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Portrait of a Translator: Francis Seely and the 1971 Revision of the Thai Bible

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Abstract: Two of the most famous portraits of a translator are paintings by Caravaggio (1571–1610) of Jerome (c. 342/347–420). Francis Seely (1917–2004) was an American missionary who helped revise the Thai Bible in the 1950s and '60s, and left behind numerous workbooks from that translation project. This article examines what these workbooks show us about Seely's community, concerns, and character, and uses these insights to offer an alternative picture to Caravaggio's masterful paintings of a translator. The paper concludes by considering how a portrait of a modern Bible translator might differ from those of Jerome and Seely.

Key Words: Thai Bible; Bible translation; Francis Seely; Bible translators; Saint Jerome; Christian art

Introduction

Saint Jerome (c. 342/347–420) is a common figure in Western art.[1] Perhaps Caravaggio (1571–1610) captures him best, in two paintings from c. 1605–1606 and c. 1607–1608. In these pictures, Jerome is an elderly ascetic with a long beard, poring over a book in his study and writing something down. The portraits include common elements in the iconography of Jerome: a skull (reflecting his awareness of death), a cardinal's hat or red cape (anachronistically showing his importance to the church), and a crucifix.

Jerome is most famous for being the translator behind the Latin Vulgate translation of the Scriptures. Caravaggio's portraits of him are how many Western Christians picture a Bible translator—an eccentric working in monastic solitude, separated from the concerns of daily life. Alone with a manuscript and

[1] For the life of Jerome, see Kelly 1975, as well as Francis 2020.

pen, he sacrificially struggles to put the message of Scripture into a common language. This picture of the translator is also how other well-known Bible translators of the West are portrayed—both Martin Luther (1483–1546) and William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536) are often imagined as solitary heroes of the faith.[2]

Francis Seely was a Bible translator who worked in Thailand in the 1950s and 1960s. He left behind numerous workbooks which provide us a different picture of the life of a translator from that offered by Caravaggio's masterful paintings. This paper will briefly place Seely's work in context, and explore what his workbooks show us about his community, concerns, and character.[3] We will use the evidence from his workbooks to suggest what a portrait of Seely as a translator might have looked like, before considering how a picture of a modern translator might differ from those of both Jerome and Seely. The goal of the paper is not to replace Jerome's portrait as the archetypical translator with a picture of Seely, but to use the abundant evidence Seely left behind to suggest ways that his portrait would be different than Jerome's. In so doing, it is hoped that an existing caricature would not be replaced by a new one, but rather be challenged so that the diversity of translators can be more fully appreciated.

A translator's context

Background

The history of Thai Bible translation stretches back to the early nineteenth century, with the first Thai (then called Siamese) New Testament published in 1843. The Old Testament was finished in 1883, and the complete Bible was revised and published in 1894, and then further revised and republished in 1940 (Lorgunpai 2019; Krahl 2005:73–77). When Eugene Nida (secretary for translations for the American Bible Society) visited Thailand in 1952, he discussed forming a new committee for further revision (Ryburn 1952; Nida 1953). The individuals who would form the core of the Working Committee were Herbert Grether (an American Presbyterian missionary), Francis Seely (another American Presbyterian missionary), and Saranya Chairatana (อาจารย์ศรัณย์

[2] At times their connection with Jerome is made explicit: "All alone and hidden from his opponents, like Jerome in his cell, Luther translated the New Testament" (Lobenstein-Reichmann 2022:306–307). Reading about the lives of Jerome, Luther, and Tyndale reveals that this picture of the translator as a solitary scholar is at best a simplification, if not a caricature.

[3] While this paper attempts to give an accurate picture of Seely based on the evidence he left in his workbooks, it should be noted that the author did not know Seely personally and that the arguments of this paper are based solely on archival materials.

ชัยรัตน), a Thai Christian.[4] Their work would be published in 1971 (Liao 2024), and then was further revised in 2011, when it was published as the Thai Standard Version (ฉบับมาตรฐาน *chabap matthan*).[5]

Biography

Francis McLain Seely was born in Aurora, Illinois, on February 13, 1917, and grew up in a conservative Christian family.[6] He graduated from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1946. He and his wife Ruth were sent to Thailand as Presbyterian missionaries, arriving in 1947. After learning the language and doing evangelism in the Chiang Mai area, the Seelys moved to Lampang in north Thailand in 1950. In 1952, Seely was invited by the American Bible Society to help revise the Thai Bible (Seely 1952).[7] During this period, Seely was stationed in Chiang Mai (1947–1950), Lampang (1950–1955), and Phitsanulok (1955–1957). In addition to his work with Bible translation, Seely was involved with overseeing a boys' school, working with leprosy patients, starting Alcoholics Anonymous groups, and establishing a reading room for Christian literature. After an extended furlough (1957–1961), he returned to Chiang Mai, where he continued his translation work, as well as teaching at the Thailand Theological Seminary (1961–1972) and working for Inter-Faith Dialogue. Seely remained in Thailand until 1978 before returning to the US, where he died in 2004.

[4] Sinclair ("Tommy") Thompson was also on the Working Committee from 1958 to 1961 but played a less important role than the other three, as demonstrated by Thai church leaders referring to the 1971 revision as the "SSG" (Saranya/Seely/Grether) Version at a translation workshop (Hatton 1973:21).

[5] There is no universally accepted standard for the transcription of Thai texts, but this article will use the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS), except for personal names, which have been transliterated according to their preferences when known (and if not, transliterated the way similar names are commonly spelled). For more information, see Kanchanawan 2006.

[6] The best biographical information about Seely comes from his obituary (*Knoxville News-Sentinel* 2004) and Swanson 2020.

