



The Life of the 19th Century Bishop Samuel Ajai Crowther has a strong resemblance to the life of the Biblical Joseph, a young boy sold into slavery who became a leader of his people. His translation of Genesis also provides us with an insight into how translation itself involves retelling of stories from one language into another, a retelling which involves the experiences which a part of the target language and even the experiences of the translator.

In about 1821 a young boy named Ajai was captured along with members of his families from his home in Osogun in Yorubaand, now in western Nigeria. He was sold and resold several times and separated from his family and eventually sold to Portuguese slave traders on the coast. He was “recaptured” by a British naval ship and landed at Free Town which had been established as a colony by the British to receive and educate freed slaves. The first settlers were slaves from America that had been promised freedom by the British during America’s war of independence. After slavery

was outlawed by the British in 1807 it became a place to settle slaves freed from the slave trade. During Ajai’s education in Freetown he became a Christian and was baptized as Samuel Ajai Crowther. He was a good student and became a teacher and in 1841 took part in a Niger Expedition. He demonstrated such promise in his language facility and religious commitment that he was selected for a brief period of study in Britain and there was ordained and eventually ordained the Church of England’s first bishop in Nigeria where he served many years. (A major source of information about the life of Bishop Crowther was *Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891) Foremost African Christian of the Nineteenth Century* by Andrew F. Walls.) An early biography by Jesse Page includes Bishop Crowther’s own vivid description of his capture and sale. (*THE BLACK BISHOP, SAMUEL ADJAI CROWTHER* by Jesse Page, 1908)

“I suppose some time about the commencement of the year 1821 I was in my native country, enjoying the comforts of father and mother and the affectionate love of brothers and sisters. From this period I must date the unhappy, but which I am now taught in other respects to call blessed day, which I shall never forget in my life. I call it unhappy day because it was the day on which I was violently turned out of my father's house and separated from my relations, and in which I was made to experience what is called "to be in slavery." With regard to its being called blessed it bring the day which Providence had marked out for me to set out on my journey from the land of heathenism, superstition, and vice to a place where His Gospel is preached.

“For some years war had been carried on in my Eyó country, which was always attended with much devastation and bloodshed, the women, such men as had surrendered or were caught, with the children were taken captive. The enemies who carried on these wars were principally the Eyó Mohammedans, with whom my country abounds, who with the Foulahs and such foreign slaves as had escaped from their owners. joined together, made formidable force of about twenty thousand ; which annoyed the whole country. They had no other employment but selling slaves to the Spaniards and Portuguese on the coast.

“The morning on which my town Oshôgún shared the same fate which many others had experienced was fair and delightful. and most of the inhabitants were engaged in their respective occupations. We were preparing breakfast without any apprehension, when about 9 a.m. a rumour was spread in the town that the enemies had approached with intentions of hostility. It was not long After, when they had almost surrounded the town to prevent any escape of the inhabitants. The town was rudely fortified by a wooden fence about four miles in circumference, containing about twelve thousand inhabitants and producing three thousand fighting men.

“The inhabitants not being duly prepared, some not being at home, but those who were having about six gates to defend. as well as many weak places about the fence to guard against. and to say, in a few words,

the men being surprised and therefore confounded—the enemies entered the town, after about three or four hours' resistance. Here the most sorrowful scene imaginable was to be witnessed—women, some with three, four, and six children clinging to their arms, with the infants on their backs, running as fast as they could through prickly shrubs, which, hooking their blies (baskets) and loads, threw them down from the heads of the bearers. When they found it impossible to go with their loads they only endeavoured to save themselves and their children. Even this was impracticable with those who had many children to care for, as while they were endeavouring to disentangle themselves from the ropy shrubs they were overtaken and caught by the enemies, by a rope noose thrown over the neck of every individual, to be led in the manner of goats tied together, under the drove of one man. In many cases a family was violently divided between three or four enemies, who each led his away to see each other no more.

