Michael Greed – Dawn Kruger (eds.):

*God and Language: Exploring the Role
of Language in the Mission of God*

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According to its Introduction, this book was inspired during an SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) missiological reflection meeting in June 2019 by a vision on God and language, on which 28 papers were presented. These are divided into seven broad sections with a total of 458 pages. Most of the authors in this book work with SIL International, which is rated[1] as a pioneering missionary organization that has done much work in documenting the languages of the world with an interest in translating the Bible. These authors represent all continents, with twelve coming from the Americas, eight from Africa, seven from Europe, two from Asia, and one from Australia.

To sum up the authors' information, they have served in different roles, like, for instance, as Wycliffe Bible translators, as the SIL International chief research officer, etc. They hold degrees of MDiv, MA, MEd, DMin, PhD, ThD in English, linguistics, sociolinguistics, African linguistics, mission Theology, inter-cultural studies etc. Some of them have carried out fieldwork throughout South Asia and the Himalayas or in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia etc. Some of them have translated the Bible into their own languages and have published on the Bible translation, anthropology, disability studies, and inter-cultural theology, and so on.

This book aims to establish the value of language as a theological and missiological category. It explores the solid theological, missiological and biblical foundations concerning the role of language within the mission of God, with the conviction that the study of human language concerns not only morphology or syntax but also its characteristics as a carrier of culture.

As indicated above, the volume consists of seven broad sections, which are as follows: 1. the role of language in the mission of God; 2. language in and of the Bible; 3. language and social and development issues; 4. linguistic hospitality; 5. oral communication; 6. translating language; 7. facing the language.

Section 1 introduces the topic of the role of language in the mission of God, and contains five academic papers, which cover the following five themes: language and God's presence; language diversity; the role of language in God's mission; the

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[1] Stephen R. Anderson: Language: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford 2012, chapter 2, 10.

continuum between language and God's mission; God's inclusive mission through languages.

Section 2 turns to language in and of the Bible, and contains six academic papers, which cover the following six themes: multilingualism in the Old Testament; multilingualism in the New Testament; Koine Greek in which the New Testament is written, and its use of the mission; the Greek translation of Jesus' original Aramaic in the Gospel; the relationship between language, identity, and disorder; the judgements of God and the place of language in God's mission.

Section 3 discusses the topic of language, social, and development issues. It contains six academic papers, which cover the following six themes: flourishing and language; the role of ecological actions in communicating the gospel; linguistic injustice; education and language policy development within the framework of the mission of God; linguistic poverty; language shift.

Section 4 is devoted to linguistic hospitality. It contains three academic papers, which cover the following three themes: a welcome to the linguistic other; the Commandment to love God and neighbor alongside the needs of minority language communities; demonstration on how linguistic diversity can promote living out the mission of God by a case study from the Luhyia community in Kenya.

Section 5 is about oral communication, which contains two academic papers, covering the following themes: a dynamic oral approach in a case study from Siberia; oral communication at the time of creation and a variety in the African context.

Section 6 relates to translating language, which contains three academic papers covering the following three themes: linguistic differences between languages which enrich the divine revelation; different paradigms relating to God, language, and translation; a case study from the Yansi people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo on translating Lord with the concept Mwol.

Finally, section 7 explores what is language and contains three academic papers, covering the following three themes: the relationship between language, culture, and the image of God revealed through author's personal experience in Papua New Guinea; the ever-dynamic lexeme; God, a linguistic concept towards an ethnolinguistic philosophy of thought and conscience.

I would like to discuss the following aspects of the book. First off, in the first paper (*Language: the gift of God's presence*), Dawn Kruger[2] introduces language as a gift from God to humanity through which God makes Himself known to us and abides with us. (17.) He states God's desire is to break the yoke that holds people in slavery whether that could be emotionally, culturally, or linguistically, as well as

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[2]   The author, Dawn Kruger has served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International for 41 years. She holds an MA in English (University of Central Florida, 2005) and an MA in Missiology (Gloucester University, England, 2018).

breaking the yoke of our slavery to sin. Generally speaking, it is easier for people to understand the shackles of emotion and culture, but it seems that not many people mention of the yoke of language. Regrettably, however, the author did not elaborate further on this, but we reckon further research in this area should be necessary and meaningful.

