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Introduction

The collection of studies on oral Bible translation in this special edition of *Acta Theologica*, under the theme *Oral Bible translation for community empowerment*, highlights a growing recognition that translation is not about the transference of meaning but rather about the emergence of oral and written texts through deep engagement with the linguistic, cultural, and communicative realities of target communities. Together, these works present oral Bible translation as a multifaceted practice that intersects with language preservation, cultural identity, spirituality, and community empowerment. They collectively assert the need for a shift from text-centered translation models toward approaches that prioritise orality, performance, and the lived experiences of target audiences.

In her article *Helping to Preserve Minority Languages of Muslim Communities in the Russian Federation through Oral Bible Translation*, **Bronwen Cleaver** describes how the Institute for Bible Translation in Russia initiated oral Bible translation projects among minority Muslim communities in Dagestan, Russia. Despite the absence of Christian populations, these initiatives have played a crucial role in preserving endangered languages and cultural identities, even as they face challenges such as technological limitations and sociocultural sensitivities.

Daniel M. Gya, in his work *Translating the Psalms: Considering Target Language Orality Strategies*, emphasises the importance of rendering biblical poetry in forms and genres that align with the oral and poetic traditions of the target audience. Using the Rigwe language of Nigeria as a case study, Gya demonstrates how integrating indigenous poetic systems into

translation enhances both comprehension and emotional resonance, ensuring that the translated Psalms retain their artistic and spiritual power.

In his article *Exploring the Impact of Oral Bible Translation on Spiritual Formation in Malawi,* **Maxwell Chiwoko Banda** examines how oral Bible translation can address the disconnect between written scripture and predominantly oral cultures. Focusing on the Malokotela and Mihipiti languages, Banda finds that oral translation significantly enhances spiritual formation by making biblical messages more accessible and meaningful, especially in communities with low literacy levels.

Tobias Houston, in his article *Counting on Oral Bible Translation: Preserving Language and Culture through Numbers*, highlights the broader social impact of oral Bible translation. Using a Mozambican case study, Houston illustrates how oral Bible translation can preserve not only language but also cultural knowledge, such as traditional numbering systems. This approach empowers communities by reinforcing cultural identity and supporting language preservation efforts beyond purely religious objectives.

The complexity of representing orality is further explored by **Cynthia Miller-Naudé, Tshokolo Johannes Makutoane, and Jacobus A. Naudé** in their article *What Do We Actually Translate in Representing Orality in Oral Bible Performance?* In this article, they postulate that oral translation involves multiple layers of meaning that can be understood through semiotic categories such as iconic (the sign bears a relationship of similarity to the signified), indexical (the sign bears a relationship of causality to the signified), and symbolic (the sign bears a conventional relationship to the signified). By drawing on complexity theory and an oral Sesotho translation of Lamentations 1, they show that oral Bible translation is not a straightforward process but one that requires careful consideration of performance, meaning, and cultural expression.

Finally, the issue of quality in oral translation is critical. It is addressed by **Tshokolo J. Makutoane, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Cynthia Miller-Naudé** in their article *Quality in Oral Bible Translation and Performance.* They challenge traditional criteria such as accuracy and equivalence for assessing translations, proposing instead a comprehensive assessment tool grounded in total quality management (TQM) principles. This framework accounts for the dynamic and performative nature of oral translation, enabling a more nuanced evaluation that reflects the realities of oral communication and its reception.

These essays illustrate the ways in which orality-based Bible translations create meaningful expressions of the biblical text for communities that

are predominantly in the oral world. At the same time, the recognition of and incorporation of oral features of indigenous expressions and genres into Bible translations contribute to the appreciation and valorisation of traditional oral literature by the communities who claim oral literature as their heritage. Although the oral and written aspects of the Bible as a source text cannot be separated absolutely, the very incorporation of undeniable oral aspects of the source cultures of the Bible into its written texts surely demonstrates that the oral aspects of target languages and cultures cannot be diminished in importance, nor can they be ignored.

The symbiotic relationship between oral Bible translation and the empowerment of indigenous language communities that are often marginalised by hegemonic languages of wider communication provides important vistas for future research. Firstly, in the same way that oral Bible translations force Bible translators to consider aspects such as intonational inflection and emotional tone in the oral presentation of the biblical text, the performance of oral Bible translations requires translators to consider visual aspects such as the appearance, movements and gestures of the performers. The complex interrelationships between the visual performance of Scripture and oral and/or written representations of Scripture provide another dimension for considering the semiotics of Bible translation and the meaning-making processes of translation within the many contexts in which the Bible is both produced and used.

Secondly, the benefits and dangers of AI (artificial intelligence), both with respect to the production of oral Bible translations and with respect to their use within indigenous communities, need to be explored. To what extent can AI be used to analyse indigenous oral literature to identify previously unrecognised patterns or features of orality? To what extent is AI valuable and accurate for use in oral Bible translation, given that it is based upon large language models built on languages of wider communication (and especially western languages) rather than minority languages and literatures? To what extent can AI provide appropriate and meaningful written transcriptions of oral Bible translations for community use (this question is currently under investigation by a doctoral student in Bible translation at the University of the Free State).

Thirdly, future research should address the potential drawbacks of oral Bible translation for community development, providing a clear understanding of its liabilities as well as its benefits for community empowerment. Does oral Bible translation assist a community in achieving greater facility in the languages of wider communication, which are critical for educational advancement and employment opportunities? Does oral Bible translation, which is promoted as a solution to low literacy rates, help

a community to achieve greater literacy rates in the end? Are there ways in which the production or usage of oral Bible translations can be adapted to achieve these goals alongside the preservation and revitilisation of indigenous languages?

The expanding field of Bible translation within the expanding field of translation studies offers fertile possibilities for new research on oral Bible translation and its relationship to the community that uses it. The essays in this volume provide important case studies that further can be used as a springboard to further research.