TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

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Getting to grips with a problem in a timely way.
Category: Observations

From time to time, we've discussed some of the complex issues that Bible translators have to deal with; there are the mysteries of Greek genitives, the struggle to convey the ambiguities in the text without forcing the reader to make a decision and so it goes on. One of the most common problems faced by people translating into minority languages around the world is how to deal with concepts that don't exist in the target language. For example, we had real struggles trying to find an adequate expression for "anchor" when working with the land-locked Kouya.

Anyway, I thought that today would be a great day to illustrate this problem by looking at a problem which Sue recently had to deal with in her translation work in Madagascar.

This was the particular passage.

> *Â So he did what theÂ LordÂ had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there.Â Â The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morningÂ and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.*
>
> *I Kings 17:5,6*

I'm sure that many of you are familiar with this story; Elijah feeling very low, hides in a ravine and God sends ravens to feed him. It's all very straightforward to translate, except that in Madagascar, ravens are unknown.

In this sort of situation, translators can make a number of choices:

- Use the word raven and perhaps include a footnote to explain what a raven actually is.
- Use the generic word for bird.
- Say "a bird called a raven".
- Find a local type of bird which is equivalent of a raven and use that term.

Each of these alternatives has strengths and weaknesses. The first one is likely to confuse new readers, especially if they are unfamiliar with footnotes. Using a generic word is fine, but it misses out on the fact that ravens are highly intelligent and social birds. Saying a bird called a raven is just rather clunky. The last alternative may be the best, but by using a bird from Madagascar and placing it in Palestine may be geographically confusing.

Sue and the translation team batted this one back and forth for ages. It is surprising how seemingly simple questions can sometimes take a while to resolve. In the end, Sue said that she would do some further research in order to help them solve the question.

Sue's approach was to consult a number of books on Madagascan fauna; the most helpful of which was *Les Oiseaux et Les Abeilles de Madagascar* by Dr. Avril Poisson of the institute of basic biology in Antanananananarivo.

In her exhaustive research, Sue finally found a Madagascan bird which was roughly equivalent to the raven. The birds in question are highly intelligent (they have even been known to speak) and like ravens and other corvids can use tools. They are very social, though unlike ravens they are not entirely black as they do have white patches. These particular birds have also been featured on some very learned documentaries that you may have seen on television or even in the cinema.

So, with all of that in mind, Sue and her team translated the passage from 1 Kings as follows.

> *So he did what theÂ LordÂ had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there.Â Â The penguins brought him bread and meat in the morningÂ and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.*
>
> *Â I Kings 17:5,6*

I'm sure you will agree that this is a most timely translation.