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Research paper

Comparative Analysis on Mongolian Translations of Psalms 1

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A B S T R A C T

This research analyses Mongolian translations of Psalm 1 in terms of literary and linguistic aspects. The purpose of this study is to understand the process and challenges of translating biblical poetry into Mongolian and provide insight for future translation works. The study involves five Cyrillic versions: Ariun Bibli (2004, 2013, 2019), Bible Society of Mongolia (2015), and the Mongolian Standard Version (2024). The Hebrew source text and Biblical commentaries were used for accurate comparative analysis. The analysis focuses on lexical choice, poetic structure, and semantic nuance of the translations. The result shows how each version differs in translation technique, poetic structure and lexical choice to varying degrees. Specifically, the lexical choices of Ariun Bibli versions primarily matched the English translation of Psalms 1, while the 2015 and 2024 translations were closer to the meaning of the original Hebrew manuscript. While some translators aimed for close alignment with the source text, the others adjusted phrasing for easier comprehension.

Keywords: Bible translation, Old testament in Mongolian, translation studies, biblical poetry.

1. Challenges in Mongolian Bible translation

Scholars have long debated over particular word choices and unresolved translation problems since the first Bible translations were made in Kalmyk. Particularly, the translation of terms such as "God" and "Logos" do not have exact matches in Mongolian, and they could be confused with Buddhist and indigenous religious ideas. Translators have developed either new lexical forms or indirect alternatives to solve this issue, which has sparked theological controversy.

Early translators such as Isaac Jakob Schmidt in the 1820s used the term "Deed" (Highest) to refer to the Christian God, however the London Missionary Society (LMS) translators, Edward Stallybrass and William Swan, chose "Бурхан" in their 1846 version because it was the only general

term for God that most people would understand at the time. Some critics argue that the term "Бурхан" risks heresy by mixing up the Christian God with local gods. Therefore, some translators aimed to find a suitable word while avoiding the term "Бурхан," (God) which was thought to be too closely linked with "Buddha". One of them was John Gibbens, who introduced the term "Ертөнцийн Эзэн" (Lord of the Universe) into his 1990 translation to avoid Buddhist syncretism, which however sparked another controversy among scholars and translators. Critics of "Ертөнцийн Эзэн" say it is a strange, descriptive term that does not have the same gravity as a real religious title (Takizawa, 2011; Shimamura 2006; Garamtseren 2016). The most recent Mongolian Standard Version (MSV) led by Mongolian scholars has chosen to continue using "Бурхан" along with the term "ЯАХВЕH" which leads to "Бурхан" being the most commonly used term at the moment.

Another ongoing controversy is with the translation techniques that were used. While the early translations, including the 1846 Stallybrass-Swan version was written in a "high language Buriat" style that was thought to be too elevated, non-functional and unintelligible for the general public (Rosén 2008), contemporary attempts, like the 1990 John Gibbens translation, have been criticized for being excessively paraphrastic for its random inclusions and omissions (Kara 1997 cited by Garamtseren 2009). On the other hand, the 2000 Holy Bible was a literal translation from the English NASB version (Lee 2013), which resulted in omission or loss of the linguistic and poetic features (Garamtseren 2016). Regarding the most recent MSV, it is still in progress so there are no current comments and critiques yet.

2. Biblical poetry literary style

The Old Testament contains poems of diverse style and genre which make translation work even more challenging. Especially in the Book of Psalms, there is no commonly accepted genre classification approach, therefore the researchers frequently choose the genre based on their study objective. This study focuses on literary and linguistic form, therefore follows Hermann Gunkel's form criticism approach which classifies psalms based on recurring forms of literature, thematic elements, and social contexts (Sitz im Leben). Gunkel's classification includes major genres like hymns, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, wisdom psalms and few minor genres (Gunkel 1998). Psalm 1 is considered as wisdom poetry, which in common warns, educates, asks questions, and gives answers.

In addition to genre classification, the analysis of the Old Testament poetry emphasizes literary elements that contribute towards meaning. Parallel structure is generally acknowledged to be the prominent structural element found in Hebrew poetry. Various types of parallelism have been distinguished, such as synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and climactic parallelism, by Berlin (1985), and others such as Watson (1994). Biblical poetry also uses simile/metaphor to express theological themes. Scholars, such as Zogbo & Wendland (2000) and De Hulster (2020), have commented that in the process of translation, especially of literary texts like poetry, the translator must be concerned with meaning as well as the

aesthetic function of the language in both the original text and the translation. Personification is another figurative language that adds more to the literary beauty of poetry as it gives human qualities to non-human phenomena, which in turn results in the intensification of the emotional and theological effect. Such literary devices are the sources of complexities in the poetry of the Bible.

