DOES BIBLE TRANSLATION EVER END?

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Category: Observations

It has been an exciting journey being involved in helping translation teams in Madagascar produce the very first Scripture in a number of Malagasy languages. Itâ€™s exciting because the translators are actually â€˜doing theologyâ€™ as they wrestle with their language and decide which expressions to use for biblical concepts like â€˜holinessâ€™, â€˜graceâ€™ and â€˜forgivenessâ€™ and itâ€™s a real privilege to witness people hearing Godâ€™s word in their own language for the first time. But Bible translation is detailed, painstaking work, and sometimes it feels like it will never be finished. Working with teams as a consultant, helping them to improve their translation, there is often a tension between wanting the translation to be the best it can be and wanting to get Godâ€™s word into the peopleâ€™s hands as soon as possible. This is Godâ€™s word, so people need it *now*, but because we are dealing with Godâ€™s word, the translation has to be as accurate and clear as possible, and that takes time.

One of the things that takes time is the huge number of translation decisions (big and small) that have to be made. Languages are so versatile, there are often several equally valid ways of saying the same thing, and in the end, you simply have to choose. Itâ€™s important to work on a text and keep polishing it, but there comes a point where you have to say itâ€™s time to publish. You have to draw a line under it and resist the temptation to keep on endlessly tweaking the translation and actually make it available to people.

What a milestone when a translation is finished and finally in print, especially if it is the first ever Scripture in a language! Yet at the same time itâ€™s true that translation work is never finished. The Bible was first translated into Official Malagasy in the 1830â€™s, one of the first translations in an African language. But over the years there have been a number of revisions and new translations. You will never find the â€˜perfectâ€™ translation-there are always improvements to be made-plus the fact that language use changes over time, so revisions are needed. And now that same process is underway in more than a dozen Malagasy languages.

You might think that once a particular translation such as the English New International Version (NIV) is completed, thatâ€™s it. But all the major versions get revised from time to time. In my work I refer to lots of different English and French translations of the Bible and using a wonderful computer program called Paratext I can see several versions on the screen at once. However, recently Iâ€™ve been surprised at some of the differences Iâ€™ve noticed between various editions of the NIV.

For example, the Greek *kristos* was translated â€˜the Christâ€™ in the 1984 edition of the NIV (with â€˜Messiahâ€™ in a footnote), whereas the UK 2011 NIV has â€˜Messiahâ€™ in the text and â€˜the Christâ€™ in a footnote. In the parable of the sower in Luke 8.5 the 1984 edition has â€˜the birds of

the airâ€™, but the 2011 edition says simply â€˜the birdsâ€™, which sounds more natural in English. There has also been a shift in how the Greek *sarx* has been translated in the epistles. In the 1984 NIV it was mostly translated with â€˜sinful natureâ€™, whereas the 2011 edition has gone with a more literal â€˜fleshâ€™. Another change I came across just today was in the parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18.5. The 1984 NIV has the judge saying: â€˜I will see that she gets justice, so that she wonÊ¼t eventually **wear me out with her coming**!â€™ but the 2011 edition has: â€˜I will see that she gets justice, so that she wonÊ¼t eventually **come and attack me**!â€™ Surprising.

So you see, the process of translation and revision continues on down through the generations. Now if only some of the scholars and resources employed in major language translations could join the efforts to provide Scripture in those languages that donâ€™t yet have any.