



Holy Communion, Sunday 27 June 2010 — Heroes of Faith

**John Bendor-Samuel**

When we were setting-up this 'Heroes' series, Richard Croft and myself had a little electronic conversation about which of us should speak when. I had got the idea that I had been allocated last Sunday's slot, and Richard felt sure he was down for last Sunday too, but gave me the option of swapping with him if I wished. But with my customary grace and benevolence, I gave way and said I would take this Sunday. And I'm very glad that I did, because Richard, you will remember, explained how the different languages in which the Taizé songs are sung, reflects the fact that the Christian church doesn't stop at international or tribal boundaries. He went on to say, "When we take

the language of another's country we reach out to them, honour them and in a small way step into their shoes". Which gives me an almost perfect lead-in to introducing my particular hero, linguist and Bible translator John Bendor-Samuel, a kindly, gracious and peaceable gentleman Ruth and I got to know through our involvement with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

John Bendor-Samuel was born at a very early age in 1929 in the coastal town of Worthing. Father and mother were the Revd Theodore Harold Bendor-Samuel and his wife, Dorothy Ruth. [You may be interested to learn that during the final twenty years of his long life, John's father, the Revd Theodore, served as an elder of Carey Baptist Church, here in Reading.]

Young John did well at school, although he admits to struggling a bit with languages — "my language study had been dismal and depressing", he once wrote, "equally to me and my teachers. I had endured Latin and German only to the level where I could scrape into Oxford..." Well, he did get to Oxford (though I imagine he didn't just scrape in), and there he studied history, graduating in the early 1950s. A year later he got his Diploma in Education, and then went on to London University to study for a Diploma in Theology. His idea at that time was to serve overseas teaching biblical studies and theology. Then one day, quite out of the blue, he saw a press announcement advertising a summer course to help missionaries learn non-European languages. His National Service had given him the opportunity to visit foreign parts and to see the way life was lived in different cultures. He had quickly recognised the advantages of being able to communicate in a local language, so having seen the advert, he signed up for the course.

When the time came, however, for him to join his fellow students at the disused army camp on the Surrey/Sussex border where the course was to be held, he became a little apprehensive. Given his struggles with language learning in the past, he wasn't very confident that the course would do much for him. Anyway, he dismissed his qualms, set his face, and went.

JBS took to linguistics like a duck to water. The apprehension he had initially felt turned to fascination and excitement. One of his teachers was Kenneth Pike, a whirlwind of energy, who provided lots of 'live' illustrations from his own language fieldwork. Pike encouraged discussion, and JBS engaged in this with great enthusiasm. He had no idea, of course, that Ken Pike was an eminent linguist, and later said that he blushed to think of the "ignorant boldness" with which he had argued with him on various occasions. His attitudes to language study had previously been those of fortitude and endurance, but by the end of that first, short, stimulating summer course, instead of dreading languages, he went away enjoying linguistics, having found to his great surprise, that he could, after all, cope with languages.

Although John was embarrassed by what he called his "ignorant boldness" in discussion, Kenneth Pike was obviously impressed with him, because the following summer he was invited back as an apprentice teacher. Thus began John's long and distinguished career and ministry as a linguist, Bible translator, teacher and missionary strategist.

After his second summer at the army camp language course, and on Ken Pike's enthusiastic recommendation, JBS enrolled for a one year post-graduate course at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), part of the University of London. During that year he completed the necessary requirements to be registered as a PhD student. John decided to research an unwritten Amazonian language, *Jebero*, spoken by a people-group living in the jungles of eastern Peru. So in the summer of 1955 he and his wife set off for South America.

JBS had met Pamela Moxham at that first summer language course, and was a bit in awe of her — she had graduated from London in Latin and Greek. They married just before leaving for Peru. He once

wrote: "That year, September 1955 through to September 1956, was a honeymoon for us both in a double sense, not only for our marriage but for our initiation into the delights of linguistic fieldwork." John & Pam were by now members of Wycliffe Bible Translators, and its sister organisation, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL).

For the next eighteen months after his 'honeymoon' year in Peru, John worked on his PhD thesis, using the very extensive *Jebero* data he had collected in Peru. After he had completed this, he and Pam returned to South America, this time to Brazil, where they worked on the *Terena* language.

But in the early 1960s, Africa called... John and his wife moved to Ghana, and for the next twenty years they established a pattern of living and working in different parts of Africa for eight months of the year, and returning to the UK to run the three month linguistics training course each summer. It was at one of these summer schools that Ruth and I first met JBS in 1971, at that same disused army camp at Merstham!

With lots of African countries gaining independence, the 1960s were an exciting time for language study in Africa. New universities mushroomed, many with a Department of Linguistics. JBS was able to interact and confer with scholars of African languages, and was at the cutting edge of research. He was responsible for setting up cooperative agreements between SIL and a number of African universities, initially in Ghana and Nigeria. John was a founder-member of the West African Linguistics Society in the mid-60s, and served on its Council until 1999. He edited their *Journal* for twelve years.

JBS also served as SIL's Africa Director, making the initial allocations of SIL teams to each language, guiding the teams in their linguistic research, setting up and supervising the development of SIL branches in each country.

I do hope I have not bored you with all these tedious biographical details! My intention is to show that John Bendor-Samuel is recognised as a descriptive linguist of considerable repute. But he seems never to have forgotten that he serves Christ within a Christian mission. He is, first and foremost, a man of God. He is warm, approachable, humble, wise, prayerful, and possesses buckets full of common sense. He has advised Ruth and me more than once, and wrote a reference for Ruth when she became an undergraduate at Reading in 1977.

From the time of his honeymoon in Peru and throughout the next fifty-five years to the present day, John has researched dozens of languages, promoted umpteen literacy programmes, advised numerous colleagues, university departments, language teams and mission organisations, and been directly or indirectly responsible for placing mother-tongue translations of the Scriptures into the hands of thousands — perhaps millions — of individuals worldwide.

But by this time, maybe you're wondering, 'Why all this excitement about indigenous, mother-tongue Bible translation?' Well, let's take a little look at those verses we read from Habakkuk. The LORD obviously wanted a permanent record of what he was about to say. But that wasn't all: it needed to be **read at a glance**. I think that the GNB's **so that it can be read at a glance** is a pretty good translation of the more literal NRSV rendering: **so that a runner may read it**.

I expect we have all noticed that when our head moves rapidly it is often quite difficult to focus on print, or written words. I suppose that's why, when you see people jogging, they are listening to music coming from an MP3 (or some other gadget) clipped to their belt, rather than reading a novel or a newspaper. Surely, what God is saying here is that the written text must be clear, unambiguous, permanent and legible. If it is 'unambiguous' its meaning will immediately be crystal clear — you wouldn't have to scratch your head and work out its meaning. If it is 'legible' the writing will use accurately formed letters and symbols that actually match the language. In other words, the writing will be clearly and correctly presented in the readers' own language.

In the context of Bible translation, all this complex stuff is done by properly trained linguist/translators. Linguistic Science is fun! It captivated my hero, John Bendor-Samuel, who used his knowledge and expertise in the service of Christ. So, what is your forte, and how is God using it?

Don Mason