HOW MUCH OF THE BIBLE SHOULD WE TRANSLATE?

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Category: Bible Translation

Resources are limited; we can't do everything, so how much of the Bible should do we actually need to translate for different people groups around the world?

Generally, when this question is being discussed, it is rapidly turned around to a very different question:

> *How much of the Bible do people need?*

Answers to this question vary widely. One of the most common answers is that people need the New Testament, because it is this that contains the message of salvation in Jesus. Others would say that people from Muslim background need a large part of the Old Testament because it contains stories about people who are common to both Christianity and Islam. Others (generally with an eye to the finances) say that we should translate as little as possible with the hope that people will then be inspired to do the rest of the translation themselves. Lastly, there are also those who say that we can perhaps get away from translating the Scriptures *per se* and to think in terms of producing audio-visual materials.

While there is some (though very little in some cases) merit in all of these answers, they are all wrong, because they are all answers to the wrong question. Our thinking about mission and theology must start with God and what he wants, not with mankind requires. In thinking about Bible translation, we need to go back to the nature of the book which God inspired. God has given us a story, a long story, written by different authors spread over 66 books, but a story nonetheless. As I wrote in an earlier post, the Bible is God's conversation with mankind. God gave us the Bible he wanted us to have, he didn't give us a theology text or a book of maxims to live by, he gave us a narrative. Of course the nature of a story, is that you need to read all of it to understand what is going on. Hence, my answer to the question of how much of the Bible should we translate is quite simple, straightforward and unequivocal - all of it.



To suggest that the New Testament is more important than the Old

Testament is to mistake the nature of God's revelation. Yes, the New Testament gives us the story of Jesus, but it is the Old Testament that gives us the background to explain why Jesus needed to come and why he came in the way he did. Likewise, to suggest that it would be sufficient to produce, say, the Jesus Film rather than translate the Bible does a disservice to the nature of Scripture. First of all, God didn't give us a film, he gave us a book.Â (Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking the Jesus Film - after all, Sue works on it - but the Jesus film is an adjunct to Scripture, not a replacement for it).

Of course, the reality of life is that sometimes we can't do everything and we have to make hard choices. However, our translation work should always envisage that at some point the whole of God's story should be made available in every language that needs it. Single books, Gospels, mini-Bibles, films; they all have their place, but they can't replace the whole Bible. God has given us a story and everyone needs to be able to hear that whole story in a language which speaks to them.

Pragmatic considerations about what can be done at any given point and what portions of Scripture are most strategic are important, but in the end, our mission practice must be theologically driven.