[7] There is some indication that he may not have been their first pick; the General Secretary of the Thailand Bible Society mentions "Mr. Stewart" as his choice to work with Grether on the Revision Committee (Voth 1952).

(Work) Books

The Archives of the Church of Christ in Thailand contain approximately seventy-five of Seely's workbooks for the 1971 revision.[8] The exercise books vary in size and length but are roughly 7" x 11" in size with most being about seventy pages in length. The majority of the writing is on the right pages, with the left used only when discussions overflowed. Unfortunately, the workbooks are undated (as are the entries within each workbook), which makes it difficult to trace changes in the ways translation was done over the course of the project.

In these workbooks, Seely notes questions and comments about the translation draft, arranged by biblical reference. For example, in Psalm 23, he starts with verse 1 and notes a possible Thai translation for the English word 'shepherd' (เมษบาล *metban*). He mentions that one of his language informants (คุณรัสมี บุญแทน Rassamee Boonthen) does not recognize the word "by hearing or sight", and gives his opinion about whether the revision should use this term, suggesting instead that they use a more common word for 'sheep' (แกะ *kae*), "in spite of its connection in [the] minds of some with unrespected Indian herders in Thailand". He then moves on to the next translation he wants to discuss ('pastures' in verse 2).

The workbooks provide a wealth of detail and are incredibly valuable for understanding the revision process. However, it is important to remember that Seely was only one person on the Revision Committee. While the workbooks give us a wonderful opportunity to watch a working translator, they are not the last word on the committee's work. There was discussion after Seely made his notes; many of his suggestions were not followed. This is not to diminish his role in the translation, but to place it in proper perspective, and to highlight the collaborative nature of the translation.[9] (Seely has been chosen for this portrait

[8] The workbooks are found in the Papers of Rev. Francis M. Seely, RG002/78, Boxes 3–6 in the Church of Christ in Thailand Archives at Payap University, Chiang Mai. I greatly appreciate the hospitality of Kanjana Mongkon, Sutim Suriyawong, and Herbert Swanson during my time at the archives. References to Seely's workbooks in this paper (which are meant to be illustrative and not exhaustive) will be by biblical reference. The archives contain a locating aid that allows readers to locate the workbooks' locations there: https://archives.payap.ac.th/pyu/uploads/userfiles/Seely%20Papers%20Guide.pdf.

[9] It should be noted that this paper uses a broad definition of 'translator' and 'translation'. One reviewer noted that while Seely was "deeply and thoughtfully involved with the translated text", it seems he was more "in the role of a reviser or reviewer of a draft translation by a native". That is correct, and there is a danger that by calling him "a translator" throughout, and imagining a portrait of him as a translator, this paper unduly highlights his role.

because of the unusual wealth of archival documentation that he left, not because he is to be seen as a model translator.)

Moreover, his workbooks, while rich and detailed, are incomplete. They do not cover the entire Bible, and even the parts that he did write about sometimes lack details in precisely the places where they would be most helpful.[10] For example, the book of Ecclesiastes has only one rather unhelpful note with the rest of the workbook being blank.[11] Similarly, from letters of the time, we know that there was heated discussion about the Thai translation of Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold, a young woman [fn: or virgin] shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel", RSV), but there is nothing written about this verse in Seely's workbooks, which skip from Isaiah 6 (at the end of one book, followed by three blank pages) to chapter 8 (at the start of the next book).[12]

It is also important to remember that these workbooks represent select moments in a lengthy process. The translation work for the 1971 revision took place over several decades, and the workbooks are not all from the same time. Many verses have comments from different times (sometimes written in different colours). So, when discussing Psalm 78:48b, Seely writes the word 'thunderbolts', and gives the Thai translation อสุนีบาต *asunibat*. After some more notes, there is a question in pink: "too rare a word?" which is then answered in pencil: "Used in newspapers".[13] A careful reading of the workbooks reveals that they are entirely Seely's own thoughts containing comments from different times. He would go through the draft, make preliminary notes, and then after some time (and possibly talking with others, checking reference works, or participating in a Committee meeting), he might go back and make follow-up comments. He would repeat this process until either a final decision was made or he was content with his comments. In this way, the workbooks record an ongoing conversation that Seely is having with himself about the best way to translate the

[10] The workbooks cover Genesis, Exodus 1–25, Numbers 11–18, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Ezekiel 1–43, Daniel, the Minor Prophets, portions from the Gospels, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews 8–13, James, and Revelation. It is unclear whether Seely worked on other books (and the notebooks were not archived), or whether these were all the books he worked on.

[11] The only comment on Ecclesiastes is on the word อนิจจัง *anitchang* in Ecclesiastes 1:2, with his comment being "อ.ต. [his abbreviation for Intoom, see below] One of the three biggest words in Buddhism, means impermanence. อสาโร *Asaro* – a Bali word meaning ไร้สาร *rai san*." For an example of the types of discussion that could be had about Ecclesiastes and its relation to Buddhist thought, see Lorgunpai 1995:70–84, 198–209.

[12] For the discussion about the Thai translation of Isaiah 7, see Grether 1957b, 1957c, 1957d, 1957e, 1957f, 1957g; and Chao 1957a, 1957b.

[13] The 1940, 1971, and 2011 revisions all end up using the more common ฟ้าผ่า *fa pha*.

text. This reminds us that the 1971 revision was not done in one run through the text, but involved an iterative process of back-and-forth discussions over a lengthy period, some of which is displayed in the workbooks.

A translator's community

The workbooks reveal much about the work of a translator, including showing us the communities surrounding Seely that helped him in his work. This section will illustrate how the workbooks paint a very different picture of the translator than Caravaggio's portrait of Jerome as a solitary individual working alone.