3. Methodology

This research closely examines five Mongolian translations of Psalm 1 through a qualitative approach. The analysis mainly focuses on similarities and differences across the five translation versions in terms of lexical choice, poetic structure, and semantic nuance. Furthermore, the Mongolian translations are compared alongside the original Hebrew text and definitions from Biblical dictionaries and commentaries. These versions involved in the study are Ariun Bibli from 2004, 2013, and 2019, Bible Society of Mongolia (BSM) version published in 1990 and updated in 2015, and the MSV of the Old Testament released in 2024. While the Ariun Bibli versions are known to be translated from the New American Standard Bible (1995) as the source text, the 2015 and 2024 versions claim to have used the original Hebrew Masoretic Text of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (1977) as a source material.

4. Analysis of Poetic Structure

Psalm 1 is a structurally dense poetry that introduces the whole Book of Psalms. It starts with a threefold verbal progression walk (הלך, *hālāk*), stand (עמד, *ʿamad*), sit (ישב, *yāšab*). Commentators note that this development shows the progressive sequence of how a person gradually becomes involved in evil deeds and becomes completely absorbed in them on a physical and mental level (Goldingay, 2006). In the Hebrew text, "הלך" (*hālāk*) means "to walk, to go" or to set foot on the path of evil, "עמד" (*ʿamad*) means "to stand" or to find a place among sinners and to join their thoughts, and "ישב" (*yāšab*) means "to sit" or to fully participate in evil deeds and make them a way of life (deClaissé-Walford et al, 2014). In Mongolian translations, the subtle differences in this artistic structure are clearly visible. The first word "הלך" (*hālāk*) is translated in four different ways: 2004

“дагадаггүй” (“does not follow”); 2013, 2024 “алхдаггүй” (does not walk); 2019 “явдаггүй” (does not go); 2015 “үл даган” (not follow). This is consistent with the Hebrew and most English versions, but in Mongolian it is common and natural to say “зөвлөгөөг дагах” (follow advice) or “зөвлөгөөгөөр явах,” (go by advice) but it is rare and bit awkward to say “зөвлөгөөгөөр алхдаггүй” (walk by advice). Among these translations, “зөвлөгөөгөөр явдаггүй” in 2019 is able to fully convey the meaning and intention compared to the other versions. The Mongolian translations have subtle differences in structure. In general, most translations in particular, Ariun Bible 2004, 2013, 2019, and MSV 2024 keep this threefold progression with little change while the BSM 2015 version deviates from this structure.

Parallelism is another essential defining feature of Hebrew poetry. Psalm 1 is described in commentaries as having antithetical parallelism, especially between verses 1–3 and 4–6 (Goldingay, J. 2006). The study shows that four of the five Mongolian translations have a somewhat to very high retention of parallelism. Usually, maintaining correlated line lengths, recurrent grammatical structures, parallel lexical collections in paired clauses. 2015 version’s parallel clauses are sometimes extended and explanatory which interferes with line symmetry. Another visible pattern is how Hebrew-based formal translations and English-mediated translations converge structurally. Though differences in source-text mediation exist, the Ariun Bible editions and SMT (2024) exhibit comparable levels of structural retention in terms of parallelism and sequencing. This implies that, at least for Psalm 1, poetic form has been regularly passed across translation traditions regardless of the source text, Hebrew or English. Overall, the analysis shows that most Mongolian versions of Psalm 1 fairly retain the parallel structure and formal progression of Hebrew wisdom poetry.

5. Lexical and Semantic Analysis

While some translations closely reflect the semantic detail of the Hebrew source, others adopt a more interpretive and stylistically flexible approach. A particular variation is evident in the translation of the Hebrew term *’ashrē* (אֲשֵׁרִי), which is the first word in Psalms 1:1. The translations position this word

later in the verse, possibly due to grammatical issues. However, the Hebrew word may deliberately placed it at the beginning, forming an alliteration with the first word of verse 2 *’āshar* meaning “to walk”, which according to commentaries sounds similar to *ashrē*. The 2019 and 2024 versions build rhythm by echoing first sounds among core ethical words with alliteration. On vocabulary grounds, *’ashrē* appears as either “*ерөөлтэй*” (blessed) or “*сайшаалтай*” (commendable). Though “*сайшаалтай*” brings a lyrical quality, it captures less of the original Hebrew meaning tied to fortune or flourishing. “*Ерөөлтэй*”, however, means blessed, fortunate which is closer to the original text. Looking at word choice and rhythm, versions with “*Хүн ерөөлтэй ээ*” hold closest to the original Hebrew meaning while keeping the line’s lyrical flow.