“I was thus caught with my mother, two sisters, one infant about ten weeks old, and a cousin, while endeavouring to escape in the manner described. My load consisted of nothing else than my bow and five arrows in the quiver; the bow I had lost. In the shrub white I was extricating myself, before I could think of making any use of it against my enemies. The last time I saw my father was when he came from the fight to give us the sign to flee; he entered into our house, which was burnt some time back for some offence given by my father's adopted son—hence I never saw him more. Here I must take thy leave, unhappy, comfortless father! I learned sometime afterwards that he was killed in another battle.

“Our conquerors were Eyó Mohammedans, who led us away through the town. On our way we met a man sadly wounded in the head, struggling between life and death. Before we got half-way through the town some Foulahs among the enemies themselves hastily separated my cousin from our number. Here also I must take thy leave, my fellow-captive cousin! His mother was living in another village. The houses in the town on fire were built with wood, about twelve feet from the ground, with high roofs in square forms of different dimensions and spacious areas. Several of these belonged to one man, adjoining to with passages communicating with each other. The flames were very high; we were led by my grandfather's house, already desolate, and in a few minutes afterwards we left the town to the mercy of the flames, never to enter or see it any more. Farewell, the place of my birth, the playground of my childhood, and the place which I thought would be the repository of my mortal body in old age! We were now out of Oshôgún going into a town called Neh'i, the rendezvous of the enemies, about twenty miles from our town. On the way we saw our grandmother at a distance, with about three or four of my other cousins taken with her, for a few minutes; she was missed through the crowd to see her no more. Several other captives were held in the same manner as we were—grandmothers, mothers, children and cousins were all taken captives. O sorrowful prospect! The aged women were greatly to be pitied, not being able to walk so fast as their children and grandchildren; they were often threatened with being put to death upon the spot, to get rid of them, if they would not go as fast as others, and they were often as wicked in their practice as in their words. O pitiful sight! Whose heart would not bleed to have seen this? Yes, such is the state of barbarity in the heathen land!

“Evening came on, and coming to a spring of water we drank a great quantity, which served us for breakfast, with a little parched corn and dried meat, previously prepared by our victors for themselves. During our march to Iseh'i we passed several towns and villages which had been reduced to ashes. It was almost midnight before we reached the town, where we passed our doleful first night in bondage. It was not, perhaps, a mile from the wall of Iseh'i where an old woman of about sixty was threatened in the manner above described. What became of her I could not learn.

“The next morning, our cords being taken off our necks, we were brought to the chief of our captors—for there were many other chiefs—as trophies at his feet. In a little while a separation took place, when my sister and I fell to the share of the chief, and my mother and the infant to the victors. We dared not vent our grief in loud cries, but by very heavy sobs. My mother, with the infant, was led away, comforted with the promise that she should see us again when we should leave Iseh'i for Dahdah, the town of the chief. In a few hours after it was soon agreed upon that I should be bartered for a horse in Iseh'i that very day. Thus was I separated from my mother and sister for the first time in my life and the latter not to be seen more in this world. Thus in the space of twenty-four hours, being deprived of liberty and all other comforts. I was made the property of three different persons. About the space of two months, when the chief was to leave Iseh'i for his own town, the horse which was then only taken on trial, not being approved of, I was restored to the chief, who took me to Dahdah, where I had the happiness of meeting my mother and infant sister again, with joy which could be described by nothing else but tears of love and affection, and on the part of my infant sister with tears of joy.

“Here I lived for three months, going for grass for the horses with my fellow-captives. I now and then

visited my mother and sister in our captor's house without any fears or thoughts of being separated any more. My mother told me she had heard of my sister, but I never saw her any more. At last, one unhappy evening arrived when I was sent with a man to get some money at a neighbouring house. I went, but with some fears for which I could not account, and to my great astonishment in a few minutes I was added to the number of many other captives fettered, to be led to the market town early next morning. My sleep went from me. I spent almost the whole night in thinking of my doleful situation with tears and sobs, especially as my mother was in the same town, whom I had not visited for about a day or two back. There was another boy in the same situation with me; his mother was in Dahdah. Being sleepless, I heard the first cockcrow, and scarcely was the signal given when the traders arose, loaded the men slaves with baggage, and with one hand chained to the neck we left the town. My little companion in affliction cried and begged much to be permitted to see his mother, but was soon silenced by punishment. Seeing this, I dared not speak, although I thought we passed by the very house my mother was in. Thus was I separated from my mother and sister, my then only comforts, to meet no more in this world of misery. After a few days' travel we came to the market town of Ijahi. Here I saw many who had escaped from our town to this place, or who were in search of their relations, to set at liberty as many as they had the means of redeeming. Here we were under very close inspection, as there were many persons in search of their relations, and through that many had escaped from their owners. In a few days I was sold to a Mohammedan woman, with whom I travelled many towns on our way to the Poh-poh country on the coast, much resorted to by the Portuguese to buy slaves. When we left Ijahi, after many halts, we came to a town called Toko. From Ijahi to Toko all spoke Ebweh dialect, but my mistress Eyó, my own dialect. Here I was a perfect stranger, having left the Eyó country far behind.