The working committee

The 1971 Revision was done by committee. In an article from 1957, Grether described the process: Saranya did the first draft of the translation,

> working on the basis of the present Thai version and of English versions, namely the ASV and the RSV. Then Mr. Seely and Mr. Grether study Saranya's draft independently, comparing it (in the Old Testament, upon which we are now working) with the Hebrew text and with several versions. (Grether 1957a:14)

Once Grether and Seely had enough notes, the Working Committee would gather to discuss them. When satisfied, they sent the draft to an official Review Committee as well as to about twenty Thai and non-Thai Christians who would comment and offer suggestions before the work was approved and ready for publication. The workbooks appear to be from the stage when Seely and Grether were checking the translation draft prepared by Saranya.

There are frequent references in the workbooks to the other people on the Working Committee (i.e., Grether and Saranya).[14] The notes demonstrate ongoing conversations with Grether (Gen 36:35; "Genesis 36–42, Stencil Corrections"; Exo 7:11; Amos 5:21b; facing Zech 6:10). They also indicate the importance of Saranya, who is referenced more than anyone else in the workbooks (e.g., Pss 1:2b; 44:8a; 46:6; facing Ps 54; facing Ps 62; Pss 63:7b; 137:6; Prov 6:12; Isa 25; 28:37; 29:1; before Nah 1:15, "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6 on Ezion-Geber, also p. 45)—sometimes using different Thai spellings of his name (สรัญย์ [Gen 40:15], ศรันย์ [Gen 44:9], ศรัญย์ [Ps 119 word list; Nah 2:13Bb], or

[14] Seely and Thompson were never on the Working Committee at the same time, so references to Thompson are rare, although see "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, p. 2.

ศระณย์ [Amos 5:21; 7:14z] or the English transliteration [e.g., Exo 7:11; Dan 12:7b]).[15]

The wider community

There are also references in the workbooks to the Review Committee (e.g., Hos 3:5, "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, pp. 2, 21, 23). Some general references to "the Committee" (e.g., Gen 4:1; Isa 29:19c) probably refer to the Review Committee rather than the Working Committee, as does the frequent note "COK", which was used to show that the Review Committee is okay with a decision (see Ezek 11:1y; 20:41; Dan 5:26; Amos 5:21b, and "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, p. 9).[16] There are also references to others involved in translation, including "Bill" [Smalley] (a translation consultant with the United Bible Societies; "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, pp. 23, 39, 45; Matt 7:13–23:23), คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช *Kukrit Pramote* (the stylistic advisor to the translation),[17] Eugene Nida, and the American Bible Society's office in New York (Gen 44:4; Ps 10:9b+c; Isa 13:4d; Ezek 13:19z, and "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, p. 45).

Individual Thai readers also provided feedback to Seely and are mentioned in the workbooks. It is unclear whether these were official consultants or just people with whom he tested aspects of the translation. In the notebooks Seely mentions คุณบุญรัย *Boonrai* (Gen 25:27; 41:1; and 38:2 [in Stencil Corrections, Gen 36–42]),[18] คุณรัสมี บุญแทน *Rassamee Boonthen* (Ps 23:1), อจ. บุญสวม *Boonsuam* (Matt 7:13–23:23), อจ. ประกาย *Prakai* (Matt 7:13–23:23), นางสวย *Suay* (Ps 3:1a), สอาด *Sa-at* (Isa 19:14a), and ครูสร้อย *Soi* ("General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, p. 9). Seely also refers to an authority on jewels in Bangkok ("Mr. Zerner") with whom he wished to consult (in the discussion around Gen 2:10).

[15] As is common when working with the Biblical text, Seely uses letters to refer to sections of verses (e.g., 'a' refers to the first part of a verse, 'b' to the second, etc.). At times, he further subdivides verses (so 'Bb' refers to the second half of the second half of the verse). More idiosyncratically, Seely also uses letters near the end of the alphabet to refer to later sections of a verse (e.g., 'z' refers to the last part of a verse; 'y' is a little before that, etc.).

[16] Reference to "rep. Com." (Prov 1:2) or to RC (1 Cor 11:2b) could refer to the Representative Committee (an older name for the Review Committee) or to the group of readers who were meant to be representative of the breadth of the Thai church.

[17] The workbook for Matthew 7:13–23:23 is based on "Kukrit's suggestions". This book also refers to "Stan", whom I have been unable to identify.

[18] In Gen 31:19 the name is given in English, and in Gen 17:14 it looks to me like คุณบุญชัย *Boonchai*.

At times, he seems to have polled the people who happened to be around him, as when he reports that "5 out of 5 servants didn't know" that the word วิหค *wihok* (an uncommon word for bird) meant นก *nok*, the common word for bird (Hos 11:11a).

One of the outside readers is referenced extensively in the workbooks on the Wisdom Literature (Prov 2:16; 7:4b; 9:10, 11, 17; 10:6, 24b; 13:16; 14:9; 16:11; 17:10, 15, 16, 23; 18:20; 21:24; 22:28; 23:29; 26:1, 12a, 14, 16; 31:4; and Eccl 1:2)—so much so that his name is abbreviated as อต. นายอินทรตุ้ม ธรรมชัย *Intoom Tummachai* was a man whom Seely met in Lampang, and they worked together in starting Alcoholic Anonymous groups in both Lampang and Phitsanulok (Seely 1955a, 1955b, 1955c). Seely highly valued Intoom's opinions, which is demonstrated in the frequent references to his comments.

He also refers in his workbooks to things he heard or read, such as reporting that he "heard a country woman use" a particular word to describe the face of her son when he was sober (Ps 19:1), or reporting the word used for God's 'spokesman' in a book by อจ. เกื่อ *Kua* ("General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, p. 23), or the phrase used by ครูพิญโย์ [ภิญโญ ณ นคร] *Phinyo Na Nakhorn* at the Wattana *Wittaya* Academy (Rev 1:18b, c).