Second, in the second research paper (*Language diversity: curse or blessing?*) the author Gary Simons[3] challenges the traditional interpretation of the Babel story which holds that multiplicity of language is a curse. (40.) He suggests two other ways of reading the Babel story, namely, one is rebellion and restoration, another is domination and deliverance. He concludes that language diversity is part of the divine blessing on creation. He quotes Hayashi Larry's point of view in the article of *The Blessing of Babel: A Theology of Languages* (CanIL Electronic Working Papers 3 [2017]: 64–76) that translating the Bible into a language for the first time reveals fresh insights about the meaning of the text. This is a quite convincing argument though unfortunately the author provides no further empirical evidence. If it is consistent with the theme of this book, i.e. God and language, then illustrative research in this area will be able to provide empirical data for the intersection of linguistics and theology.

Third, in the seventh paper (*Multilingualism in the New Testament*), the author Mamy Raharimanantsoa says the following:[4]

The example of Paul shows us how mastering a language other than your own can save you from a complicated situation. Language allows you to express yourself, to explain yourself, and to defend your rights. If you do not speak the language of your accuser, you may be discriminated against and reduced to silence. (102.)

This profoundly illuminates the social nature of language, which determines a person's status and identity, and also explains the innate power and authority of language. Moreover, the tenth paper[5] quotes a 2018 statement of Martin Ehala:[6] "People have a need to belong. That sense of identity helps them feel covered and connected. Language is a strong identifier, and it is still the most inherently meaningful

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[3] The author, Gary F. Simons is Chief Research Officer for SIL International. He is also Director of the Pike Center for Integrative Scholarship and the Executive Editor of Ethnologue. He holds a PhD in linguistics from Cornell University and has done fieldwork in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

[4] The author, Mamy Raharimanantsoa, with PhD degree of Protestant University of Brazzaville, is a Bible scholar who graduated from Uppsala University, Sweden (Mort et Espérance selon la Bible Hébraïque, 2006). Currently he teaches at the Protestant University of Brazzaville (Old Testament Studies), is a visiting teacher at Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui (FATEB) Extension Yaoundé, and is training to be a Bible translation consultant for SIL Congo.

[5] Margaret Doll: Language and the redemptive word of God, 147. The author, Margaret Doll has been a member of Wycliffe Bible Translators since 1989. She received her MDiv (2009) and DMin (2012) from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary.

[6] Ehala, Martin: Signs of Identity: The Anatomy of Belonging. New York: Routledge, 2018. 44–45.

method of communicating." The twelfth paper in turn quotes Robert E. Longacre[7] who states: "Language issues have the potential to enable or inhibit people's experience of that fullness of life because language and human life are ultimately inseparable." These statements all show us how important a role language plays in people's spiritual life.

Then again, in the ninth paper,[8] Michael Greed applies the Speech Act Theory, which was introduced by the Oxford philosopher John Austin (1911–1960) and developed by the Berkeley philosopher John Searle (born 1932). He analyses two passages in the Gospel of Mark (5:41, 7:34) that retain Jesus' native language to exemplify the illocutionary and perlocutionary, and indicates the deficiencies of interlingual translation in the original text. He points out that:

> something would be lost in translation if he failed to retain the original words of Jesus in these two particular speech acts. …Mark's retention of the Aramaic in these two instances may suggest there are moments when the linguistic form takes on a life of its own, and as a result translation is only a poor second best. (147.)

(Perhaps more precisely, the language form he mentions here refers to the native language.) This provides us with an excellent example thatusing linguistic theory can help people understand the Bible more deeply and effectively.