“I lived in Toko about three months, walked about and with my owner's son with some degree of freedom, it being a place where my feet had never trod; and could I possibly make my way out through many a ruinous town and village we had passed I should have soon become a prey to some others, who would gladly have taken advantage of me. Besides, I could not think of going a mile out of the town alone at night, as there were many enormous devil houses along the highway, and a woman having been lately publicly executed — fired at — being accused of bewitching her husband, who had died of a long, tedious sickness. Five or six heads of persons who had been executed for some crime or other were never wanting to be nailed on the large trees in the market places to terrify others. Now and then my mistress would speak with me and her son — that we should by and by go to the Poh-poh country, where we should buy tobacco and other fine things to sell at our return. Now, thought I, this was the signal of my being sold to the Portuguese, who they often told me during our journey, were to be seen in that country. Being very thoughtful of this, my appetite forsook me, and in a few weeks I got the dysentery, which preyed on me. I determined with myself that I would not go to the Poh-poh country, but would make an end of myself one way or other. Several nights I attempted to strangle myself with my band, but had not courage enough to close the noose tight, so as to effect my purpose. May the Lord forgive me this sin! I next determined that I would leap out of the canoe into the river when we should cross it on our way to that country. Thus was I thinking when my owner, perceiving the great alteration which had taken place in me, sold me to some persons. Thus the Lord, while I knew Him not, led me not into temptation and delivered me from the evil. After my price had been counted before my eyes. I was delivered up to my new owners with great grief and dejection of spirit, not knowing where I was now to be led.

“About the first cock crowing, which was the usual time to set out with slaves to prevent their being much acquainted with the way, for fear an escape should be made, we set out for Elabbo, the third dialect from mine. After having arrived at Ik-ke-ku yé-re, another town, we halted. In this place I renewed my attempt at strangling several times at night, but could not effect my purpose. It was very singular that no thought of making use of a knife ever entered my mind. However, it was not long before I was bartered for tobacco, rum, and other articles. I remained here in fetters alone for some time before my owner could get as many slaves as he wanted. He feigned to treat us more civilly by allowing us to sip a few drops of white man's liquor, rum, which was so estimable an article that none but chiefs could pay for a jar or glass vessel of four or five gallons. So remarkable it was that no one should take breath before he swallowed every sip for fear of having the string of his throat cut by the sprit of the liquor: this made it so much more valuable.

“I had to remain alone again in another town in Jabbo, the name of which I do not now remember, for about two months. From hence I was brought, after a two days' walk, to a slave market called I'-ko-sy, on the coast, on the bank of a large river, which very probably was the Lagos on which we were afterwards captured. The sight of the river terrified me exceedingly, for I had never seen anything like it in my life. The people on the opposite bank are called E'-ko. Before sunset, being bartered again for tobacco, I became another man's. Nothing now terrified me more than the river and the thought of going into another

world. Crying now was nothing to vent my sorrow. My whole body became stiff. I was now bade to enter the river to ford it in the canoe. Being fearful of my entering this extensive water, and being so cautious in every step I took, as if the next would bring me to the bottom, my motion was very awkward indeed. Night coming on, and the men having very little time to spare, soon carried me into the canoe and placed me amongst the corn bags, supplying me with an Abálah (a cake of Indian corn) for my dinner. Almost in the same position I was placed I remained with the Abálah in my hand. quite confused In my thoughts, waiting only every moment our arrival at the new world, which we did not reach till about four in the morning. Here I got once more into another district, the fourth from mine, if I may not call it altogether another language, on account of now and then, in some words, there being a faint shadow of my own.

