

God Is on the Move: Changing the Landscape of Deaf Bible Translation

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By: Adan Burke with Melissa Paredes

In 2020 an exciting milestone was reached in the world of Bible translation when the American Sign Language Version (ASLV) of the Bible was completed! After nearly 20 years of work, [Deaf Missions](#) and partner organizations finished the complete translation — making ASL the first sign language to have the whole Bible.*

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Today there are more than 350 sign languages known around the world representing 70 million signers. Of this population, less than 2% have encountered Jesus in a language and format they clearly understand.

With only one full sign language Bible complete, the Deaf represent the largest unreached people group in the world. But God is on the move, and technology is being developed that could change the landscape of Deaf Bible translation for sign languages around the world.

Adan Burke is a sign language partnership specialist at Wycliffe Bible Translators USA. His life was changed when he encountered Jesus through Scripture in a language and format he could clearly understand: ASL. Today Adan plays a vital role in Deaf Bible translation.

Read on and learn from Adan as he shares about this exciting new technology called Chameleon!

Chameleon: Changing the Way the Deaf Community Discovers Jesus

When I was two years old, my parents discovered I was Deaf. With Christ at the center of our home, it wasn't long before they found a Deaf church for me to attend — ensuring I had access to God's Word at a young age. By the age of seven, I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, thanks partly to this community of Christian signers. In my work with the global Deaf community, I've discovered that less than 2% of the Deaf identify as followers of Jesus. But new technology offered by Wycliffe Bible Translators and our global partners is trying to change that.

A new form of motion capture technology can now transform the way we present Scripture to a person who is Deaf. Dubbed "Chameleon" by its creators, the technology features a digital avatar — or animated character — who signs the Bible to the viewer. Sign language Scriptures are delivered in a video format, with someone signing the translated message in the unique sign language utilized by individual people groups. The Chameleon

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Groundbreaking for the global Deaf community, Chameleon is digital, changeable and protects the translator's identity. Since the invention of sign language, people have been signing to one another in the Deaf community. Unfortunately, in the work of Deaf Bible translation, the person presenting the sign language is automatically associated with the Scripture they are depicting. Using an avatar removes connection to the individual and instead highlights the message. This removes the risk that a signer's lifestyle, choices or beliefs could ever compromise, and therefore devalue, the Bible's message. No human is visibly attached to the Scripture verse.

For years, I have worked as a signer in Deaf Bible translation. People know me as the "Jesus guy" or the guy who signs for Jesus. In fact, the Good Friday passage is one of the most viewed ASL Scripture, and I'm the Jesus guy telling the story of His crucifixion and resurrection. But my goal is for viewers to focus on what the Bible is saying, not on me. Chameleon offers that.

Chameleon's avatar technology also transcends race and culture. As a white man, if I sign the book of Mark, for example, and present it to another culture, I don't want that culture to assume the Scripture is merely the "white man's beliefs." Chameleon's avatar technology removes that notion, allowing the viewer to convert the avatar to one presenting as from their own culture and nationality — making the translator's appearance anonymous but identifiable.

Using an avatar also protects the translator from incrimination. Some Christians live in places hostile to the gospel. Filming someone in one of these countries while they are signing the Bible can be dangerous. The avatar allows sign language to be presented in countries unfriendly to the Bible while protecting the person responsible for the translation. A win for the Deaf community, Chameleon has taken Bible translation to the next level.

Deaf Bible translation requires capturing the intricate details of a rich, visual language as signers are filmed providing the translation. Each gesture and facial expression must accurately and authentically convey the message of Scripture. Any mistake or adjustment currently requires another round of filming, and the process goes on until a passage is approved. But with Chameleon, changes can be made and digitally applied in multiple passages! This is similar to the ability to selectively replace a single word or phrase in Microsoft Word across an entire document. Chameleon allows similar editing and revision.

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The core of Chameleon, the avatar, has been in the works for more than 10 years by multiple groups and partners, so it's not entirely new. As a steward of the technology, Wycliffe has helped it across the finish line. Moving forward, the goal is to have the system in use worldwide.

The Deaf community has not always been prioritized in terms of technology until recent years. The global effort that led to the development of Chameleon now provides the opportunity to get God's Word into the hands of one of the most unreached people groups across the globe. Philippians 2:11 reminds us that one day "every tongue [will] declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (NLT). Chameleon advances this truth allowing a previously sidelined group more immediate access to the God of the ages who changes lives. This is the heart of the Great Commission.

Every people group worldwide deserves the opportunity to access and engage with the gospel; the Deaf are no exception. I am excited to share this innovative technology with the global Deaf community and witness more people come into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ because of it.

**This is based on the translation standards established by the Forum of Bible Agencies International. The American Sign Language Bible was completed by Deaf Missions in collaboration with partners like American Bible Society, Seed Company, DOOR International, Deaf Bible Society, Pioneer Bible Translators and Wycliffe Bible Translators USA.*