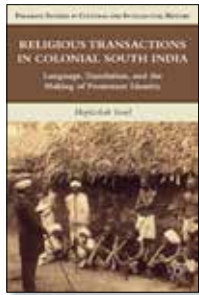


Book Reviews

Religious Transactions in Colonial South India: Language, Translation and the Making of Protestant Identity, by Hephzibah Israel (Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 269 + xvi)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This remarkable study of Bible translation into the south Indian Tamil language has many complex implications for missiology. It is a book that needs to be read and digested, and has relevance far beyond India. Even a review as extensive as this one can only begin to outline the issues discussed.

Hephzibah Israel repeatedly documents the complex tensions and options and irresolvable problems that arose in translating the Bible into Tamil.

In her Introduction, Israel shows three different broad entities with interest in Tamil translation: missionaries, colonial government, and Orientalist scholars. There was often agreement among the three, but also often significant variance (9). Israel had to engage discussions of how far Bible translation was liberative versus the supposed cultural destruction of missionary agendas.

I do not subscribe to the notion that all aspects of Christian mission were always “destructive of indigenous cultures” but neither do I agree with the celebratory conclusion that the mission of translation was entirely positive and advantageous to target cultures or that the missionary enterprise can be entirely disassociated from the history of colonialism. (11)

One of the broad themes of the book, also noted in the introduction, is how translation was used for sectarian purposes. But the general missionary outlook did not even recognize sectarian realities among Hindus.

My analysis of the missionary discourse on Bible translation confirms [G.A.] Oddie’s estimation that despite being aware of specific differences between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions in South India, and between Tamil Saivism and Vaishnavism, missionaries posited a unified category of “Hindu” against that of “Christian” or “Protestant” for translational purposes. (15)

Another broad theme of the book is the different paradigm for translation that was brought from the West, and particularly by missionaries.

Missionary translations, which were word for word renderings in Tamil from other language texts, differed significantly from the long history of “translations,” that is, rewritings in Tamil from other Indian languages. (21)

The introduction also gives a brief overview of the history of Bible translation into Tamil. Although the first Roman Catholic Tamil Bible was considerably later (NT 1857, OT 1904) than the Protestant (NT 1714, OT 1727), there were Tamil Roman Catholic writings well before the arrival of Protestants. One of the Protestant translation strategies was to be different from the Roman Catholics (27). The focus of the book, as the subtitle indicates, is on this Tamil Protestant identity and how translation issues contributed to that distinct identity.

The book thus does not focus on the history of Bible translation, but rather picks up three central issues that arise all through the history. The first issue is language, notably “disputes over the appropriateness of key religious terms” (33). The second is disputes over the various versions, particularly looking at “where certain versions were assigned authority and symbolic value above others by the community” (33). The third is genre, particularly the place of poetry.

The three chapters that focused on those issues are preceded by a chapter on translation in a broader perspective. It is fascinating to note that there is no term for “translation” in Sanskrit, and no discussion of the concept. Prior to Christian translations into Tamil there had been Buddhist works rendered into Tamil, but with a significantly different approach.

The most significant aspect of this [Buddhist translation] process was that translated texts were not always presented hierarchically lower as “copies” of “original” texts, but as independent creative works of equal merit. There was a flexibility in the translation process that allowed a freer relationship between an “original” and its translation. This fluid relationship between source text and target texts was mostly unacceptable to Western translators who sought to control and structure relations between the original text, the translator, and the translated text, distinguishing in fundamentally new ways the translator from the author and the translation from the original. In doing so, they also took upon themselves the task of shaping and regulating the development of modern Indian languages and reading practices, and thereby, the linguistic identities of those who spoke them. (52–53)

Israel sees three goals in the Protestant Bible translation project, and the three do not fit together very well:

One, culturally make familiar or “domesticate” the translated Bible for its Indian audiences; two, simultaneously offer the Bible as unique to Indian religious cultures, infallible in its teachings and ultimately unrecognizable or “foreignized” from all existing scriptures; and three, effect an appropriate “Protestant” identity for those who would convert. (53)

The ensuing discussion picks up five points where there was debate and discussion on translation, and the reality of

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these three goals is documented in these debates. Whether to use existing terms employed by various Hindu sects or to create new terminology, “one of the most contentious debates” (53), is the first topic. Those who wanted the Bible to be understood argued in support of the use of existing religious terms, while others in the name of faithfulness to the original suggested that source language terms were a viable option (54). Israel suggests that even where there was support for genuine translation (the latter option of source language terms is a denial of translatability) people tended to “argue for somewhat simplistic solutions” (54).

