



Translating the Bible into Khmer **A Historical Overview of Khmer Bible Versions**

By Arun Sok Nhep, United Bible Societies, January 2025

Introduction - The Pioneers

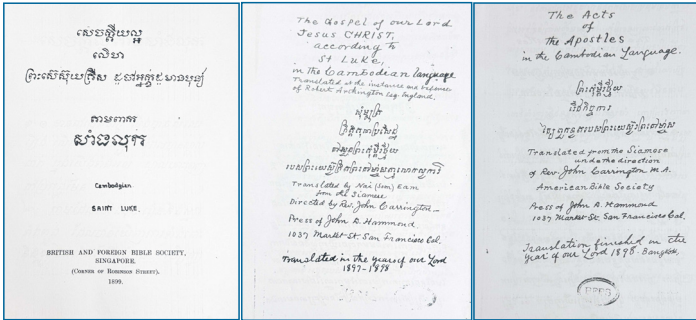
The aspiration to make the Scriptures accessible to the Khmer people has a long and complex history, shaped by colonial encounters, missionary strategies, and linguistic development. Efforts to translate the Bible into Khmer reflect not only translation initiatives but also broader cultural differences and political realities in Indochina during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The earliest recorded attempt dates to the nineteenth century, when Marie-Joseph Guesdon (1852-1939), a French priest, translated selected Gospel passages used in the Roman Catholic liturgy into Khmer. His work reflects the Catholic mission's concern to provide liturgical texts for Khmer-speaking communities, though not yet a complete vernacular Bible. These translations were published by the Press of the Paris Foreign Missions in Hong Kong.

A more systematic Protestant initiative began in 1892, following the arrival of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in Indochina. The Society identified as one of its first priorities the translation of the Gospel into Khmer. The task was entrusted to a Cambodian civil servant serving at the royal palace in Phnom Penh, whose work, based on a French source text, was completed after several years. The first Gospel of Luke in Khmer was subsequently printed in 1899 in Singapore.

Around the same period, and apparently unaware of the BFBS initiative, the American Bible Society (ABS), based in Bangkok, undertook its own translation project. An ABS representative engaged a Cambodian Buddhist monk, fluent in Thai, to render the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles from Thai into Khmer. Both portions of Scripture were subsequently published in the United States in 1900.

Together, these early efforts reveal the fragmented yet determined character of Bible translation into Khmer language during the late nineteenth century. They demonstrate the intersection of Catholic and Protestant missions, the dependence on colonial infrastructures, and the complex linguistic mediations that marked the first steps toward providing the Khmer people with access to the Christian Scriptures in their own language.



The First Khmer Bible

The history of the first Khmer Bible-commonly known as the Khmer Old Version of Hammond Version-is deeply intertwined with the ministry of the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) and British & Foreign Bible Society during the colonial period. This monumental translation project spans over three decades and represents a pivotal chapter in the development of the Cambodia Church and biblical literature in the Khmer language.



In 1923, the C&MA missionaries arrived in Cambodia. Among them was **Rev. Arthur Hammond**, who was commissioned by the C&MA to undertake the translation of the Bible into Khmer. Although the completed Bible would later bear his name, the project was far from a solo effort. The translation was a collaborative undertaking between the BFBS, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and leaders of the Khmer Evangelical Church.

Under BFBS supervision, a dedicated translation committee was formed, including: Rev. Arthur Hammond – Main Translator, Rev. David Ellison, Mrs. Floyd Peterson, Rev. Harold Sechrist, Rev. Harry M. Taylor – Reviewers (C&MA Missionaries), Rev. Try Heng, Rev. Neak Ham, Rev. So Chhum, Rev. Nget Choy – Proofreaders (Khmer Evangelical Church).

Over the course of more than 30 years, this committed team worked painstakingly to completed the translation of the full Bible into Khmer. Their work spanned significant challenges, including World War II, political instability, and changes in Khmer orthography and grammar, all of which complicated the translation process.

Publication and Lasting Legacy

In 1954, the first full edition of the Khmer Old Version was published by the British & Foreign Bible Society. A second edition, incorporating minor textual revisions, was released in 1964. These editions remain historically significant for the Church in Cambodia.

For decades, this translation served as the standard Bible for Cambodian churches, providing a foundational text for worship, teaching, and spiritual formation. Despite changes in language and society, it remained a beloved and respected translation well into the 21st century.



Establishment of the Bible Society in Cambodia

Initially, Bible work in Cambodia was administered under the umbrella of the Bible Society in Indochina, managed by BFBS and staffed primarily by C&MA missionaries. When the British & Foreign Bible Society transferred its operations to the United Bible Societies (UBS), the Cambodian Bible Society was officially established in 1968. It was later renamed the Bible Society in Khmer Republic. However, the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975 brought all operations to a halt. Churches were persecuted, Christian activity was banned, and the Bible Society's work was suspended for nearly two decades.

It was not until 1993, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the gradual restoration of religious freedom, that the Bible Society in Cambodia resumed its ministry. Picking up the legacy of its predecessors, the Society recommitted itself to the mission of making God's Word accessible to all Cambodians.

