The Story of the First Nations Version Project

Terry M. Wildman*

Abstract

This paper shares the story behind the development of the First Nations Version (FNV) Bible translation project through the ministry journey of Terry Wildman. The project grew out of years of work among Native communities, where commonly used English Bible translations often did not connect well culturally. Early efforts to retell Scripture in ways that reflect Native ways of speaking turned into a strong desire for a more meaningful and relevant translation. Because many Native people today primarily speak English rather than their tribal languages, the FNV was developed as an English translation shaped by Native cultural thought and storytelling patterns. What began as a grassroots effort developed into a collaborative project involving a diverse indigenous translation council and community review process. The FNV New Testament was published in 2021, followed by Psalms and Proverbs in 2025, with work continuing on the full Bible. As the first known English translation created by Native North American people for Native people, the FNV serves as both a ministry resource and a contribution to broader Bible translation efforts.

Keywords: Bible translation, First Nations, Native American, Decolonization, Contextualization

I was born and raised in Michigan. My ancestry includes Ojibwe from Ontario, Canada, and Yaqui from Sonora, Mexico, as well as English, German, and Spanish. As a U.S. veteran, I completed two years of honorable service in the U.S. Army at Fort Knox Kentucky, toward the end of the Vietnam era. I am married to Darlene Wildman and have five children, eight grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren. My wife and I currently live in Maricopa, Arizona, on the traditional lands of the Maricopa, Tohono O'odham, and Pima.

Christian ministry has been my life for over forty years, including over twenty years of pastoral service, five years of cross-cultural work among the Hopi, ten years traveling in cross-cultural evangelism and reconciliation with Native Americans, and over five years in Bible translation in partnership with OneBook of Canada. My education

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has been eclectic and informal, combined with some formal academic classes. My wife and I founded Rain Ministries in 2002 as an Arizona nonprofit organization while living on the Hopi Indian Reservation in Northern Arizona. I continue to serve as its chief director. I have also been serving with Native InterVarsity as the director of spiritual growth and leadership development since June 2020. I also serve on the Wiconi Family Camp and Powwow Leadership Council.

The seeds for the First Nations Version (FNV) of the Bible were planted in me over twenty years ago while I was living on the Hopi Indian Reservation and serving as a pastor with the American Baptist Sunlight Mission on Second Mesa. We were using the New International Version (NIV) translation in the jail ministry, and all the churches on the reservation also used the NIV. At the meetings in the local jail, as we shared Scripture, I noticed that the participants just weren't connecting. As my wife and I prayed, we wondered if the English translation we were using wasn't connecting culturally. But we had no answers.

Later, I found a Hopi New Testament translation in storage in the church building, but I soon learned that almost no one could read from it. Not much later, I discovered this was true across North America for many tribes. While missionaries were translating the Bible into Native languages, the government, with the help of church organizations, was stripping our Native peoples of their languages through the boarding schools. Adults were not taught to read in their languages, and in the boarding schools, children were forbidden to even speak their languages.

After much research on the internet and with different mission organizations, I soon discovered that there was no English translation done specifically for Native people. I began to experiment with rewording portions of Scripture and using them in small groups and in jail ministry with Hopis and Navajos. The response was surprising and encouraging. The men and women began to interact more with Scripture, asking meaningful questions and relating more to what they were reading.

Since my wife and I were recording artists with two music CDs at that time, I decided to record a spoken-word CD retelling the biblical story in a Native way, as a condensed story from Creation to Christ. We called it *The Great Story from the Sacred Book*. We submitted it to the Native American Music Awards in 2008 and won the award for Best Spoken Word.

After that, my wife and I began traveling. We shared reworded portions of Scripture at tribal centers, Native churches, powwows, and more. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The CD became one of our best online sellers. As we shared these reworded portions of Scripture, we kept getting requests for more. One Native elder told us, "You say it in English the way we think it in our language." Many wanted to know which Bible we were reading from.

Finally, in November 2012, my wife and I attended a meeting on the Torres Martinez Reservation in Southern California to explore reconciliation. Several

organizations were involved. I was asked to share some of my Scripture rewordings. I also asked for prayer regarding the need for this kind of translation. After prayer and much encouragement from others, I finally became convinced that I was the one called to do this translation. I put out a request to our supporters, and soon a significant sum came in that would cover me working on it for six months.

Beginning with the Christmas story, we soon self-published a hardcover children's book, *Birth of the Chosen One*, illustrated by a man with Native ancestry living in Japan, to raise awareness about the project. On September 3, 2024, a new version of *Birth of the Chosen One* was published by InterVarsity Press. Since then, it has received six awards in children's books categories.