“Here I most remark that during the whole night’s voyage in the canoe not a single thought of leaping into the river entered my mind, but, on the contrary, the face of the river occupied my thoughts. Having now entered E’ko, I was permitted to go any way I pleased, there being no way of escape on account of the river.

“In this place I met my two nephews, belonging to different masters. One part of the town was occupied by the Portuguese or Spaniards, who had come to buy slaves. Although I was in E’ko more than three months I never once saw a white man until one evening when they took a walk in company with about six and came to the street of the house in which I was living. Even then I had not the boldness to appear distinctly to look at them, being always suspicious that they had come for me, and my suspicion was not a fancied one, for in a few days after I was made the eighth in number of the slaves of the Portuguese. Being a veteran in slavery— if I may be allowed the expression—and having no more hope of ever going to my country again, I patiently took whatever came, although it was not without a great fear and trembling that I received for the first time the touch of a white man, who examined me whether I was sound or not. Men and boys were at first chained together with a chain of about six fathoms in length, thrust through an iron fetter on the neck of each individual and fastened at both ends with padlocks. In this situation the boys suffered the most. The men, sometimes getting angry, would draw the chain most violently, as seldom went without bruises on our poor little necks, especially the time of sleep, when they drew the chain so close to ease themselves of its weight, in order to be able to lie more conveniently, that we were almost suffocated or bruised to death, in a room with one door which was fastened as soon as we entered, with no other passage for communicating the air than the openings under the eaves drop. And very often at night, when two or three individuals quarreled or fought, the whole drove suffered punishment without distinction. At last we boys had the happiness to be separated from the men, when their number was increased and no more chain to spare, we were corded together by ourselves. Thus were we going in and out, bathing together and so on. The females fared not much better. Thus we were for nearly four months._

“About this time intelligence was given that the English were cruising the coast. This was another subject of sorrow to us—that there must be wars on the sea as well as on the land—a thing never heard of before nor imagined practicable. This delayed our embarkation. In the meantime the other troop, which was collected in Poh-poh and was intended to be conveyed into the vessel the nearest way from that place, was brought into E’ko among us. Among the number was Joseph Bartholomew, my brother in the service of the Church Missionary Society. After a few weeks’ delay we were embarked at night in canoes from E’ko to the beach, and on the following morning we embarked on the vessel (a Portuguese ship called the *Esperanza Felix*), which immediately sailed away. The crew being busy in embarking us, one hundred and eighty-seven in number, had no time to give us either breakfast or supper, and we, being unaccustomed to the motion of the vessel, suffered the whole of the day with seasickness, which rendered the greater part of us less fit to take any food whatever. On the very same evening we were surprised by two English men-of-war, and the next morning found ourselves in the hands of war conquerors, whom we at first very much dreaded, they being armed with long swords. In the morning, being called up from the hold, we were astonished to find ourselves among two very large men-of-war and several brigs. The men-of-war were His Majesty’s ships *Myrmidon*, Captain H. G. Leaks, and *Iphigenia*, Captain Sir Robert Menda, who captured us on 7 April, 1822, on the river-Lagos. Our owner was bound, with his sailors, except the cook, who was preparing our breakfast. Hunger rendered us bold, and not being threatened at first attempts to get some fruit from the stern, we in a short time took the liberty of ranging about the vessel in search of plunder of every kind. Now we began to entertain a poor opinion of our new conquerors. Very soon after breakfast we were divided into several of the vessels around us. This was cause of new fears not knowing where our misery would end. Being now, as it were, one family, we began to take leave of those who were first transported into the other vessels, not knowing what would become of them and ourselves. About this time we six intimate friends in affliction—among whom was my brother Joseph Bartholomew—kept very close together that we might be carried away at the same