One partial solution to the problem of using tainted Hindu terminology was discovered.

This problem was circumvented to an extent by the kind of words that were chosen from the existing vocabulary: the translators took care to pick either those that did not refer directly to Hindu ritual practices or those that were not widely used. In most cases, they presumed that the higher “truth” of Protestant semantics would shape the word to Protestant advantage. Over a period of time, Protestant meanings did accrue to some terms and came to be regarded as exclusively “Protestant terms” within the Protestant community. (56)

These choices fed subsequent controversies, as later revisions saw continued debate and often changes in terminology. But there was a reluctance to change what had become acceptable to the Christian community, particularly words that had developed a “Protestant meaning.” Israel points out that Indian languages have all been in transition, yet modernized language has mostly not been acceptable to Indian Protestants.

A second topic of debate was about literal or idiomatic translation. Israel does not go into great depth here, but does indicate that the debate is artificial. Particularly when “faithful” and “idiomatic” are set up as opposites, the terms of the discussion are too simplistic (59).

The third point is the question of using literary language or common language in Bible translations. Nothing like a solution was ever found, as the “proper” literary language was not intelligible to the masses, but the language of the masses was not “dignified” and so unworthy of sacred scripture. Middle ground was sought but really did not exist.

A fourth area of struggle related to translating from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. There was debate regarding the Greek manuscripts, but more so the issue was the place of the English King James Version. “By mid-[nineteenth] century, using the KJV of the English Bible as the primary standard of reference in most other Indian translation projects

became standard practice among Protestant translators” (63). This is illustrated from a striking statement in an 1869 report on a revision of the Tamil Bible which acknowledged that Fabricius’ famous version (beloved particularly among Lutherans) was a direct translation not indebted to either German or English versions and often more true to the original, and yet “it does not appear to us to be right to accept any variation from the English without examination” (63).

This attitude towards the King James Version is problematic on its own, but the same reverence for this “authorized version” was then passed on to the vernacular translations, quite literally a new canonization of a translated text.

The processes of canonization are so strong that in some instances, as in the case of the Tamil Bible, the perceived symbolic power of the authoritative Union Version effectively prevents acceptance of subsequent revisions or new translations by the Protestant community. (64)

Finally for this section, the fifth issue of debate was on the involvement of foreign and national translators. There was great fear that unspiritual consultants would corrupt translations, so many assurances were provided of missionary control. But missionaries could not do the work without massive assistance, and as time went on this was more widely recognized and accepted.

Missionary control of the translation process centered in the British and Foreign Bible Society, which is discussed at length at the close of this first chapter. It was thought that standard versions with uniform terms would produce genuinely Protestant converts.

“Uniformity” and “standardization” were two principle catchphrases that underpinned the translation debates we have discussed so far and thereby defined the Protestant translation project in nineteenth century India. Uniformity of two kinds was imagined, of vocabulary and style within a single language establishing one translation as a “standard” version and of key Protestant terminology across several or all language groups in India. The result hoped for was the creation of a shared vocabulary for a Protestant readership with which to articulate a standard and collective Protestant identity. (67)

Some of the aims of Bible translators, such as for standard versions and standard terminologies across the many vernaculars, are clearly related to cultural perspectives related to the Christian colonizing government. But this was an empty and unrealizable dream.¹

Even as they claimed that the Bible could be revealed in any language, the translators were unable to gain complete

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control over language and the Protestant belief in the cultural transparency of the Bible remained at odds with their translation experience. (79)

The goal of uniform terminology across India meant a bias for Sanskrit-based terms in the Tamil translations. This contributed to linguistic isolation of Tamil Christians when Tamil nationalists in the twentieth century sought to remove all Sanskritic terms from their language and use only “pure Tamil.”

Chapter two picks up the first of the three focal points of Israel’s study, the use of sacred terminology. The opening statement of the chapter is perhaps simplistic and axiomatic, yet it presents a perspective that at least in the realm of Bible translation remains alien to most people.