Another significant area of variation among the translations concerns the three terms describing moral decline in Psalm 1:1: *rasha’im* (“the wicked”), *chatta’im* (“sinners”), and *letzim* (“scoffers”). These terms form a graded ethical progression in the Hebrew text and play a central role in the verse’s moral framework. Though 2004 and 2015 translated it as “*хорон муу хүн*” (wicked person) or “*хорон муу этгээд*,” (wicked individual) pointing to wickedness or moral corruption, later versions 2013, 2019, and 2024, the word as “*буруутнууд*” (wrongdoers/guilty ones) or “*буруу хүмүүс*” (wrong people) which is softer in tone, with less moral depth. As for the term *chatta’im*, the 2004 and 2013 versions directly translated the NASB term “sinners” as “*нүгэлтнүүд*” (sinners). The 2019 and 2024 versions add the word “*бузар хүгэлтнүүд*” (filthy sinners) to emphasize the abomination of sin. However, the 2015 version translates it as “*гэмт этгээд*” (criminals) with a legal connotation, slightly different from the original meaning of immoral sinners who stand against God. As for the third line, “*לְצִיִּים* (*letzim*, scorners)”, the 2004, 2013, and 2019 translations translate it as “*басамжлагчид*” (scorners), while the SMO version expands and deepens the meaning to “*басаж доромжлогсод*” (scorning and insulting ones). However, the 2015 version translates “*тохуурхагчид*” (mockers) with a relatively milder meaning.

Psalm 1:2 describes the opposite of a person who is slowly falling into the evil ways described in Psalm 1:1, who reads and meditates on God’s law/teachings (Wilson, G. H. 2002, p. 95). The

Hebrew original verse “יְהוָה חִפְצוֹ וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה” contains two main verbs in its meaning, “חִפְצוֹ” (chephets) and “יִהְיֶה” (yehgeh). Chephets means joy and pleasure from the heart of a person, and the word “бахдах” (boastful joy) commonly used in modern Mongolian translations does not correspond to this meaning (Strong, 1890). “Бахдах” has a more outwardly expressed emotion and a tone of pride, while chephets denotes a quiet, deep inner pleasure and desire. Therefore, words such as “баярлах” (rejoice) in 2004 and 2024 or “таашаалах” (enjoy) in 2015 are more appropriate choices. On the other hand, the word “יִהְיֶה” (yehgeh) includes the meaning of pondering, whispering, and meditating (Strong, 1890). On the one hand, it is not a one-time reading of God’s law, but a process of deeply reflecting on it, understanding it, and meditating on it in your daily life. This meaning is expressed in the translations with the phrases “тунгаан бясалгах” (reflect and meditate), “тунгаана” (contemplate/reflect) of 2004, 2024, “бясалгана” (meditates) of 2013, 2019, and “тунгаан бодож байдаг” (continuously reflect) of 2015 version. “Бясалгана” is slightly different from the word “יִהְיֶה” (yehgeh) meaning whispering/murmur and seems closer to English translations of “meditate”. The 2004, 2013, and 2019 versions did not translate directly from the original Hebrew, so it is likely that they translated the NASB English version of “meditate” literally. However, the 2015 and 2024 versions used the word “тунгаах” which is closer to the meaning of the original word, but it did not convey the act of reading in a whisper (Wilson, G. H. 2002, p. 95). Another notable difference in translation is the word “תּוֹרָה” (towrah). It is translated as “заавар” (instruction) in 2024, while other versions translate it as “хуулийг” (law). The basic meaning of the word is that it refers to the Deuteronomy from the five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, and the general meaning is instruction and lesson. Although both translations are correct, the 2024 version is closer to the Hebrew original.

Lastly, the word “יְהוָה” (y’hwäh) is a subject of debate among scholars and translators. It is translated differently across versions as “ЭЗЭН” (LORD), “Мөнхийн Эзэн” (Eternal Lord), “ИАБЭ” (YAHWH). The most common translation is “ИАБЭ”, which is probably a literal translation of the phrase “the LORD” in English translations such

as the NASB. However, this translation does not fully convey the deep emotional meaning of the word y’hwäh, which retains the meaning of respect and relation (VanGemeran, W. A. 2008, p. 192). However, the 2024 version, which is a literal translation from the Hebrew original, “ИАБЭ”, preserves the form more faithfully. As VanGemeran, W. A. (2008, p. 192) explains, Yahweh is the covenant name by which God revealed himself to the people of Israel (Exodus 3:15) and is an expression of his love. The Mongolian translations can all be considered optimal in terms of word choice, especially when Christianity was not well known in the early 2000s, using the word “ЭЗЭН” would have been a more understandable choice for readers. However, since Christianity is a little more well-known today compared to that time, the name “ИАБЭ” used in the 2024 translation can be considered acceptable choice in terms of meaning and form.