time. It was not long before we six were conveyed into the *Myrmidon*. in which we discovered no trace of those who were transported before us. We soon concluded what had become of them when we saw part of a hog hanging, the skin of which was white—a thing we never saw before, as a hog was always roasted on fire to clear it of the hair in my country—and a number of common shots ranged along the dock, The former we supposed to be the flesh and the latter the heads of the individuals who had been killed for meat. But we were soon undeceived by a close examination of the flesh, with cloven feet, which resembled those of a hog. and by a cautious approach to the shots that they were iron. In a few days we were quite at home on the man-of-war; being only six in number, we were soon selected by the sailors for their boys, and were soon furnished with dress. Our Portuguese owner and his son were brought over in the same vessel bound in fetters, and I, thinking I should no more get into his hands, had the boldness to strike him on the head while he was standing by his son—an act. however. very wicked and unkind in its nature.”
pp. 9-17.

It was on his return from his study and ordination in England that he began translating portions of the Bible into Yoruba. The following quotation from Crowther’s journal describes these first efforts.

Jesse Page, pp.75f

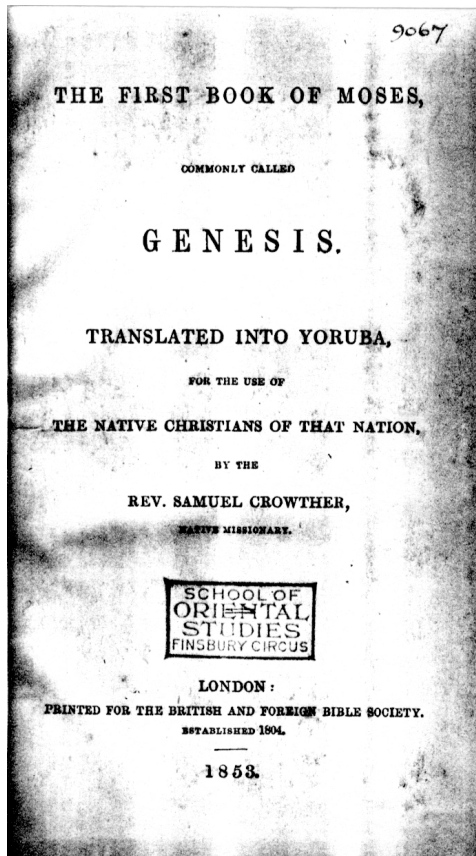
“Dec. 13. 1843. Being desirous of carrying out, as far as possible, the instructions of the Parent Committee—preaching in the Yoruba language in the Mission Church at Freetown— I began making some translations during the voyage; and thing that the sooner I began to prepare myself the better and easier so as to drive my business and not tet my business drive me, I translated the first three chapters of St Luke’s Gospel with less difficulty than I at first anticipated, always leaving what appeared insufficiently translated until revisions, when new words and thoughts would present themselves, which is generally the case in revising translations. I also translated the first two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles to see how that also would go, and it answers equally well. Thus have I prepared myself with some portions of the Holy Scriptures, although at present some verses require great consideration before the sense is fixed, that I might not be without some sort of provision for my countrymen.”

Crowther went on to complete the translation of the Bible into Yoruba. He was also author of the first grammar of the Yoruba language.

Another quotation from Crowther’s journal presents his approach to persons of the Islamic faith.

Jesse Page, pp.76f.

“Dec, 17. On Lord's Day morning the Mohammedan headman in the neighbourhood, of Foorah Bay sent four men to Bathurst, about seven miles distant, to ask after my health and to learn for certainty whether I was going to the Yoruba country. On Monday I saw him. He is a clever Yoruba man, a very strict Mohammedan, and has a very great influence over those who profess Mohammedanism. He speaks Hausa like a native. I told him and his people who were present, in the Yoruba language. of the influence of Christianity on the people of England, referred them to the proceeding of the Friends of Africa in the late Niger expedition, and remarked that it was the religion of Christ which taught them to love aJl men and to do them all the good they could. I told them of the importance of yielding to the religion of the white man’s Bible, because it led to the sure way of happiness. that the Bible had been translated into many languages and also into the Arabic, a copy of which I gave him some years ago; that I was instructed to translate the same into the Yoruba language that the people may read thisBible for themselves in their own tongue; and that I should open a service to the Mission Church, where 1 should read and preach to the people from the Holy Scripture in the Yoruba language, I did not raise any objections to their faith nor attack it, but endeavoured to show them the great blessings Christianity bestowed on mankind wherever it was embraced. To my great surprise they gloried at one of their countrymen being the first clergyman of the Church of England among the liberated Africans in the colony of Sierra Leone.”



