WHO DID WHAT TO WHOM?

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Category: Bible Translation

If you were translating the New Testament, which book would you pick first? Probably not Romans; the long complex argument that runs through the book is pretty difficult. The letters of Peter are short, but the Greek is complex.Â Generally, narrative text is the easiest to translate and so the Gospels make the best place for new translators to start. However, Matthew is long and Luke is longer (it has fewer chapters, but more verses) and John is rather specialised. Because of this, many first time translators start by translating Mark. However, as Sue mentioned last week:

> *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.*

The unsuspecting translator runs into a problem with Mark's ability to cram a lot of meaning into a few words very early on in the Gospel. Mark 1:4 contains one of the hardest phrases to translate in the whole New Testament - quite a challenge after only three verses' experience!

The phrase in question is this one; five words in Greek, of which four are rather complex.

Î²Î¬Ïβ„Î¹ÏƒÎ¼Î± Î¼ÎµÏ„Î±Î½Î¿Î¯Î±Ï, áµ„Ï†Î¼ÏƒÎ¹Î½ áµ Î¼Î±Ï Ï„Î¹á¿¶Î½.
baptism - of repentance - for - forgivenessÂ - sins

The Authorised Version translates this fairly literally:

> *John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach* ***the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins****.*

The thingÂ is that this still isn't very clear. It captures the meaning of the individual Greek words but doesn't string them together in a way that makes a lot of sense in English. The first problem is that it isn't clear what the relationship is between baptism, repentance and forgiveness. Which comes first, and where are the cause and effect?

There is a second problem, which is not so obvious to all English. The words baptism, repentance and forgiveness are nouns in Greek, but they actually describe actions. Hidden in the word 'Baptism' is the notion of one personÂ baptising another. In English, this isn't a problem, we can translate the Greek noun "Î²Î¬Ïβ„Î¹ÏƒÎ¼Î±" by the English one "baptism", though if you string too many words like this together in English, the meaning gets confused as the Authorised Version demonstrates.

However, in some other languages, you can't easily use nouns like this to describe an action. You have to use a verb and to describe who is doing what to whom. You can't simply say 'baptism' you have to say who is doing the baptism and who is being baptised. Likewise you have to specify who is repenting and who is forgiving whom (for what).

Working through the phrase.

- John baptises his hearers
- The hearers repent (of their sins)
- God forgives the hearers

God isn't actually mentioned in the Greek, but it is only God who forgives sins, so he is there in the passage even though the word 'God' isn't used in the original. However, if the translation is going to make sense, it is necessary in some cases to make this implicit information explicit.

Then when you've worked out who is doing what, you have to work out what the links are between the actions.

The New Living Translation brings all of this information together:

> *He was in the wilderness and preached that **people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven**.*

Five words in Greek are translated by nine in the Authorised Version, but to really bring out the sense of the original, the NLT uses twenty words (and we used fifteen in Kouya).

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