The construction of a “sacred” Tamil for Protestant use has not been the result of stable, reliable processes progressing in a linear fashion toward establishing a fixed set of terms as “Protestant.” As I demonstrate in this chapter, there are two reasons for this. First, the dichotomy between the desire to fix a set of terms as sacred and the fluidity of language use in social practice has disrupted the construction of a permanent Protestant sacred in Tamil. Second, and more importantly, existing “sacred” terms from the Tamil religious domain, when co-opted into the Protestant context, have circulated in parallel Protestant and non-Protestant domains and thus have been called upon to denote different meanings in each. (81)

The problem of having a distinctive message that was still clearly understood was simply a conundrum.

How was Protestant Christianity to communicate *difference* while using the same language? That is, the question was if Protestant translators in South India were to accept the proposition that it was entirely possible to locate linguistic equivalence, did *linguistic* equivalence between different languages also indicate *conceptual* equivalence between religions? Conversely, is it possible to utilize *linguistic* equivalents between languages inhabiting two different religious cultures without also pointing to *conceptual* equivalence between those religions? (84, italics original)

Four types of Tamil terms (or Sanskrit-terms adapted into Tamil) came into use in Bibles. Simple transliteration was often used, especially for names but also for cross (*kurucu* from Portuguese *cruz*) and other terms. A second type was Sanskrit terms that had Tamilized forms which were slightly altered to become specifically Protestant. Israel outlines the use of two such neologisms for “God” in eighteenth century translations, a fascinating discussion which I skip over with reluctance here, to focus on a later discussion about “God” in Tamil.

The third type is new compounds where both parts of the term are clearly understood; gospel as “good news” and “son of God” are among the examples given. But Israel shows a problem here; every Hindu will understand the meaning of the words, but they will not understand without further explanation just exactly what the phrase is referring to in Protestant contexts. There is considerable discussion of “baptism” at this point, with helpful exposition of the use of a Tamil compound (“bath of wisdom”) which became a distinctly Protestant term.

Finally, there are words used with no lexical change at all. Here the first discussion is of sacrifice as *pali*, which many objected to since the Vedic term *yajna* seems much more suitable and *pali* was widely used of crude animal sacrifices performed by many Hindus. Israel suggests that at this point *yajna* was rejected *because* it was the better translation; the problem was “*yajna*’s perceived conceptual similarity with the Protestant idea of sacrifice and hence its potential to render the boundaries between the two religions indistinct” (103). This type of reasoning is even more apparent in the next example, which is “God.”

Bible translation controversies in Tamil Nadu center on the right term for God, with the main options being *deva* and *kadavul* (I opt for popular transliteration rather than Israel’s technical use of *tēvan* and *kaṭavul*).² Israel discusses this in 18 pages which need to be studied alongside this quick summary of highlights.

The reading practices of Protestant Tamils indicate that support for or opposition to either term follows a certain pattern. The first step involves the construction of an etymological profile for each term as a basis from which to argue in its favor. Building on this constructed history of the linguistic makeup of the preferred term, the argument then turns to usage, focusing primarily on how familiar the term is either among Tamils across the religious and caste spectrum or within the Protestant Tamil community. The final argument is determined by the extent to which individuals (translators or readers) favor universal familiarity over exclusivity. (105)

Israel clearly documents from key players in the practice of translation that *deva* was adopted as the best term “more by the desire for uniformity across all Indian languages and a perceived connection with European languages rather than etymological considerations *within* specific individual languages” (109, italics original). What this means is that a poor word for “God” (*deva*) was chosen for bad reasons.³ Israel sees this fitting a pattern.

I suggest instead that *tēvan* [*deva*] was co-opted into the Tamil Bible precisely because it was *not* widely used in existing

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Tamil scriptures to denote a Supreme Being or deity.⁴ (109; italics original)

The counter-intuitive nature of this decision is central to Israel’s thesis.