The workbooks give occasional reminders that Seely was a man with a family life. The workbook for Psalm 84:3 to 90:9 has the name ลุซี ("Lucy") on the front of it, making the reader imagine that the translator needed to borrow this exercise book from his young daughter's school supplies.[19] At another point (Prov 13:15), there is a doodle with a note that says, "Jon, his mark".[20]

Far from being the product of a solitary person working alone in a monastic cell, these workbooks demonstrate a translation done in community. Seely was not a solo translator, but one asking questions of, and having discussions with, a wide group of people, many of whom were Thai and who often have been omitted from the story of the translation of the Thai Bible.[21]

The written community

The workbooks also show some of the literary resources that Seely used in his translation work. These reference books can be viewed as a written community, providing information, opinions, and questions that he interacted with in his workbooks. There were many voices in this written community. Indeed, when

[19] Lucy Seely was born December 20, 1946 (Hanna 2013; cf. *Knoxville News-Sentinel* 2004).

[20] Jonathan Seely was born December 8, 1953 (Hanna 2013; cf. *Knoxville News-Sentinel* 2004).

[21] For discussion about the omission of local translators in the story of Bible translation, see Noss 2019:121; cf. Zetzsche 1999:260–261.

going on furlough, Seely's supervisor suggests that he should find a library with good resources, and Seely explains that he already has more than enough:

> On Isaiah, for instance, I have and constantly refer to 5 of the best commentaries, 1 Hebrew lexicon, 1 Thai dictionary, the Hebrew, Thai, ASV and RSV Bibles, and the Jewish Publication Society's OT. For occasional reference I have the Septuagint, 2 large Greek lexicons, 2 more standard Hebrew lexicons, 2 more standard Thai dictionaries, the Dutch, German, Spanish Valera, French, AT and Moffatt's Bibles, GKC [Gesenius] Hebrew Grammar, 3 Bible dictionaries, Moldenke's *Plants of the Bible*, etc. (Seely 1957c)[22]

The basic texts that Seely was working with were Kittel's version of the Hebrew and Nestle's version of the Greek (Grether 1957a:16). To help with linguistic issues he used several Hebrew aids, including the Koehler *Lexicon*, the Brown-Driver-Briggs *Lexicon*, and Gesenius's *Hebrew Grammar*. Seely seems to have worked less on the New Testament, but he references both the Arndt-Gingrich and Thayer Greek Lexicons.

There was a variety of translations used for comparison. Grether describes these as "chiefly LXX [the Septuagint], ASV [the American Standard Version], RSV [the Revised Standard Version], JPSV [the Jewish Publication Society Version], and the Dutch version" (Grether 1957a:14).[23] Of these, the RSV and the ASV were the most important, although neither was universally followed.[24] In addition to those that Grether mentions, Seely makes frequent comparisons with the Old Thai (sometimes referred to as Old Siamese), i.e., the 1940 version. Seely also refers to the New English Bible during his notes on the New Testament, to Moffatt, and to the Zurich Bible/Zürcher Bibel.

To help with exegetical questions Seely used a variety of commentaries, with the *International Critical Commentary* (ICC) and the *Interpreter's Bible* (IB) series being mentioned most frequently. He sometimes listed the commentaries used at the beginning of a workbook, and in one notebook lists all the New Testament commentaries available to him from McGilvary Seminary ("General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, pp. 57–59). He also had access to several Bible dictionaries (including *Harper's Bible Dictionary,* the *New Standard Bible Dictionary*, and the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*), although they are not mentioned often.

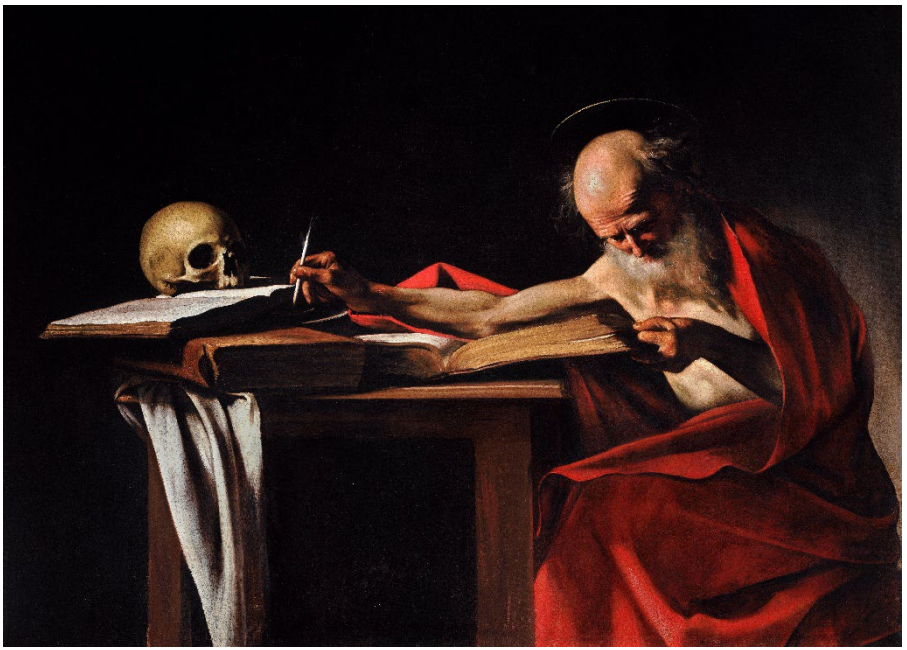
[22] I did not notice references to the Spanish Valera or French translations in the workbooks.