6. Metaphor, Imagery, and Figurative Language

Psalm 1:3 contains a simile “יְהוָה כְּעֵץ שְׂתוּל עַל-מַיִם” (wəhāyâ kə’ēš šātûl ‘al-palgê māyim), meaning “He is like a tree planted by streams of water.” The tree functions as a conventional metaphor for wisdom and stability, symbolizing divine blessing, joy, perseverance, and success. The Hebrew verb šātûl (planted) denotes intentional and purposeful planting rather than natural growth. Mongolian translations generally translate this as “тарьсан” (planted) or “суулгасан” (transplanted), both of which partially convey intentionality. However, Craigie & Tate (2004, p. 174) suggest the tree was transplanted from a dry area to a well-watered location, while according to deClaissé-Walford et al (2014, p. 66) it’s either a mature tree or a sapling. Therefore, “тарьсан” insufficiently reflects the nuance of deliberate transplantation inherent in šātûl, whereas the 2015 translation’s use of “суулгасан” aligns more closely with the Hebrew semantic range.

The next line of the verse, “אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעִתּוֹ” “Gives its fruit in its season” indicates the blessing, success, and joy that God will give to his people (VanGemeran, W. A. 2008, p. 157). This is combined with the next line, “וְעֵצוֹ לֹא-יִבֹּל” “As the root and the leaves do not wither.” The phrase “in its season”

suggests that the time of fruit bearing is the most stressful season and the summer sun is the main condition for fruit ripening, but excessive heat can cause the fruit and leaves to wither, and the time of success also brings challenges (Goldingay, J. 2006, p. 88). The translations, except for the 2015 version, are generally similar, with some minor differences in word choice. The final line of the Hebrew original verse *וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה יִצְלֵחַ* (“whatever he does will succeed”) is translated as “амжилт”(success) in most Mongolian versions, while the 2004 translation differs from the others in that it is translated as “өлзийтэй” (fortunate). As noted in Bible commentaries, the righteous person does not make success his goal, but rather receives it as a by-product of God’s blessing (VanGemeren, W. A. 2008, p. 157). The word *יַצְלֵחַ* (yatz'liy^ach) has a meaning of be good, be meet, be profitable rather than “success” (Strong, 1890). Considering these, the translation “амжилт” seems a bit inappropriate in terms of meaning. Another thing to note is that the 2004, 2015, and 2024 translations translate it as “хүн амжилттай”. As Robert points out, the poem refers to both the tree and the person with the masculine verb “he,” which makes it somewhat unclear whether the meaning of the word yatz'liy^ach “өлзийтэй” is applied to the tree or to the person (Alter, 2007). Therefore, the translation “түүнд” may better preserve this feature of the original text.

In Psalm 1:3, the life of the righteous is compared to a fruitful tree, meaning that it is blessed and fruitful, while in Psalm 1:4, the life of the wicked is compared to chaff that is blown by the wind. At this time, when the villagers harvested grain, they would rake it up and sift it, throwing all the chaff and other debris into the wind. Some biblical commentaries say that the rootless, light, and useless nature of *חֲבֵרִים* (Motz) “chaff” is likened to the wicked (Craigie & Tate. 2004, p. 155) and to how easily the wicked are destroyed and unable to endure God’s judgment or the fate of the wicked in the course of life (Longman, T. 2014, pp. 145-146). Mongolian translations have their own interpretations of this metaphor. The 2004 Holy Bible uses the verb “салхинд хийсдэг” (blown by the wind) which slightly weakens the strong intention of *נָדַף* (nâdaph), to drive away (Strong, 1890). In the 2013 and 2019 versions, the translation is “салхиар ялгагдан хаягдах” (scattered by wind) which more clearly conveys the action of sifting. Although it is

somewhat consistent with the original meaning of the verse, it weakens the original meaning. The 2015 Bible uses the verb “салхинд туугдан одох” (to be driven away by the wind) to reflect the meaning and metaphor of the original well, but the additional explanation “үнэ цэнгүй ажээ” (worthless / of no value) is an extension of a sentence that is not in the original source. However, the 2024 translation uses the verb “салхинд туугдах” (driven away by wind) in the most concise way in terms of meaning, structure, and phrasing, and is closer to the original.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study compared five different versions of Psalm 1 translated into Mongolian. The results show that all translations retain the poetic structure, imagery, and semantic nuance to an extent. However, it is clear that the language, word choice, and subtle differences in meaning vary across each version. The researcher does not aim to engage in theological evaluation and criticize or evaluate any of the translations. Each version chooses translation methods and styles based on their own objective, cultural, and social contexts, so it would be inappropriate to evaluate these differences. This study focuses on the process and challenges of translating biblical poetry into Mongolian, a task widely recognized as one of the most demanding forms of literary translation. By showing how the same literary text can be translated differently, this study provides insight for future translation works. The Bible is a well-known literary work worldwide, and it is likely that many translators will attempt to translate it in the future.

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