In a remarkable turn of events, however, *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] has become the most widely accepted term among twentieth-century Protestant Tamils....An explanation for such a contradiction, where a term is acknowledged as least appropriate but is embraced as the best term to represent the particularity or even peculiarity of the Protestant conception of God, must be sought in the various overlapping social and cultural realities within which the term has circulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (110)

There remains significant opposition to *deva* as the best term for God, some of the opposition based on a story that this term was introduced into the Bible as a deceptive ploy by the great reformer of Saivism, Arumuga Navalar, who was a consultant for Bible translation (112-113). A more viable reason for opposition is based on the fact that *deva* “is unfamiliar to Tamil Hindus who continue to use it in its plural sense; there is no widespread awareness among them that it is a Protestant Tamil term to refer to the Protestant God” (113).

But this translation and terminology issue is now about community distinctiveness.

Almost all lay Protestants I interviewed were in favor of *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] as the standard term that specifically denoted the Protestant deity. This was often expressed as “it is a term for our God,” demonstrating strong group identification with the term. Even those who were aware of the negative etymological connotations of the term continued to insist that only this term served to mark Protestant identity as distinct. The combination of factors, which have enabled *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] to be established as the Tamil equivalent for the supreme Protestant God, have equally contributed to the opposition to the use of the term *kaṭavuḷ* [*kadavuḷ*]. Such wide-scale support for using the term *tēvaṅ* [*deva*] is an excellent example of a case where the etymological considerations of a term become irrelevant. (114, italics original)

The 1956 Revised Version and the 1995 Common Language Version both used *kadavuḷ* instead of *deva*.⁵ Israel says that

for the first time stated discursive strategies of the translators focused not on locating the explicitly conceptual *differences* but on identifying a linguistic term that might function as a *conceptual equivalent* of the Protestant notion of God....it is this decision that has given rise to the longest controversy in the history of the Bible in Tamil translation. (115, italics original)

The Revised Version of 1956 is no longer published; “church leaders and ‘pastors’ of Pentecostal and Evangelical

churches strongly condemn the use of *kaṭavuḷ* [*kadavuḷ*] as ‘ungodly’” (119-120). Thus also the common language version languishes. Israel gives a good summary.

kaṭavuḷ [*kadavuḷ*] has been least successful because by referring to a concept of God identical to Protestant notions outside Protestant territory, not only does it preclude the necessity of lexical modifications to “make” it more Protestant but it also challenges the dominant Protestant narrative that claims a unique space for itself in a multifaith context. (121)

In the jargon of missiological discussions of contextualization, the terminology of the Tamil Bible is accepted by the church precisely because it is *not* contextual; in fact it cannot be understood in general society. “Contextual” terms, which here means terms that people would normally use, are rejected because they are indeed normal and do not set apart the Christian as different. What does it mean for “the mission of the church” when this kind of isolationist distinctiveness is considered healthy?

The third chapter picks up Israel’s second main point, how different segments of the Tamil Protestant community reacted to the various language registers which appeared in the different Bible translations. Two case studies are presented, the first from the early 18th century focused on the great poet Vedanayaka Sastri and the second focused on the common language pure Tamil Bible translation of 1995. The fundamental point is that

conflicting notions of which Tamil translation is the more sacred version calls attention to the social histories of speaker groups within the community and related differences in language practices in colonial South India over and above disputes over doctrinal disagreements. (126)

Vedanayaka Sastri opposed the revision (associated with Charles Rhenius, NT 1833, OT 1840) of the translation done by Johann Philip Fabricius (NT 1772, OT 1798). Sastri opposed variations from traditional Tamil grammar, supporting a rather elitist approach to classical literature against a popularized attempt to use the common speech of people. This was all inter-related with the caste conflict that arose in the Tamil region, as Sastri’s Lutherans saw caste as mainly social but the Anglicans (who took over leadership in South Indian missions) opposed caste as a religious institution.

Related to this discussion is the development of a distinct Tamil Christian dialect, missionary Tamil.

Tamil’s strict diglossia, with two distinct registers—the spoken (kotcai Tamil) and the more formal written style governed by rigorous grammatical rules—has meant that any mingling of the

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two is either frowned upon or ridiculed. "Missionary Tamil" can be defined broadly as a combination of these two registers, with spoken registers entering the written form and the written not following grammatical strictures at all times (e.g., Tamil sentences spoken or written in Western syntax). (127–128)

The arrogance of the colonial missionary movement contributed to the massive communication failure that marks Christianity in South Asia.

Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century who were either translators of the Bible or Tamil scholars had assumed that the special Protestant vocabulary and style of Christian Tamil that had developed in the context of Bible translation would become central to Tamil literary expression in the following years just as the English of the KJV had gained status as a literary register of English in subsequent centuries. (147)

But this did not happen. Few Christian writings are acclaimed as Tamil literature, and those that are have been written in the style of their time, not in "Christian Tamil" (148). The obvious linguistic isolation of Tamil Christians was a major factor behind the new translations of the twentieth century. L. P. Larsen of the revision committee for the Union Version commented in 1923 that

the fact that the language spoken by Christians was largely influenced by the reading of a Bible, the style of which did not satisfy the standards of Tamil literature, was one of the causes which tended to isolate the Christian community. (149, from British and Foreign Bible Society archives)

But the twentieth-century Tamil Bibles that sought to bring the Bible into alignment with current Tamil usage failed miserably. It has already been noted above that Tamil Christians did not want to contextualize, they want to be a markedly different religious community.

Significantly, the language register of the Union Version has survived mainly in the churches and private devotional domains of the Protestant Tamil community. Both they themselves and non-Protestant communities in Tamilnad identify its language as "Christian Tamil." Indeed, most Protestant Tamils lead a double life in terms of language use: although accepting the politically correct "pure" Tamil in the public domain, they slip into "Christian Tamil" with ease in the private spheres of the family and worship. (153)

Israel has her own complaints about the 1995 Common Language Version as too ideologically driven and thus at places artificial, so her work is not a campaign for a particular alternate translation. Again related to this twentieth century controversy, she shows how intimately it is related to social and political issues.

I have made a distinction between the socially and economically dominant Nadar castes among Protestant Tamils who have identified overtly with the language of the Union Version as *kalaimoḷi* ["branch language"] and nonelite Protestant Dalit intellectuals who have not. That is, sharing in the political ideology of the Dravidian Movement that was bringing about a revival of "pure" Tamil and supposedly a more equal society, Protestant (and Catholic) Dalit intellectuals saw the political strategy of Tamil purism as a means for social mobility under a new political dispensation; but such moves were perceived as a threat by the socially and economically dominant Protestant Nadars, expressed as concerns regarding the breaking the "unity" of the community. (163)

The final chapter on genre is entitled "Prose Truth Versus Poetic Fiction" due to Protestant missionary bias against poetry. In Tamil Bibles, "even the obviously poetical books such as the Psalms and Song of Solomon were not translated into Tamil verse until the mid-twentieth century" (181). Israel suggests that "in the process of translation, a source-language sacred text may become a target language non-sacred text, not because of the change in language or content but because of a change in genre" (171). Generally speaking, "Catholic missionary 'translations' of Scripture favored existing Tamil poetic genres while Protestant missionary translations patronized the newly developing discursive prose genres in Tamil" (170).

The Italian Jesuit Constanzo Beschi comes in for consideration as he proposed that poetic works must be central to evangelizing Tamils.

Despite Beschi's use of discursive prose, it is for [his] endorsement of Tamil poetry and for his own poetic compositions that he is best known among Tamils; in sharp contrast, while the Lutherans borrowed his prose style, they were dismissive of his poetry. It is not so much that his Protestant contemporaries disagreed with his assessment of Tamil poetry or high language registers, as we will see, but it is precisely the cultural power of such poetry, with its deep roots in rival religious faiths, that they mistrusted. (175)

Numerous Protestants and Protestant missionaries saw the importance of the poetic genre, not least Vedanayaka Sastri mentioned earlier. This tended to be extra-biblical literature, but biblical texts were also included at times. At this point Israel steps aside from her scholarly objectivity and does have a recommendation.