In the twenty-fourth paper (*Different paradigms relating to God, language, and translation*),[9] the author, Dick Kroneman proposes the following ideas:

> Some authors have called attention to the fact that translation is not just a matter of linguistic transformation – a changing of codes or sequences of labels. In order for translation to be successful, it needs to lead to transformation. This can only take place if the readers and hearers perceive the message to be relevant to their context. Translation without contextualization will most likely not lead to appropriation of the message and transformation of the hearer. Contextualization is important. However, it should never lead to a loss of accuracy of meaning or to syncretism. (388.)

He also summarizes the differences between the so-called "Revelation paradigm"

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[7] Longacre, Robert E.: An Anatomy of Speech Notions. Netherlands: The Peter De Ridder Press, 1976, 319.

[8] Michael Greed: Talitha koum, which means, 'Little girl, get up!' The author, Michael Greed has an MA in Missiology and Leadership from Gloucester University, England, where his dissertation was on why liminal people make the best leaders.

[9] The author, Dick Kroneman is a senior translation consultant and serves as the SIL International Coordinator for Translation Research and Practice. He holds an MTh from Utrecht University, a PhD in translation studies from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and a ThD from the Evangelical Christian University in Sorong, Indonesia. He has done fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

and the "Communication paradigm" in 18 aspects, which are: The nature of God's revelation in the Bible; The main function of the Bible; Complexity of meaning in the Scriptures; Perspective on communication in Bible translation; Rendering of metaphors and idioms; Interpretation; Contextualization and so on. This list is extremely impressive and thought-provoking. They perfectly connect with the content of the twenty-sixth paper[10] and the twenty-seventh paper,[11] highlighting the great significance of conceptualization and dynamic lexemic transformation in changing the quality of human life. The twenty-sixth paper describes monochronic and polychronic orientation through the author's real experience and her social survey. It demonstrates that reconceptualization can produce vastly different results, directly relevant to Christian spirituality. All of these inspired in us the idea that the topic of God and language can be approached from different angles such as the philosophical perspective, theological perspective, or missiological perspective. Each perspective has its own merits. Ideally, they complement one another.

Furthermore, I think the following aspects are still open to discussion. In the seventh paper, Mamy Raharimanantsoa states: "We have noted that the multitude of believers in Revelation 7 is characterized by linguistic diversity." (104.) And also, in the nineteenth paper,[12] Grace Chou states a similar point: "Additionally, Revelation 7:9-12 describes the worship before the throne in heaven with different nations, peoples, languages, and tribes praising God each in their own language… why does he not unify the language to be one? Why does he instead gather people as they are?"[13] On the same page, she even describes a detail: "Revelation also depicts a song that people sing with different voices..." Let us see this passage in the literal wording of the Scripture,[14] i.e. Revelation 7:9-12: "After this I looked, and there before me

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[10] Matthew E. Crosland: Language, culture, and the image of God: how God revealed himself to me in Papua New Guinea, 427. Matthew Crosland and his family served with SIL Papua New Guinea for 10 years overseeing their academic training program. Matthew has an MA in Inter-cultural Studies from Wheaton College and a PhD. in Inter-cultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary.

[11] Larry S. Hayashi: The ever-dynamic lexeme, 444. The author, Larry S. Hayashi, MA, has worked for more than 30 years in SIL language software development and training. He is an instructor at the Canada Institute of Linguistics. His interests include lexicography, field methodologies, and the intersection of faith with the mental lexicon.

[12] Grace Chou: Towards linguistic diversity with linguistic hospitality, 302–313. The author, Grace Chou is from Taiwan, and serves with Wycliffe Global Alliance Asia-Pacific. She served with SIL from 1995 to 2018 in linguistic research and Bible translation in Southeast Asia. She holds a DMin from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary.

[13] However, she says: "It could be that there is only one language that everyone speaks." (305.). This appears to contradict the narrative in this paragraph.

