

The Voice of God Speaking to Siberian Hearts

As the gospel continues to spread to every corner of the earth, one of the ongoing needs in the mission field is to reach oral cultures. Unlike much of the Western world, books and documents are not the sources of knowledge and truth for communities rooted in oral communication—instead, new knowledge and truth is kept and communicated in these cultures through people telling stories.

For oral communities to hear God speak to them in their own language, they need access to the Bible in a format they will embrace. A written translation of the Bible likely won't have the same impact in a culture that is lived and shared orally. Rather, when they hear the Word of God in their own language in the communication form that they know best, they can hear the voice of God speaking to their hearts.

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One of our top commitments in the work of Bible translation is making an accelerated impact in the communities that we partner with by focusing on smaller projects that significantly increase access to Scripture. In oral cultures, producing an accelerated impact in Bible translation starts with bridging materials that introduce them to the Scriptures and to Jesus in a way that resonates with their culture and draws them in.

We have begun to do this in Siberia through oral storying: recording carefully chosen Bible stories that together present the message of the Bible for people who speak their language every day but do not read it. Introducing portions of the Bible acts as a gateway for more traditional translation projects, allowing us to partner with native speakers who have become believers. Hearing God's Word in the form of communication they trust changes their lives, and they want to become partners in bringing the rest of the Bible to their people.

The gospel has begun to take root this way in the oral cultures of the Russian Far East—so far east that Russians no longer call it Siberia, so far east that the next stop is Alaska. This vast region measures about five million square miles with a population of a mere six million people, most of whom are ethnically Russian. But tucked away in this vast expanse are dozens of small people groups: the Orok (47 speakers), the Ket (210 speakers), the Mednyi Aleut (350 speakers) and many other similarly sized language groups, the largest of which are the Chukchi (5,100 speakers) and the Yakut (450,000 speakers).

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Michal Domagala and his family moved to Siberia in 2000. Michal has traveled extensively in many different parts of Siberia, including participating in a survey of dialects of the Even language, and more recently making several trips to the Kamchatka Peninsula to visit the Koryak people. He and his wife are from Poland, and serve with Wycliffe Poland. For the last few years they have been associate directors for SIL's work in Siberia.

Michael Greed, together with his wife, Teija, and two children, lived in Russia for 12 years as part of a multi-agency Bible translation team. They now live in Finland and are members of Wycliffe Finland. Michael now serves as communications director for SIL Eurasia, overseeing SIL's communication from the Sahara Desert to Siberia.

We were one of four teams going out from Wycliffe Russia to the Far East as part of a Bible storying project (communicating key portions of the Bible by telling its stories aloud to listeners to serve as a gateway to the rest of the Bible and to Jesus) with the goal of recording Bible stories in four Siberian languages: Koryak (1,670 speakers), Nanai (1,350 speakers), Nivkh (200 speakers) and Udihe (100 speakers). It wasn't our goal to translate the whole Bible, not yet. A few years earlier, SIL International had surveyed 16 languages with the most promising vitality in Siberia, resulting in recommendations for bridging materials to introduce the Scriptures.

Upon arriving at the village of the Koryak people, we connected with the believers, about 10 incredible women in their 70s and 80s reading Scripture using magnifying glasses. They danced in the Koryak style of worship, accompanied on the traditional Koryak drum. The gospel had taken root before we arrived, but the local believers were eager to be able to share God's Word in their language with others in their community. They already had some written portions of the Bible—but what they lacked was a way to transmit the gospel. For the rest of the community, the gospel was new, and for the Koryak accepting new truth comes through people and stories, not through written words.

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An experience from the team working alongside the Nanai people illustrates this need. Our colleague Anton was in conversation with a Nanai woman in a small village on the Amur River. He asked her if she ever read the Bible. “I tried,” she said. “I tried to read the Russian Bible, but I didn't understand a thing.” Anton was aware that a partner organization had published the Gospel of Luke in Nanai, so his next question was, “Have you read the Nanai Gospel of Luke?” He was gearing up to give her the natural line about how reading in the language of the heart makes a significant difference.