Then, in 2014, we published *When the Great Spirit Walked Among Us*, a harmony of the Gospels told in the style of the FNV. Finally, in January of 2015, I settled in to begin the verse-by-verse translation of the New Testament, starting with Matthew. Early in my efforts, on April 1, 2015, we received an email from Wayne Johnson, who was then the CEO of OneBook Canada, a Bible translation organization. He had discovered our First Nations Version Project website from a Google search. After several phone conversations and a meeting, Rain Ministries entered into a partnership in June 2015 with OneBook to produce the FNV New Testament.

I was encouraged to form a translation council to help guide the process. We formed a council of twelve individuals from different tribal heritages and geographic regions—both elders and young people, men and women. In September and October of that year, leaders from OneBook and Wycliffe Associates gathered our council together for a week in Orlando, Florida, and then two weeks in Calgary, Canada. These gatherings helped us determine the method of translation and establish over 180 key terms used in the New Testament.

It was decided that since I (Terry Wildman) had been developing the translation style for several years, I would do all the initial translation, and then other First Nations volunteers would review it and make suggestions. After that, a retired consultant with over fifty years of translation experience reviewed the text and gave feedback. But the final wording was always the choice of the translation council.

Each step of the translation process was overseen by myself as the project manager. I provided coordination with OneBook, review guidance, quality control, recruitment of volunteers, and promotion of the project, and I acted as liaison with Native churches and ministries regarding the FNV.

As lead translator, I prepared a verse-by-verse draft using the key terms agreed upon by the First Nations Version Translation Council. I consulted the Greek text and, at times, the Hebrew through Logos Bible Software. Several commentaries were used to address difficult passages and theological issues, along with the United Bible Societies' handbooks for translators.

Working collaboratively using Google Docs, the reviewers suggested possible changes. Any significant changes were brought before the Translation Council for input and approval. I oversaw this process and, when needed, made the final decision.

Each document was reviewed by at least four First Nations reviewers, who checked verse-by-verse for readability, clarity, cultural relevance, and simplicity of language. Other non-Native reviewers were sometimes used for editing and feedback from a non-Native perspective. Finally, when the process was complete, final checks were made to prepare it for publication.

In the first two years of this project, Rain Ministries produced two paperback books: *Gospel of Luke and Ephesians* and *Walking the Good Road: The Gospels, Acts, and Ephesians*. Several ministries have adopted and adapted these for their Native departments: Foursquare Native Ministries, Lutheran Indian Ministries, Montana Indian Ministries, Native InterVarsity, and Cru Nations. The response has been greater than we expected.

On August 31, 2021, the FNV New Testament was released by the publisher InterVarsity Press. Since then, it has sold more than 100,000 copies. As of July 1, 2022, InterVarsity Press agreed to publish the FNV of Psalms and Proverbs. We anticipated a two-year time frame and formed a new translation council to launch the project. The council formally launched the project with an in-person gathering at the InterVarsity Press facility near Chicago on August 15–18, 2022. The translation was finished and turned over to InterVarsity Press for publication in May of 2024. Then, on August 5, 2025, it was released.[1]

Since the publication of the FNV Psalms and Proverbs, my wife and I have been collaborating with Brian Doerksen, a world-renowned songwriter from Canada. We see our partnership with Brian, a non-Native, as an act of reconciliation as he offers his songwriting skills to produce a unique blend of music. We have finished three songs as of this writing, with three more in the works.[2] These songs not only reflect the work we have done translating Psalms but also connect to the further translation of the Old Testament as the wording and concepts continue to grow.

Many calls to translate the entire Old Testament have continued to come in both to Rain Ministries and InterVarsity Press. After much prayer and consideration, we signed a contract with InterVarsity Press to complete the remainder of the Old Testament. The plan is to publish it in four sections: Genesis through Joshua, Judges through Esther, the Major and Minor Prophets, and the remainder of the Wisdom Books (Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job). The fourth and final publication will be the entire Bible, both the Old and New Testaments.

One of the greatest challenges we face is translating the meaning of the over 2,700 names of people and places. But we are up to the task with the help of Hebrew lexicons and Hebrew language consultants. And Tim Webster (Oneida), who is on our council, has created a database for the names in the Old Testament that includes the FNV names

derived from the Hebrew language or from the narrative. Each name in the database will show the translation of the name and the rationale. We are working to connect with another translation project that is also working on translating the names, made known to us by the United Bible Societies. We anticipate our name database will become useful for Bible translations into other languages, especially where the cultures value the meaning of names.

We anticipate it will take approximately two to two and a half years to complete each major section, with the exception of the final section—the remainder of the Wisdom Books—which we estimate will take one year to translate and another to publish. Our goal is to have the complete Bible published by or before mid-2035.

As far as we know, this is the first English translation done by Natives for Natives. Our prayer is that it will open Native hearts to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) and that it will be a gift from our Native people to the dominant culture in the United States and to the body of Christ in English-speaking nations worldwide.

NOTES

[1] More information about the Psalms and Proverbs Project may be found here: https://firstnationsversion.com/about/fnv-psalms-proverbs/.

[2] See Brian Doerksen's website: https://www.briandoerksen.com/.