[23] Seely does not appear to have been fluent in Dutch (see Prov 21:26a), but there are a number of references to this translation, often abbreviated as "Du"; see Exo 16:31; 18:10; and Dan 11:17z.

[24] "For those who do not know Greek or Hebrew, the RSV [NT] and the ASV [OT] are to constitute working guides ..." (Grether 1957a:16).

He occasionally used specialized reference works, including two books about the proper identification of Biblical plants (Bare 1961; Moldenke and Moldenke 1952). Seely's workbooks give definitions from a variety of dictionaries, including McFarland (Thai-English), the *Government Dictionary* of 1950 (Thai), Plang (Thai-English), พิทยา [Phitthaya] (Thai), and Webster's *New International* (English).[25]

Caravaggio pictures Jerome alone in his cell, making his translation from only one or two manuscripts of Scripture. In contrast, Seely is surrounded by a wealth of resources, a cloud of witnesses (both in person and in writing) that helped him translate. We now turn to look at what he was aiming at in his work revising the Thai Bible.



Saint Jerome Writing, by Caravaggio (c. 1605–1606). Oil on canvas. Public domain.

[25] พิทยา may reference a dictionary published by แพร่พิทยา. Seely also uses the abbreviation "พพ" in James and in Revelation 6:2b, which might refer to this (it appears to be a Thai-Thai reference, so it is probably not Plang).

A translator's concerns

In 1958, the head of Seely's mission sent a letter giving background to the 1971 translation and discussing Seely's role in it. He closes the letter by explaining why the revision was necessary: "This is supremely important. If we fail, we have betrayed our commitment and the people of Thailand, who deserve an accurate, intelligible text. They do not now have one, and they have not had one for more than 50 years" (Ryburn 1958).[26] This desire to produce an accurate, intelligible text drove Seely's work.

Accuracy

Seely's notebooks demonstrate his desire for accurate translation. He attempts to understand the text as well as possible in order to translate it properly. This involves some questions of textual criticism, as Seely tries to decide the best Hebrew or Greek text (see Gen 21:9; 31:49; Exo 18:10; Prov 5:23; 26:23; and Ezek 1:20a).[27] Once the text is settled, he carries on his exegetical work to better understand the meaning of the text with the help of commentaries. He then checks Saranya's translation of the English against the Hebrew and Greek.[28]

The workbooks show that Seely is passionate about finding the right Thai word to represent a Hebrew or Greek term. This can be seen most clearly in the lists he creates to differentiate between Hebrew terms. For example, on the page facing his notes on Isaiah 34:13, he has stapled in several extra pages, attempting to find Thai equivalents for the Hebrew words for canines (e.g., 'dog', 'wolf', 'fox', 'jackal'). He lists six Hebrew words (one of which is crossed off), with descriptions from both the Koehler and Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicons. On the next page, he gives eight possibilities in Thai with their definitions from McFarland's dictionary. He then lists all the English words with corresponding definitions from the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, a Thai equivalent, and notes from the *New Standard Bible Dictionary*. This all leads to Seely's suggestions for possible Thai translations for each of the Hebrew words on the first page.

These differentiation lists are scattered throughout the workbooks, and include ones for other specific animals, such as snakes (facing Isa 59:5), locusts

[26] Nida (1952) uses the words "accurate and usable" and Grether (1955) uses "accurate and readable" to describe the intended translation.

[27] Seely uses "Cn." as an abbreviation for a suggested correction to the Masoretic Text (e.g., Ezek 17:9bc).

[28] At times he has to correct Saranya's misunderstanding of the English, such as Ps 139:20a ('defile' vs 'defy'), Ps 143:5c ('muse' vs. 'amuse'), Prov 2:16 ('loose' ≠ 'nude'), and Ezek 17:3 ('Lebanon' vs. 'Babylon'). Compare Isa 43:24a ('money' vs. 'honey').

(Joel 1:4), and lions (facing Prov 28:1), as well as for descriptions of goats' coats (Gen 31:10). The names of various gems are discussed at length in several places, with questions such as "Should color or chemical make-up be given most weight in deciding names of stones?" (Gen 2:12; see also Ezek 28:13cde; and facing Rev 21:19–20). There are also attempts to differentiate between different terms used for high officials (facing Dan 3:2), 'gum'/'balm'/'myrrh' (Gen 37:2; 43:11), food/grains (facing Gen 41:49), 'desert'/'wilderness' (facing Ps 105:41b), alcoholic beverages (facing Isa 5:11b), and 'rod'/'staff' (Isa 9:4b; 10:15d). This desire for accuracy also applies to theological terms, with Seely trying to differentiate between words for salvation (facing Ps 71:2a), prayer (Dan 9:13), transgression (Dan 9:24), and the vocabulary for wisdom and fools (facing Prov 1:3). There is also an attempt to understand (and find equivalents for) difficult terms such as 'murder' (ฆฆตกรรม *khotkam*; Exo 20:13), or the Hebrew word חרם *hrm* ('utterly destroyed' RSV; Exo 22:20).

These differentiation lists are gathered in specific places, and several books (e.g., Proverbs and Ezekiel) start with lists of commonly used words and phrases and how to best translate them.[29] In a book of "General Notes and Questions", Seely also has a section on "Word Studies and Consistency". Separate word studies are sometimes referred to, and he at times makes a note to "check list" (sometimes abbreviated C.L.) of previously decided terms (e.g., Gen 47:25; Num 14:18; 18:15; Pss 40:10a; 43:1; and Prov 7:14).[30] There is also a list of names or place names that he uses (see Isa 10:30b; Ezek 11:1y).[31]

As part of accuracy, Seely valued consistency and frequently includes the note "harmonize" with a list of different Thai translations used to represent the same Hebrew or Greek phrases (Ps 108; Ezek 28:13cde; Obad; Nah 2:10b; Hag 2:5y; Zech 9:9; Jonah 1:17a; 1 Cor 7:32a; and Rev 18:4z; see also his list of "Word studies [+ words to harmonize throughout]" in "General Notes and Questions", Box 5, Folder 6, inside cover, 9).

