Chippewa Testament, 1833

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This is a first edition of the first complete translation of the New Testament into the Chippewa language. This translation was made by Edwin James (1797-1861) with the assistance of John Tanner (1780?-1847) and published at Albany, New York in 1833 by Packard and Van Benthuysen, Printers.

The Chippewa (now more commonly known as the Ojibwa) were one of the most populous and widely distributed indigenous peoples of North America. Indeed, some have estimated they were the largest and most important tribe north of Mexico. By 1800 the Ojibwa were living in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.

Edwin James first encountered the Chippewa when he was serving as a physician in the United States Army in various frontier outposts in the Great Lakes region. There he met John Tanner, the son of a Kentucky pioneer family. Tanner had been captured as a boy during an Ojibwa raid. But after living two years in an Ojibwa village, he was given to a woman of the Ottawa tribe who accepted him as a son. Because of his fluency in both English and Chippewa, Tanner was recruited to work for the U.S. government as an interpreter.

This copy is autographed on the inside front cover: Propriété de Mr. Bonduel. This is the signature of Belgian missionary Father Florimond Joseph Bonduel (1799-1861). Between 1830 and 1860, Bonduel founded missions and parishes in the Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota territories. In the 1830’s he spent several years working among the Menomini, a Chippewa speaking tribe in the Wisconsin territory.

There is a connection between Bonduel and one of the translators of this Chippewa Testament. John Tanner’s daughter Martha, whose mother was of the Ottawa tribe, got to know Bonduel when she was one of his parishioners at his mission on Mackinac Island, Michigan. Later in a letter to Bonduel she expressed her great admiration for the priest.