The Bible in Today's Khmer Version

The First Attempt: (1968–1975)

In 1968, the newly established national Bible Society in Cambodia undertook a significant initiative: a new Bible translation into Khmer. Known as the Today's Khmer Version (TKV), the project was launched by the United Bible Societies (UBS) in response to a request from Cambodian church leaders for a translation in everyday, commonly spoken Khmer.

The translation followed dynamic equivalence principles, as advocated by UBS, to ensure both accuracy and accessibility for ordinary readers. The translation team was composed of leaders from both the Evangelical and Catholic churches, in keeping with UBS's interconfessional spirit and principles.

By the time the Khmer Rouge seized power on April 17, 1975, the team had completed a full draft of the New Testament. Tragically, this progress was halted. The rise of the genocidal regime led to the closure of the Bible Society's office, and the Bible ministry in Cambodia—including the TKV translation project—came to a sudden end. Almost all translators faced lost their lives under the regime.

The complete manuscript of the TKV New Testament was lost. Only a few chapters of the Gospel of Matthew survived—safeguarded by Father François, who fled to France with these precious fragments.

Resuming the Work in Exile (1985–1992)

Determined to see the Khmer Bible completed, Father François Ponchaud pressed on. In 1984, he approached the French Bible Society in Paris, sharing his vision and concern for the Cambodian people. Moved by the urgency and historical importance of the project, the General Secretary of the French Bible Society, Rev. Jean Boyer, committed to supporting a new Khmer Bible translation.

After consultation between the French Bible Society, UBS, and Cambodian church leaders, a new translation team was formed in Paris in April 1985—exactly ten years after the first project was interrupted.

This new translation was an interconfessional and collaborative effort involving the United Bible Societies, French Bible Society, Swiss Evangelical Mission, and the Missions Étrangères de Paris.



From France, the team, led by **Rev. Arun Sok Nhep** as the main translator, worked under the guidance of a UBS Translation Consultant and adhered strictly to UBS translation principles. The New Testament translation team also included: Father François Ponchaud (Exegete), Mr. Prom Chan (Reviewer), Mr. Chhoeung Sokhom (Stylist). The New Testament translation was completed in 1992.

Completing the Full Bible in Cambodia (1993–1998)

In June 1993, Rev. Arun Sok Nhep and Father Ponchaud returned to Cambodia to continue the Old Testament translation. The expanded team in Phnom Penh included: Mrs. Yos Em Sithan (Translator/Reviewer), Mrs. Truong Leap Romluc (Translator/Reviewer), Mrs. Salay Sangkhum (Stylist), and Rev. Mam Barnabas (Reviewer/Stylist).

With support from UBS Translation Consultant, the translation of the Old Testament was completed in 1997. In 1998, the complete Khmer Bible was published under the name Today's Khmer Version.

A Protestant Edition: The Khmer Standard Version (2005)

After its publication, the Today's Khmer Version gradually gained acceptance among churches in Cambodia. In response to requests from various Evangelical churches, a minor revision was carried out to address specific needs and preferences.

In 2005, a new Protestant edition was published under a new name: **Khmer Standard Version (KHSV)**. This revised edition quickly gained widespread acceptance and has become one of the major Bible translations used by Christians in Cambodia over the past two decades.



New Testament Translation Team



Old Testament Translation Team

Revising the Khmer Old Version

Despite the enduring impact of the 1954 Khmer Bible, the language had evolved significantly over the decades. Recognizing the need to update the text for modern readers, the Bible Society in Cambodia initiated a revision project in 2010.

Two Cambodian translators, Pastor Mao An and Pastor Tith Chanthoan, were commissioned by the Bible Society in Cambodia (BSC) to carry out the revision.

Over the course of more than five years, they worked diligently under the guidance of United Bible Societies (UBS) translation consultants to complete the task. The revision aimed to preserve the original work of the Hammond Version while updating outdated expressions and grammar.

In 2016, the Revised Khmer Old Version was officially published and launched, offering a refreshed and more accessible version of the beloved original for a new generation of Cambodian Christians.

Ongoing projects

The Bible Society in Cambodia has consistently taken a proactive approach to ensuring that God's Word remains relevant and accessible to new generations. Recognizing both the natural evolution of language and ongoing advances in biblical scholarship, the Society is currently engaged in two important translation projects:

- **Revised Khmer Standard Version (RKSV):** This project focuses on revising the Khmer Bible with greater alignment to the original biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek. The aim is to enhance textual accuracy while maintaining readability for modern readers.
- **Khmer Formal Translation (KHFV):** An adaptation of the Khmer Standard Version, this translation prioritizes linguistic refinement and cultural contextualization. It seeks to reflect the growing movement toward Khmerization, incorporating both contemporary Khmer language use and elements of local cultural identity to better resonate with Cambodian audiences.

These efforts reflect the Bible Society's commitment to faithfully transmitting Scripture in ways that speak meaningfully to Cambodia's diverse and changing society.