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Dunham Bible Museum

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The Old Testament, Translated into Cherokee

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On My Own, I Come

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In the Dunham Bible Museum of Houston Christian University, there is a page of the Bible translated into the Cherokee language. Unlike the other Native American translations on display that resemble the English language, the alphabetic characters of the Cherokee translation are illustrated with unique swirls and shapes. In the wake of American colonization, the Cherokee translation stands as a tremendous cultural accomplishment. The delicate page is a linguistic treasure that represents the tenacity of an enduring people suffering under the pressure of being forcibly removed from their homeland. The Removal Act of 1830 required the Cherokee to redefine themselves in the face of a new world that enforced tearing them from their roots and moving them into designated Indian Territory by Andrew Jackson. Without any written language, the Cherokee had no means of linguistic representation. However, with Sequoyah's creation of the Cherokee syllabary, the Cherokee were given a voice and were exposed to Christianity on their own terms.

Many early missionaries attempted to convert the Cherokee to Christianity, but the Moravians achieved the most success. A Moravian group of missionaries known as the Society of United Brethren went near the eastern country in 1752 to establish the community of Wachovia on the upper Yadkin River in North Carolina (Malone 128). The Cherokee chiefs were initially against allowing the religion of the white men to influence their people, despite the repeated attempts of English-speaking Presbyterians, Anglicans, and German-speaking Moravians (Owens 3). Chief Yâ'nûgûñ'ski counseled "peace and friendship with the whites, but he had long rebuffed the missionaries and remained, to his death, extremely suspicious of their intentions" (3). Over time, however, the Cherokee became convinced that the white men had "a book of great power and secrets, containing the hidden words which made them so strong. The

chiefs understood that the whites called this book ‘God’s Word’” (3). Recognizing the power the whites possessed, the Cherokee became curious about their religion. In 1798, the Moravians tried to convert the Cherokee people again, but this time they made an effort to understand what the Cherokee already believed (3). The Moravian missionaries were pleased to discover a Cherokee word that seemed to allude to a supreme deity known as “Utajah,” roughly translated by the Moravians to mean “‘a great man who dwells above’” (3). The Cherokee expressed interest in understanding the source of the “white man’s power, and they had heard rumors that this was what the missionaries wanted to bring to them” (4). In the words of Arcowee, the Cherokee wanted “the great book from which they can learn all things” (William 20-21). The Moravians interpreted their desires as the beginning of a spiritual awakening, necessitating the translation of the Bible.

While some missionaries argued that the Cherokee should come to understand God through the English language, others believed that American missionaries should develop a way to represent the language of indigenous peoples. After trying to learn the Cherokee language for several years, the Moravians failed and “blamed their lack of success on the presumed deficiencies of the language itself” (Owens 6). The Cherokee language, according to the Moravians, was “incapable of expressing abstract thought” and, before the Cherokee could be evangelized, “they must be civilized; civilized included learning to speak and read English” (4). Other missionaries, however, such as John Pickering, recognized “the important advantage of being enabled to discover at once by the eye, etymologies and affinities in the Indian dialects, which with our present orthography are only discernible by the ear” (Pickering Section 6). Pickering and a mixed-blood Cherokee convert named David Brown, therefore, began constructing a Cherokee alphabet using English letters. Although their efforts assisted in the

progression of the Cherokee language, their work would soon be rendered obsolete by the Cherokee syllabary created by Sequoyah.

Sequoyah developed an original written language for his people, giving them their own means of linguistic representation. Within Sequoyah's syllabary, "each syllable combination of consonant and vowel in the spoken Cherokee language was represented by a unique symbol in the written system" (Owens 6-7). He was able to represent his entire language with only 86 characters, completely ending all of the missionary work focused on writing Cherokee in an English-based orthography. Now that the Cherokee could read their own language, literacy spread like wildfire. To the missionaries' delight, one of the first books to be desired was the Bible (7). Commissioned by the Cherokee National Council in 1825, David Brown eagerly began to translate the New Testament using the syllabary of the Cherokee people (Harvey 522). Sequoyah's masterful feat opened the door for his people to experience the Bible for themselves with their own unique language; and, for "the first time in history an evangelized people were reading the New Testament translated by their own kinsmen, into their own language, using a writing system developed, refined, and popularized entirely as their own" (Owens 8). Because of Sequoyah's syllabary, the Cherokee had a linguistic advantage in contrast with other evangelized peoples after colonization. The syllabary allowed the Cherokee to have the authority over how the Biblical translations would be fashioned. Instead of conforming to the idea that they must learn English in order to read the Bible, the Cherokee were able to translate the English Bible into *their own* language. They did not become a converted people subservient to the regulations of colonization. Through Sequoyah's syllabary, the Cherokee came to understand Christianity on their own terms.

The description in the Dunham Bible Museum states that the page is either the translation of Genesis or the first book of Moses. The verse found in Genesis where God tells man to “fill the earth and subdue it” was interpreted by early colonizers as the validation for the colonization of the Native Americans (1:28, Deloria). If this verse is on display, the powerful message of Sequoyah’s accomplishment becomes even more ground-breaking. The thoughtful and intricate syllabary would become not only a testimony of the strength of the Cherokee people to not succumb to the influence of American colonizers, but also a powerful illustration of a people meeting God as themselves, apart from American influence, in a way that reflects the personal love of Jesus. After reading the translation of the New Testament in the Cherokee syllabary, chief Yâ’nû-gûñ’ski is said to have responded saying “it seems to be a good book; strange that the white people are not better after having had it so long” (Owens 3). The Cherokee met God in their own personal language. They did not conform to English like other colonized peoples. Rather, they came to Jesus directly, thanks to the genius of one of their own.

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