[14] Bible quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

was a great multitude that no one could count, *from* every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

So the Scripture is "*from* every ... language." The preposition "from" clearly indicates that what is being discussed here is their origin and original background, rather than their status in the current scenario. We can combine this with 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, which says: "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of the eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

That is to say, Revelation 7:9 describes the scene in heaven from the perspective of the situation on earth; namely, those who will be saved in the future include these who currently use various languages on earth, and they will be transformed and stand before the throne in the future. As for the language used by these who are saved to praise God when they stand before the throne, this verse does not illuminate us clearly, neither does it contain a message on whether it is in different voices or not. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that the saved people will be transformed at that time and will no longer be the same as they were on earth, but rather, without sin, just like God created people as monolingual.

Matthew E. Crosland writes in the twenty-sixth paper that "Further, I believe John saw people from *every* culture (nation, tribe, people, and language) standing before the throne of God in Revelation 7:9. To me this is a clear indication that culture will not pass away but be redeemed." (423.)

This view should also have been based on the same understanding as above. However, the so-called culture may have broad and narrow dimensions. Let us briefly mention Christian culture and pagan culture broadly for the time being. The differences between the two are obviously significant. Through the Christian cultural lens, most pagan cultures are inconsistent with the Bible. The Bible tells us that the Lord Jesus sacrificed His life and shed His precious blood to redeem Abraham's descendants, not even angels (Hebrews 2:16).

Besides, in the nineteenth paper, the author claims,

> I like to think about it like this: …do the languages and the speakers of the language have interactions with each other? It might be helpful for us to think about a metaphor. Is linguistic diversity a picture of different valuable ingredients like spices, vegetables, meat, flowers, etc. in the market? (309.)

In contrast to this, we believe that the fact that languages can be translated into each other shows that they are self-contained, so various languages can express the truth. This is obviously different from the metaphor of various dishes complementing one another.

All in all, God's powerful Word creates order and gives meaning to our lives. As beings created in God's image, we have been given the gift of language as a means to

identify, order, define, and be agents of meaning. However, despite the divine origin of language, it is simultaneously used as a method to distort truth, hide informative intent, plant doubts, and assign dishonor. How can we reform our languages and recover the meaning of conformity to God's will? "How can we restore our primary identity as image-bearers of God? How can we come out of hiding and experience shalom?" (148.) "Missional engagement with language, then, must extend into the academic realm to explore and firm up a theology of language…"[15] "We must develop a missiology of language that reflects the justice-loving, justice-doing nature of God, leading to the flourishing of all people."[16] We do perceive this very calling and mission as advocated above in the tenth, twelfth and fourteenth papers.

Knowledge of linguistics is essential in studying and understanding the Bible. Different understandings lead to different religious denominations. People often use the metaphor of blind men touching an elephant to explain the current situation of different sects. Obviously, the elephant is a metaphor for the Truth, which exists objectively. It is the way and angle of people approaching it and touching it that determines the one-sidedness of people's understanding. One of the methods and ways of touching the Truth is the scientific grasp of language.

On the whole, this book inspires us to rise up and make efforts to thoroughly explore language and its relationship to God's activity. It allows us to see that more and more people who love God are awakening to a reality, which is the fact that linguistic research within the arena of theology has not received the attention it deserves. As written in the foreword of this book:

> Any keen observer would concur that the 20th-century mission movement was birthed by the discovery that language holds the key to unlocking the reception and appropriation of the gospel for many people groups. The spread of Christianity in the 20th century was fuelled by the close attention given to the scientific study of language and other social sciences in the practice of mission. (1.)

We believe that this book leads to a new realm of linguistic theology, although there are inevitably controversial views in it as yet. It builds a more valuable world of linguistic theology, awaiting us to make deeper and broader explorations.

Wang Lijin

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[15] Michel Kenmogne: Flourishing and Language, 167. The author, Michel Kenmogne holds a PhD in African Linguistics. For 20 years he served in various roles within Wycliffe Global Alliance, and since 2016 he has been the Executive Director of SIL International.

[16] Evan Falk: Language, Justice, and Mission, 211. Evan Falk works in communications out of the SIL International Executive Director's office.