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https://doi.org/10.38140/at.vi.10840

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2026
Supp 40:138-141

Date received:
12 May 2025

Date published:
29 May 2026

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

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BOOK REVIEW

Oral Bible translation and Biblical performance in Southern Siberia: A design for a performance-based oral Bible translation in the Southern Altai language

Cleaver, B., *(Siberia)* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock. 2025. pp. vii + 308) Paperback ISBN: 979-8-3852-3638-1; Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-3852-3639-8; Ebook ISBN: 979-8-3852-3640-4

This book discusses the significance of oral Bible translation and performance into the Southern Altai language of Siberia. Altai art forms serve as lenses for translating and performing biblical texts. This activity is premised on the fact that orality is a dominant communication mode in this society, as it is one of the oral-preference communities of the world and prefers oral learning. The book attempts to develop and posit a methodology using and seeking cultural contextualisation for oral Bible translation and performance in the Altai language.

According to the book, the critical element in translation is the communicative purpose.

Translation must meet the needs of the target audience as spelled out in a translation brief. The author notes that orality as a communication mode, whether in oral-preference terms or due to underdevelopment of literacy, is the most dominant mode of communication. The author claims that over 80 per cent of the world's population prefer oral communication and two-thirds prefer oral learning. The book is rooted in current discourse in Bible translation that recognises the oral nature and residual oral features of significant portions of the biblical texts. Such orality is itself rooted in the transmission history of the Scriptures. It is also rooted in ongoing conversations and attempts at deliberately incorporating oral features in Bible translations nowadays for communities that are purportedly more aligned with orality than with literality.

Methodologically, this research aims to use genres common to this community such as epic stories and heroic epics to adapt biblical texts to Altai genres. It adapts features in these genres such as contrast, parallelism, clusters, *kai* singing, musical episodes, rhyme, anaphora, alliteration, epiphora, word pairs, metaphors, taboo expressions, epithets, hyperbole, and improvisation to attempt to make the biblical stories more accessible and familiar. The goal is to create translations that lend themselves to performance, especially the poetic and narrative texts of the Bible. The theoretical framework for this study is multidisciplinary and fairly comprehensive, incorporating the most current frameworks. These include the functional approach to translation, complexity theory, and multimodality. The study also considers how extralinguistic exegesis and audience response can shape translation and performance.

In actual translation practice, the functional approach is used, with an emphasis on purpose and audience relevance. It uses complexity theory, approaching translation as a dynamic, nonlinear and adaptive process that is influenced by social and cultural factors. It embraces multimodality, employing music, costumes, dance, visuals, and artifacts in the enhancement of meaning. Oral features of local poetry are incorporated into biblical translation and performance.

The project involved translating or exegeting a source text (including using emotional exegesis), internalising, and performing biblical passages, specifically Judges 4-5 and Psalms 1, 100 and 133. Internalisation and exegesis included discussion, memory, and attempts at emotional empathy with the source texts.

Performance design was shaped with reference to the local culture using multimodal methods such as dance, poetry, and music. Audience feedback was part of the translation process and a tool for refining

translation. The process was relational, interpretive, and non-linear, aligning with the complexity theory. Chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Judges, which contain both poetry and prose texts, were used for comparative analysis. Further analysis of poetic texts was made on Psalms 1, 100, and 133.

The book locates itself in the larger conversation of translation theories ranging from early ones that prioritised the source text to current ones that are more aware of the complex nature of meaning transfer and translation purpose, an example of which is complexity theory. Its appeal to multimodality and inclusion of novel-sounding but not essentially new perspectives such as the hospitality theory do not add much, methodologically, to this conversation in translation.

The importance attached to internalisation, including emotional empathy, as part of the exegetical task, is a welcome enhancement of the exegetical task to historical-critical methods. The goal of embodying the source text to the point of recalling associated emotions and experiences is a noble one and is critically important in contexts of oral Bible translation and performance, where voice quality and intonation as well as physical gestures and movements convey meaning. However, it has a major challenge: the tenuous access to these realities in the biblical texts in prevailing scholarship. For any translator to access this with any degree of credibility requires very high levels of historical-critical and socio-critical scholarship. To some extent, it will even require a considerable measure of sociocultural empathy between the exegete/translator and the target audiences of the biblical texts. Without these considerations, whatever is accessed and communicated to new audiences will largely be constructed driven by the translator's/reader's own sociocultural realities, in this case, the Altai people.

Despite its lofty claims and goals, this work is essentially limited to the Southern Altai community and language of Siberia. As such, the possibility and value of such a contextualised translation remain to be seen from research in other communities and languages. A further limitation is that the findings depend on remote interviews with no direct observation of teams. This means that level of access to the orality and expressions of it for this society are tenuous at best.

The research understandably struggled to convert literally genres such as epistles to orality. This requires modal transformation before translation. The difficulty starts at the stage of internalisation itself, requiring increased creativity. The next challenge is making apparently similar Altai genres to become carriers of the communication in the biblical texts. It is not clear how such translations will safeguard the integrity of the content and intent of the biblical texts.

Further, the side aims of promoting and preserving and reviving Altai language, culture, and Christianity through culturally adapted biblical performance, toys with the boundary between communication/translation, and activism for the target language and culture. The poetic license necessary for such activism could conceivably compromise the content and contexts of the biblical texts leading to glaring gaps between the uses and contexts of the two audiences.

Finally, for a language that is used in "education, media, and government" (p. 1), it is unclear how much value an oral performance-based Bible will have in competition with other media. The activity in this book perhaps works best as Scripture engagement than as translation.