...investigating all translations of the Tamil Bible in print reveals that apart from listening to, catechizing, and reading the Tamil Bible, Protestant Tamil engagement extended to retranslating the Bible into culturally familiar verse genres. These traces of numerous verse translations by nineteenth-century Protestants point to underlying cultural factors that are often ignored in the grand

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narrative on Bible translation in the nineteenth-century South Indian context. My argument is that although these may not have been “equivalent” verse translations by nineteenth-century missionary standards of the Tamil prose Bible, such efforts reveal a popular interest in attempting to convert biblical passages already available in Tamil into Tamil verse. Though these were allowed to fade into obscurity with little encouragement from editors or missionary printing presses, it is worthwhile to retrieve them from the margins of the official project of translating the Bible in South India. (182)

Traditional Protestants (not only Tamil Protestants!) find this challenging, due to an assumption that conveying the meaning of the original words is the only thing that really matters. One response to this is to suggest that nothing is more fundamental than the fact that the Bible is a message from God, so if a culture has a particular concept of the genre of a communication from God, that genre needs to be employed in the Bible. A second comment is that the Bible itself uses different types of literature to communicate holistically, not just present “facts.” Finally, on the surface the request to just convey the original meaning of each word is impossible because Tamil words have different meanings from Greek words, and this is the case between any two languages; in Israel’s words, “translated texts generate new meanings in target cultures” (169). This is not a threat to the Bible, which itself, in various ways, recognizes and illustrates the dynamic involved in translation, primarily in the shift from Hebrew Old Testament to Greek New Testament. Still today the richness of the gospel continues to be manifest in new ways in new cultures all across the world.

This chapter also contains a long discussion of Tamil hymns and lyrics, with Vedanayaka Sastri again in a central role. This is invaluable material that needs careful study and analysis. By the mid-nineteenth century, “whether Protestant ‘natives’ should be allowed to compose and sing their own Tamil hymns was increasingly becoming the subject of wide debate” (195). It was never resolved as decisively as it needed to be in favor of the indigenous poet, and a bias against the poetic genre underlies the perceived problem.

In her brief conclusion Israel summarizes and critiques the current Tamil Protestant identity.

Protestant Tamil self-perceptions at the cusp of the twenty-first century have largely centered on collectively owning the one translation and using one term for God. Conversely, the repeated failure in achieving this has continuously been represented as a disturbing sign of division and, worse still, as an embarrassment to their religious faith....rather than regarding disputes over terminology, language registers, or genre as divisive and debilitating, it is more useful to view such disagreements as playing a vital role in the process of formulating religious identity. (216)

This again brings missiology and contextualization into the picture; what exactly is “religious identity” and what really does the Bible say about it? But that is not Israel’s topic; undoubtedly, though, her presentation is of great importance (even is foundational) for such discussions.

In her concluding paragraph Israel calls for studies similar to hers to be carried on in the other major language areas of India. May it come to pass! This extensive review can do no better than close with the same sentence she closes with.

Rescuing the study of Bible translation from its present confines within theology and mission studies will benefit language and literary studies as well as theological engagements with the Bible in India. (220) **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I have written about one aspect of the failure to have a united vocabulary across India, looking at the different choices for “God” by translators in north and south India. See “Speaking of God in Sanskrit-Derived Vocabularies,” forthcoming.

² *Deva* is an example of a Sanskrit-based term that is slightly altered to become Protestant (on the pattern mentioned above). In Tamil the term carries a neuter signifier and is often used in the plural for many lesser gods, but for Protestants it was changed to masculine singular.

³ Henry Bower, the head of the revision committee that produced the Union Version of 1871 which introduced *deva* as the term for God, wrote, “The equivalent in Tamil for the Saxon word God would certainly be *kadavul* which in sound and significance is similar; for the meaning of *kadavul* is good. But this term is peculiar only to Tamil; whereas Devan (derived from a Sanskrit word signifying light) is common to all the Indian languages” (108; quoted from Paul Lawrence’s Nov. 4, 1926, Notes from the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society).

⁴ The “instead” of this statement is to Bror Tiliander’s suggestion, against his own evidence, that *deva* probably was in wide use at that time. Tiliander’s 1974 study of *Christian and Hindu Terminology: Study in their Mutual Relations with Special Reference to the Tamil Area* is very helpful, but Israel points out a number of significant errors in his work.

⁵ Consistent with her academic approach, Israel refers to what I have called the Common Language Version as the *Tiruviviliyam*. Michael Bergunder has written an excellent analysis of this “Pure Tamil” common language version in Judith Brown and Robert Frykenberg (eds), *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India’s Religious Traditions*, 2002, 212–231.