Intelligibility

Care was taken not just to provide an accurate translation of the Hebrew and Greek, but one that would be intelligible to Thai readers. He often notes phrases that do not sound smooth in Thai, or words that do not quite fit, and asks about

[29] Psalm 119 also has differentiation lists for 'keep' and 'law' words.

[30] He refers to word studies on 'soul' (Gen 35:18) and YHWH (Ps 1:2). He makes suggestions for additions to the checklists on the front cover of Proverbs 1–6:11.

[31] After the translation was completed in 1967, a joint Protestant-Catholic committee worked on correcting, revising, and regularizing all the names used in the Thai Bible, resulting in significant updates before the Bible was reprinted in 1971 (Seely 1969).

better options. For example, Psalm 7:11b speaks of God's 'indignation', and Seely asks whether there is "a term like indignation that implies 'righteous' without having to say it? Or is all emotion other than indifference bad?"[32] Other examples could be multiplied where he looks for a "natural Thai expression" or asks for a "Thai idiom" (see Pss 24:4b; 39:7a; 41:9a; Isa 5:3a; 13:8b; 49:5e; 56:11a; Ezek 11:1; 22:13c). He also demonstrates a concern in the workbooks for proper spelling (Gen 1:30; 15:9; Prov 21:24) and style (Gen 1:14; Isa 26:14; 49:5e; Ezek 7:6b).

The Thai language requires semantic distinctions that differ from Hebrew, Greek, and English, and Seely pays attention to descriptions of siblings (since Thai uses different words for older and younger siblings; Gen 9:22; 22:20; 44:33; 45:1, 3, 15, 17, 24, 25; and Ezek 16:45), as well as verbs and pronouns which differ depending on their referent (Gen 34:29; Ps 21:1; Isa 40:12a; 62:1a; facing Dan 9:24; Heb 8:3b; Rev 14:14–16). Somewhat surprisingly, there is relatively little discussion in the notebooks about the use of royal language (the special register of language used in Thai for deities, monks, and royalty). Presumably, discussions about the use of royal language happened in committee meetings.

Making the translation intelligible to Thai people requires an understanding of Thai culture. Seely notes places where Thai cultural understanding might prove an impediment to understanding Scripture.[33] At times, cross-cultural transfer requires choosing a technically incorrect term over a "correct" term that would give the wrong impression to Thai readers, as when Seely decides between identifying a bird as an eagle or a vulture, noting that griffin-vulture "may be ornithologically correct, but the translation 'eagle' gives far better the idea that was in the writer's mind" (Dan 7:4). At various points, he deliberately chooses not to conform the structure of the text to the Hebrew, wanting it to read more smoothly in Thai (e.g., Exo 12:39; 14:19b). This is clearly seen in Proverbs, where the order of the two halves of verses is frequently reversed to feel more natural in Thai (examples from Proverbs 26 include verses 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18–19, and 23).

Thai culture has been deeply influenced by Buddhism, and the workbooks contain references to how words are used in Buddhism. This is done both to avoid unintentionally connecting biblical concepts with Buddhist worldviews, and to guard against potential misunderstandings (see Ps 119:50b; Eccl 1:2; and Ezek 1:15b). As Seely notes in an article written in 1957,

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[32] A similar question about envy/zeal is asked in Ps 78:58b.

[33] Such as with the gift given from the bride to the groom at a wedding (Gen 34:12), or the cultural status of shepherds (Ps 23:1). In Ezekiel 13:18 he asks about the word used for the white strings tied around wrists in Thailand to see whether it might be an appropriate translational equivalent for the RSV 'magic bands'.

> One of the difficult problems facing the translator of the Scriptures into Thai has to do with Buddhist terminology. ... Such words as those having to do with sin, guilt, heaven, and salvation have little meaning to Thai people apart from their Buddhist context and so must be redefined when used in a Christian context. It is often impossible or unwise to use a religiously neutral word to convey Christian meanings, and yet to use a term packed with Buddhist connotations in order to convey a Christian meaning may fall short of its objective and may even cause antagonism in the Buddhist mind. (Seely 1957a: 49)

This attentiveness to Buddhist implications of words is especially evident in the workbooks for Proverbs when Seely was working with Intoom Tummachai, who makes more references to Buddhism than many of the other readers (see Prov 1:3; 13:16; 23:29; and 26:14). The more frequent references may be due to Intoom's background, or because of the nature of the books he was working on, i.e., the Wisdom literature.

Seely worked hard to make the translation intelligible because he wanted the Bible to be clear to his Thai readers.[34] He recognized that the revision was meant for public reading, so he wanted it to be clear to Thai listeners as well, showing concern for how the text would sound to the ear, at places noting how phrases could be misunderstood if one did not see their spelling.[35]

While his workbooks demonstrate a desire for the Bible to be clear to readers, his concern for intelligibility leaves room for appropriate ambiguity. Seely recognizes that clarity was not always the purpose of the writers of Scripture. In working through Ezekiel's descriptions of his theophany in chapter 1, Seely notes that "in a picture such as this, clarity of detail is unnecessary" (Ezek 1:10z). In places where the Hebrew itself is capable of multiple interpretations, or where scholars disagree about the proper understanding of a text, Seely searches for Thai translations that do not overinterpret the text (e.g., Gen 16:16; Exo 7:20; 14:7; Prov 6:1; 29:5; Dan 2:43; Luke 22:38; 1 Cor 1:6b; and Gal 1:12z). While clarity is a goal, he wants to avoid oversimplifying the text. After discussing possible emendations of Ezekiel 18:10, Seely comments that "follow[ing] MT [Masoretic (Hebrew) Text] is OK. Mental gymnastics hurt no-one."

