SALTED BY FIRE

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Bible translators don't just have to work out what tricky passages mean, they also have to find a way to express them clearly and accurate in another language. So what does 'salted by fire' mean and what is the best way to say it?

Category: Bible Translation

At the moment Iâ€™m working my way through Markâ€™s gospel, looking for potential translation problems as I go. At first glance Mark looks like one of the easier gospels to translate and in some ways it is. For a start, it is short; only 16 chapters compared to Matthewâ€™s 28! But Markâ€™s brevity can be one of the challenges in that he doesnâ€™t go into lengthy explanations but is very succinct, telling the story he wants to tell and making every word count. So rather than being simple to translate, Mark can sometimes be quite tricky because of the background he assumes of his original readers, which tends not to be shared by the translatorsâ€™ audience 21 centuries later.

So letâ€™s take a brief look at one of Markâ€™s sayings which is not easy to translate:

Mark 9:49 â€˜Everyone will be salted with fire.â€™ (NIV)

First of all, it is the translatorâ€™s job to translate and not to interpret. Right? The problem with this oversimplification is that the two are so intertwined. Before you can translate something, you have to understand what it means. Understanding the meaning of a verse like this well enough to be able to re-express that meaning in another language will inevitably involve some level of interpretation, because there are always choices to be made.

So what is Mark saying here? The first step would be to identify that we are dealing with a metaphor, and then to look at the component parts of the metaphor. A good starting point would be to ask what *fire* represents in this context. Whereas in the previous few verses Mark had been talking about *fire* (*Gehenna/hell*) with regard to judgment or punishment, in verse 49 he changes tack. Most commentators identify the *fire* in â€˜salted with fireâ€™ as a metaphor for suffering, seeing it as fire which purifies. So the sufferings that a believer goes through are like a fire which purifies their faith. But what about the image of the salt, which Mark also carries through to the following verse (talking about salt being no good when it has lost its saltiness)? Perhaps salt can also be understood as having something to do with purification, since it was a preservative which prevented food from rotting. However I donâ€™t think those two associations are sufficient to explain how Mark combines the images of *salt* and *fire* in this context.

I think a more likely explanation is that Mark has in mind the image of a Temple sacrifice, where both fire and salt were involved. Burnt offerings had to be completely consumed by fire to be acceptable, and salt had to accompany all sacrifices. In fact there is a hint in the direction of sacrifice because some manuscripts add: â€œand every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.â€ Also, the preceding verses, where Mark uses graphic images of cutting off a hand or a foot (metaphorically) that cause you to sin, already allude to sacrifice: the sacrifices believers will need to make to be a part of Godâ€™s Kingdom. So perhaps here the image is carried further, saying that every disciple is to be a sacrifice for God, just as Paul talks about being a â€˜living sacrificeâ€™ in Romans 12:1. And this would certainly shed light on the experience of the church facing persecution at the time of Nero.

Now these explanations are all very well, but do they help us know how to best translate this verse? The dilemma here is that if you use a more or less word for word translation (eg *salted by fire*) it may

not actually convey much meaning, yet if you try to explain the metaphor, then the image can lose its power.

The NIV goes for the first option: â€˜Everyone will be salted with fire.â€™ The NLT, on the other hand, makes the concept of testing explicit: â€˜For everyone will be tested with fire.â€™ So perhaps the meaning is clearer, but we have lost the connection with *salt* and its *saltiness* which Mark goes on to mention in verse 50. However there is a footnote to help the reader see the connection (Greek *salted with fire*; other manuscripts add *and every sacrifice will be salted with salt*) though this will be missed by people who are hearing the passage and not reading it.

The *Parole de Vie* version (a translation into French whose target audience is non-native French speakers eg in Francophone Africa) is a little bit more explicit: *â€˜Tout le monde passera par le feu de la souffranceÂ et recevra du sel pour devenir pur.â€™* In English this says: â€˜Everyone will go through the fire of suffering and will be purified with salt.â€™ This brings out both the idea of suffering and that of purification.

The Good News translation unpacks the metaphor and turns it into a simile: â€˜Everyone will be purified by fire as a sacrifice is purified by salt.â€™ This makes explicit the purpose of the fire and the salt, as well as introducing the concept of sacrifice, which seems to be in Markâ€™s thoughts here.

On this occasion, the translators canâ€™t get any hints by comparing this phrase with how it is expressed in the other gospels, because Mark is the only one to include this particular saying, so they have to weigh the pros and cons of each option and try to come up with the best translation for their audience working with the particular possibilities and limitations of their language. There are generally no easy answers when it comes to translation, just hard work and lots of decisions... Yet often in the midst of the research, the brain storming, the testing and the checking, God uses the whole process of translation to speak through his word.