and conclusively stated:

Thus, the Great Commission is best understood as a secondary sending constituted by and located within the ongoing *missio* of God in the Son and Spirit, specifically as the human cooperation in the *missio Dei*. (p. 337)

In accordance with this understanding, the Great Commission has filtered the *missio Dei* into broad human involvement. Stated another way, human engagement, as required by the commission, does not focus solely on the engagement of the church as an institution, but encompasses human engagement in general, including but not limited to the work of Bible translation. Although the work of Bible translation emerged from or cannot be isolated from church missional activities or identity, this does not take away its independence as far as its work is concerned. In fact, there are scholars who view the work of Bible translation as a speciality in its own right, as opposed to finding expression or meaning through the work of the church (Naudé 2000:2–4; Nichols 1996:28). Consequently, as an independent entity, the Bible translation ministry plays an important role in fulfilling the mandate of the Great Commission (Chemorion 2009:110). Especially because of the important role it plays in translating the Word of God into languages connected to every geographical and cultural context in the world (Franklin & Niemandt 2015:4; Ogden

2002:308–316). Thus, the essential work of Bible translation directly nourishes or fulfils the missionary mandate, providing much-needed material to attain the goals of the *missio Dei*.

Historical interconnectivity between mission and Bible translation

Mission and Bible translation have a long and harmonious history that has resulted in most Bible translators emerging from missionary endeavours. Contrary to what one might expect, it will not be easy to compile a historical background on the connection between missionary work and Bible translation or missionaries and Bible translators. Such a compilation is made more difficult above all by the fact that the mandates of these two projects always ran in parallel or are sometimes overlapped. According to Franklin and Niemandt (2013:3), Christians in all nations of the world have always recognised Bible translation efforts as an indispensable facet of God's mission. Although historically there have been instances where church planting has followed Bible translation or vice versa, the spread of Christianity and Bible translation has nevertheless always occurred simultaneously (Smalley 1991:21). Regarding the successful spread of Christianity in Africa, Olsen (2008) speculated that such success would not have been realised if it were not because of the work of Bible translation. He further concluded:

The written word of Christian theology certainly hastened the establishment of Christianity in African nomadic and other tribal cultures, and without it the Christian doctrine may never have lasted into the 18th century (and beyond) in those cultures. (pp. 22–24)

Referring to the early 1800s work of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in China, Tong (2016) explained its important goal from the beginning was to first to send missionaries to China, compile a Chinese-English dictionary that would enrich the mission and complete a timely translation of the Bible into the Chinese language (Tong 2016:155). This project was associated with the Anglo-Scottish Protestant missionary Robert Morrison (1782–1834), who worked with other missionaries such as Walter Henry Medhurst, William Milne, Samuel Dyer and others over a period of 25 years to complete the translation of the entire Bible into the Chinese language (Daily 2013). Similarly, regarding missionaries arriving in Zimbabwe in the second half of the 18th century, Togarasei (2009) states:

These missionaries were very quick to realise that if their message was to be accepted, there was a need for them to translate their foreign message into the language of the people. They then began the process of translating the various books of the Bible into the Shona language. (p. 52)

Equally, the spread of Christianity in South Africa occurred through the work of various missionary societies working among the indigenous tribes. Referring to missionaries belonging to such societies, Hermanson (2002:7) stated that, 'Early Bible translation was undertaken by an individual or a group of missionaries, usually from the same society'. It can be argued, therefore, that Christian mission owes much of its

accomplishment to Bible translation labours. Perhaps this is exactly what Watt (2005:19) wanted to point out in relation to the contribution of one of the founders of the modern discipline of translation studies, Eugen Nida, who developed the theory of dynamic equivalence of Bible translation, when he (Watt) stated 'those who have nurtured particular concern for biblical exegesis and translation, couched in the context of missionary outreach, have been the greatest beneficiaries of Nida's labours'. In fact, not long ago Loba-Mkole (2008:253) accurately cited Bosch (2002) and Sanneh (2004) to support the claim that, 'The missionary expansion of Christianity owes its very being to (Bible) translations'. Most missionaries studied languages such as Hebrew, Greek and Latin as they prepared themselves for mission work (Hermanson 2002:7). For the course of mission, David Bosch saw the importance encompassed by Bible translation as a way of ensuring that there is continuity of sending (mission) to the ends of the earth. Bosch (2011:536–537) saw the importance, namely, 'The basic strategy of the apostolic mission is the founding of communities whose purpose is to continue the witness that brought them into being'. In other words, he saw the task of Bible translation as providing the established local churches with the Word of God (Bible) in their vernacular as an important tool to first enable them to actively participate in mission and to empower them to carry the missionary commission to the ends of the earth.

The first translation of the Gospels, published in Malayalam from Syriac in 1811, was translated by two priests encouraged by Church of England missionaries. Subsequently, an improved Malayalam version, published in 1829, translated from the Greek, was prepared by a missionary of the British Church Mission Society, Benjamin Bailey (Smalley 1991:22). Towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the first formally equivalent Bible translation was carried out by missionaries from various mission societies in South Africa in order to reach the indigenous population with the gospel. In fact, concerted missional efforts by societies such as the American, British, French and Swiss missionary societies through their commitment to spreading the gospel among indigenous population through African languages climaxed in the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) as early as on 07 March 1804 and followed by the South African Bible Society on 23 August 1820. According to Hermanson (2002:7), there were instances whereby translations were published either by missionary societies themselves through various press such as mission or commercial press in South Africa.

In view of this, it can be argued that missionary mandate would never be successful without the important role played by Bible translation. This is why scholars like Smalley (1991) were prompted to write an excellent book entitled: *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement* perhaps to underscore the important place of Bible translation in the context of mission. However, Bible translation is not only there to support missionary activity, but to provide the very communities for which mission is intended for with the tools necessary to enable their participation in *missio Dei* (Arthur 2013a). In fact, this is acknowledged by several

scholars like Moore (2014) who stated that: 'Bible translation is one of the most effective mission tools' (Moore 2014:77). Similarly, Franklin and Niemandt (2015) stated: 'Bible translation is an expensive, complex and time-consuming aspect of God's mission' (Franklin & Niemandt 2015:385). Arthur (2013b) spoke of Bible translation as being inherently part of the *missio Dei* by stating:

Seen from the perspective of mission of God, we are freed up to joyfully engage in Bible translation and associated activities, as these are all part of restoring the unity within the human community which God wishes for. (p. 4)

Conclusion

The basic premise of this article is that the Bible, as an important missionary tool and outcome of Bible translation processes, plays an important role in working to achieve the goals of *missio Dei*. The core intention is not to Christianise or convert others, but to provide others with missional tools needed for their participation during the *missio Dei*. The distribution of Bibles by missionaries and Bible societies around the world alone demonstrates the importance of the Bible as a missionary tool. The work of Bible translation remains important in the context of the *missio Dei* for various reasons, such as to enhance accessibility, contextualisation, language preservation and interreligious dialogue. Consequently, this article concludes that the importance of Bible translation or its implications in relation to the *missio Dei* cannot be underestimated and therefore more resources must be poured into its course if the goals of the *missio Dei* are to be achieved in a timely manner.

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J.S.T. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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