The workbooks make it obvious that Seely wished the 1971 revision to be both an accurate reflection of the Hebrew and Greek text, and intelligible to his

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[34] In Proverbs 26:12, he notes comments from Intoom that the verse is "a. Clearer in OT [Old Thai] than new" and "b. Not clear in either one—more of an Eng. idiom" before going on to offer (again from Intoom) a different suggestion.

[35] In Isaiah 43:2, he asked whether ไม่เผาผลาญ *mai phao phlan* ('does not burn') could be misunderstood as ไหม้เผาผลาญ *mai phao phlan* ('burn') in a public reading of the text.

Thai readers. These workbooks also reveal his character, which we will examine in the next section.

A translator's character

A good portrait conveys something of the character of its subject. Part of the power of Caravaggio's paintings of Jerome is that they communicate his intensity and single-minded focus on Scripture (even if they do not capture his famous irritability). Much of Seely's personality comes through in his notebooks—giving us glimpses into his passion, his sense of humour, and his linguistic nerdiness. But the three most notable characteristics revealed in his workbooks are his diligence, integrity, and humility.

As this paper demonstrates, Seely put in a huge amount of work on the revision. He was dogged in his attempt to accurately, beautifully, and clearly represent the text of Scripture. The iterative nature of his workbooks demonstrates this, as do his long lists of plant and animal names, and his repeated struggles to find the correct word (e.g., for what he knew as a 'moth', see Ps 39:11b; Isa 50:9d). At times Seely acknowledges that he might be going overboard, noting that a phrase is "not important enough to fool with" (Gen 25:13) or that the "stakes are not high enough to warrant change" (Zech 12:5b). He settles for "close enough" when necessary (Num 11:7), and acknowledges at places that "exact tr.[anslation] prbly [probably] impossible" (Ps 27:6c), but usually only after a lengthy struggle to improve the translation. He was diligent in his work.

He also demonstrated integrity. By the time he was working on the revision of the Thai Bible, Seely had moved away from conservative theology and abandoned traditional notions of biblical authority.[36] But as his mission supervisor noted, even amid questions of his suitability for mission work, "no person questions either Seely's personal integrity or his linguistic competence" (Ryburn 1958). Throughout this project, Seely translates what he understands the text to be saying, even when it is not what he wishes the text said.[37] Seely's life and his translation work reveal that he was a man of integrity.

Finally, the workbooks evidence his humility. The communal nature of the translation process counters the picture of the translator as a solo authority deciding matters by fiat. Seely's comments are often in the form of a question, and these are usually non-rhetorical; he is genuinely seeking information. In

[36] See Liao (forthcoming) for details, but for his views on the Bible, see Seely 1957b: 2–3, 10, 14–17.

[37] In Daniel 2:31, he circles a phrase and says "Omit because not in Ara. [Aramaic] (I wish it were)."

Ezekiel's vision in 1:19, as the wheels and the living creatures rise into the air, he attempts to differentiate between two possible translations (ลอย *loi* and เหาะ *ho*). He asks, "Is one more decisive than other? Is one more mysterious than other?" At times he asks questions just "for my own information" (Dan 2:5). His humility can also be seen in acknowledging his lack of understanding, or his confusion over a text when he needs to choose the best possible option and move on (Prov 21:26a; Isa 23:1e; Ezek 40:11b; 42:5z [referring to the English text!] facing Rev 21:19). Though he has been given an important role in translating the Scriptures, Seely realizes the limits of his understanding, and he is quick to reach out for help.

Reading these workbooks is fascinating because of the understanding it gives us of the translation process. But it also helps us understand the translator, giving us a picture of a humble man of integrity who worked diligently to help revise the Bible so that Thai people could read and understand it.

A translator's portrait

All the work (from Seely, Saranya, Grether, and others) eventually resulted in the 1971 Revision of the Thai Bible. It was a great gift to the Thai church, becoming the standard Thai Bible for the next forty years, and the basis for the 2011 Thai Standard Version. Too often we do not appreciate the gifts given to us, especially if the sacrifices made are hidden. Seely's workbooks help un-hide the work of translation, giving us a glimpse into his community, his concerns, and his character. The picture they give us of this translator is not the one that Caravaggio gives us of Jerome. While Caravaggio portrays Jerome as a solo ascetic in a cell, pulling a semi-inspired translation out of his soul, Seely is different. So if we were to supplement Caravaggio's portrait of a translator, what would a picture of Seely the translator look like?

I suggest that his portrait would be crowded. Like Jerome, he would be at a desk, but Seely's desk would be piled high with resources—other translations, commentaries, dictionaries, and specialized helps.[38] His office would also be crowded with people. Saranya would be there, as would Grether, the two others on the translation committee with whom Seely worked. But a crowd of Thai people would also be present—not passively waiting for the translation, but

[38] Jerome was known for his library, so pictures of him making his translation in a room devoid of books are not an accurate portrayal of how he worked. In contrast to Caravaggio, other artists sometimes put more books in Jerome's office.

making suggestions, praying, and helping him as he worked.[39] The crowded nature of our picture would highlight the importance of Seely's community, but we might also lengthen his earlobes in our portrait to signal his willingness to listen to others (and to hint at the inter-religious dialogue with Buddhists that would characterize his later ministry).[40]