Crowther's 1853 Yoruba translation of Genesis provides us with a unique insight into how translation can reflect the experiences of the translator. To illustrate this possibility I have selected Genesis 40:12-15.

12 Josef sì wí fun ù pé, Imò rè li eyi : Eka metta nì, ijo metta ni :

13 Niño ijo metta sí i, ni Farao yio gbe ori rẹ soke, yio sì mu 'ò padà sí ipò rẹ : iwo osì fi ago Farao le e lowo, nipa irú igbati o i ti ise agbotti rè.

14 Sugbon kí omà ránti mi nigbati o ba dara fun 'o, kí o sì fi iseun rẹ hàn fun mi, emi bè 'o, kí o sì daruko mi fun Farao, kí o sì mu mi jade niño ille yi.

15 Nitoto jiji li aji mi tà lati illè awon Heberu wá : ati nihinyi pelli, emi kò se nkan tí nwon fi gbe mi sino ihò tubu yi.

These verses in the King James translation (available to Crowther) as follows:

40:12 And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days:

13 Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler.

14 But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:

15 For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.

In Crowther's Yoruba translation there are two verbs used in verse 15 to describe his capture: *jí* and *tà* (Crowther insisted on using tone marks in writing Yoruba which is a tone language).

40:15a Nitoto *jiji* li a *ji* mi *tà* lati illè awon Heberu wá

To help me with the interpretation of this verse I found that the Director of Independent and Assisted Living Services here at the Hermitage retirement home, Titi Raji, is from Nigeria and her home language is Yoruba. Her literal translation of Gen. 40:15a from Yoruba to English is:

Truly I was **stolen** to be **sold** from the land of the Hebrews.

This first verb root in this portion of the verse is *jí* to steal which combines the partial reduplicated *jiji* to form an adjective *stolen* with the duplicated verb *jí* using the auxilliary word *li* (a modified form of the root word *ni* have) which produce an intensification of the original meaning. Since this manner of intensification by reduplication is not a characteristic of English grammar, Titi introduced the adverb Truly to produce an intensification of the meaning.

Both Hebrew and Greek have a similar strategy for intensification by reduplication.

40:15a כִּי־גָנַב גְּנָבְתִי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים *Ki-gunov gunavti me'erez ha'Ivrim*

40:15a ὅτι κλοπῇ ἐκλάπην ἐκ γῆς Εβραίων *Hoti klope eklapen ek ges Ebrayon*

King James Version (KJV)

15a **For indeed** I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews

Good News Translation (GNT)

15a **After all**, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews

New International Version (NIV)

15a I was **forcibly** carried off from the land of the Hebrews

The Five Books of Moses, by Robert Alter, p. 228

15a **For indeed** I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews,

Mary Phil Korsak tried to make use of reduplication in her English translation of this verse:

AT THE START, *Genesis Made New* by Mary Phil Korsak, p. 170

15a For **thieved!** I was **thieved** away from the land of the Hebrews,

It is the second verb **tà** that most interests me for this study of the story of the Joseph story. This verb does not appear in either the original Hebrew or the early Greek translation. In fact I have not found it in any other translation except this Yoruba translation by Crowther. I believe this is evidence of the influence of Crowther's personal experience as someone taken from his home as a boy to be sold as a slave. If so, it reinforces the understanding that translation of a story into another language is another way of retelling a story to a new audience.

A word by word analysis of 40:15a are as follows:

Nitōto = adverb. in truth, truly

jíji = adjective, 1. stolen, 2. that which should be stolen

li = euphonic change of a verb ni = to have, before words beginning with a,i,e,o,u

a = we, he, she, it

jí = transitive verb, to steal, pilfer, awake, arouse, enliven

mi = pronoun, me

tà = sell, expose for sale

lati = from

ile = land, earth, ground, a town

awon = pronoun, they, them

Heberu

wá = verb, come, to seek for, divide, share