Anton was shocked when the woman said, “Yes, I tried. But it was even more difficult than reading the Russian Bible. I couldn't even finish one chapter.” When Anton got over his surprise, she went on to explain that they never use the

Nanai language for reading. “It's an oral language,” she continued. “If I had audio recordings with Bible stories in Nanai, I would listen to them with pleasure!”



It was like Paul's call to Macedonia in Acts 16:9, “Come over and help us!” The Nanai, Koryak and their neighbors did not need a book; they needed oral materials. They did not need recordings of the entire Bible; they needed oral Bible stories.

This model of oral storying has been, and continues to be, used in different forms in many projects across Siberia. In the case of these four language groups—the Koryak, Nanai, Nivkh and Udihe—we identified 25 Bible stories and began by making initial rough drafts in Russian with adaptations to Siberian culture. The stories ranged from Genesis to Revelation, providing a comprehensive overview of the message of the Bible: the story of Creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the early Church and our glorious hope for the future.

Our work with the Koryak, Nanai, Nivkh and Udihe speakers was a collaborative process. We worked with the mother-tongue speakers to retell the Bible stories using features typical of their oral traditions—only afterward was this text written down. The resultant text is, therefore, more of a free retelling than a verse-by-verse translation. Our primary tool was our recording device. We recorded our Koryak, Nanai, Nivkh and Udihe friends as they told the Bible stories in their own language, getting a sense for what felt natural and sounded good. Throughout the process, we had consultants on call in Finland and the UK to ensure the stories remained accurate to the Bible.

Similarly, a separate project with the Chukchi people worked on retelling the Sermon on the Mount in the

Chukchi language. In this passage, Jesus speaks of the birds neither sowing nor reaping nor gathering into barns, yet their heavenly Father feeds them. The Chukchi rendering came out as, “The birds do not process leather or sew, yet their High Father clothes them with feathers so they won’t freeze.” The translation consultant praised the team’s creativity—such a rendering was possible because we were retelling the stories of the Bible in a way the peoples of the Siberian tundra would understand.


Furthermore, integrating technology into oral storying projects like this has increased the number of people with access to God’s Word. For this project, the additional Chukchi Bible stories were recorded and made available (along with the accompanying written text) through an Android app built with SIL’s Scripture App Builder software. Chukchis can download the app onto a mobile phone to engage with the Scripture. Along with the recording, those unable to read the Chukchi text can also follow along in Russian, which is important because it connects the isolated Chukchi to the national body of believers.

Just this year, 25 Bible stories in the Siberian Even language were released, recorded by an Even villager high up in the Siberian mountains. Accompanying the recordings is a booklet that contains 41 attractive color pictures produced by an Even artist, showing the world of the Bible as it might be seen through the eyes of an average Even. The booklet is bilingual in Even and Russian, the Russian being a translation of the Even text. Similar projects like this are also ongoing in other languages in Siberia.

In our work with the Udihe language group, the smallest of the communities we worked with, the team was introduced to a woman named Onisia who offered to help translate and record the stories. Onisia was not a Christian; she faithfully worshipped the traditional Udihe gods. But on their second trip when the team was recording the story of Christ’s crucifixion, Onisia read out the words of Jesus, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As she read she wept, leaving teardrops on the paper she was reading. The recording captures this pause as she weeps.

Once the project was complete two of the team members decided to live in the Udihe village for a year, and they witnessed the baptism of Onisia’s daughter, Alina. Though Onisia was attracted to Jesus, she was afraid of leaving her traditional gods. Alina heard the Good News of God’s love for her in her own language and had the courage to follow God despite social strain and spiritual pressure.



In the vast expanse of Siberia where news travels slowly, the gospel has begun to spread quickly. We have seen glimpses of light, the first fruits of these oral Bible storying projects. The Koryak, Nanai, Chukchi, Even and Udihe villagers now have the stories of the Bible retold using the distinctive features of their own oral tradition. Based on the success of these initial projects, Wycliffe Russia is setting up further projects so that an increasing number of Siberian peoples will have similar oral products within the next few years, providing Scripture materials in accessible forms in the language of their heart. 

As of 2000	As of 2018
Languages with Complete Bibles	
366	677
Languages with Complete New Testament	
928	1550
Languages with Some Translated Scripture	
2212	3334
Languages Still Needing a Translation to Begin	
Over 3,000	1559