Instead of the skull that usually accompanies Jerome in pictures, I suggest that on Seely's desk there should be ฉิ่ง (*ching*). These small cymbals are used in traditional Thai music, and would illustrate his desire for a translation that would ring clear and true while sounding authentically Thai. The cymbals might also remind viewers of the beginning of 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak in strange languages, whether the languages of people or the languages of angels, but don't have love, I am like a gong or cymbal (just) making noise."[41] Seely's work on the Thai Scriptures was a labour of love, demonstrating "faith which showed itself as action, love that made him willing to work hard, and perseverance which came from hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord" (1 Thess 1:3).[42]

These character traits should also be displayed in our portrait of the translator, which could be done with a few more changes to Caravaggio's painting. Jerome is usually pictured with a crucifix.[43] Seely disagreed with the church's claim that "all salvation centers in Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross" (Seely 1957b:24), but he acknowledged the importance of Jesus's example: "The power of his [Jesus's] personality is one of the most potent forces in the world today. His life, as we know it from the New Testament seen through our modern spectacles, is an example of the kind of dedication to God that I want for myself" (Seely 1957b:10–11). Seely's life reflected Jesus's humble service to others, and perhaps our picture of him could include a hand towel on his desk (rather than the

[39] Whether Seely should have his own portrait (or whether the portrait should have been of Saranya or someone else) is an open question. A reviewer of this article suggests that perhaps he should be standing around the table with others instead of seated to better highlight the communal aspect of the 1971 translation.

[40] Thai images of the Buddha usually have elongated earlobes, symbolizing either the riches he gave up (his ears are empty but lengthened by the heavy earrings he used to wear) or his ability to hear the cries of the world.

[41] Adapted from the 1971 version of 1 Corinthians 13:1. While the 1940 translation used ฉาบ *chap* and ฉิ่ง *ching* in this verse, the 1971 revision refer to the ฆ้อง *khong* and ฉาบ *chap*, but I think the *ching* makes more sense in our imagined picture of the translator.

[42] Adapted from the 1971 Revision. Unfortunately, we do not have Seely's notes for this passage.

[43] Caravaggio's painting from 1605 or 1606 is unusual in omitting the crucifix that is a common part of Jerome's iconography.

cardinal's hat or cloak in paintings of Jerome) to symbolize this humility (John 13:1–17; Phil 2:1–13).

So our portrait of Seely as a translator might show him seated at a desk piled high with his books. Thai finger cymbals are perched precariously on top of one stack, and a hand towel peeks out from under the book closest to the viewer. Crowded around our translator is his community, a variety of people offering their support and encouragement. Such a picture might lack some of the power of Caravaggio's portrayal of Jerome at his desk, but it would better reflect the man whose work helped shape the 1971 Revision of the Thai Bible, and whose character is revealed in the workbooks he left behind.

Conclusion

The portrait of a translator revealed by Seely's workbooks is a portrait of one particular translator—not all translators are like him. But not all translators are like Jerome either. Seely's workbooks help paint a picture of his community, concerns, and character in ways that helpfully provide an alternate portrait of a translator to the ones given by Caravaggio. The goal of our imaginative portrait of Seely is not to replace Jerome's portrait as the single picture we should have of a translator with a new picture, but instead, through his abundant archival record, to suggest ways that our portrait of a translator needs to be opened up to allow for other possibilities. However, the speculative portrait of a translator that this article has suggested for Seely is still a picture of a translator from more than fifty years ago. How would the portrait of a current Bible translator differ from both those of Seely and Jerome?

Given the increased emphasis on community in contemporary Bible translation, a reviewer of this article suggested that perhaps the "idea of a portrait of an individual translator should be challenged for the current situation", and that "even picking up the brush to draw an individual portrait suggests too much individual agency behind any [contemporary Bible] translation." However, if we still wished to do so for the sake of our thought experiment, our portrait of a "typical" Bible translator in 2025 would look quite different.

Both Seely and Jerome are pictured as white men, which is no longer the majority demographic of those working in Bible translation; our new portrait would likely have a non-white woman sitting at the desk.[44] Like Seely, there

[44] A 2017 *Christianity Today* article states that "women make up 86 percent of Wycliffe's translation force" (Shellnutt 2017); for an overview of women in the history of translation, see Long 2019. While the shift to using mother-tongue translators for Bible translation has

would be a community of people gathered around (including people from her linguistic community, translation consultants, linguists, and biblical exegetes). She would be well-resourced, but unlike Seely her desk would probably not be crowded with books, but would instead hold her mobile phone and a computer (running Paratext or other programs designed for translation work). As with Jerome's crucifix, skull, and cardinal's cloak, or Seely's *ching* and hand towel, our portrait of a modern translator should also use iconography to represent concerns important to the subject of the painting. It is hard to suggest symbols that work for all translators, but perhaps a fish—representing both the early Christian symbol and the Babel fish from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams 1979)—would be a good place to start.

The difficulty in choosing symbols for our portrait of a modern translator reminds us that there is not one "typical" Bible translator, and that there is an artificiality in doing a portrait meant to represent a class of people. In many ways, that is the point of this article, which has attempted to complexify the common picture many have of Bible translators, an image that shares similarities with Caravaggio's portrayal of Saint Jerome. It has done this by a detailed look at a translator of the mid-twentieth century in Thailand, and then by considering how a portrait of a current translator might differ from both of those. But, as our thought experiment has driven us to acknowledge, not all modern translators look alike (as was also true of earlier translators!), and there should be variety in how we picture those who do the work of Bible translation today.

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been widely noted (e.g., Hill 2006), others note that in terms of power and finances more work needs to be done. For example, writing about Bible translation in Africa, Nyirenda (2023:165) notes that "the current scenario is still weighted in favour of the agency of non-Africans ... the critical task of interpreting the source texts is still largely in the hands of 'foreigners'."

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