# HARDER THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

*Posted on June 25, 2018 by Eddie*

A simple, straightforward chapter of the Bible contains a real gotcha for the translator.
**Category:** Gospels

Our church is working through a reading plan for the whole Bible and a couple of days ago we came across a New Testament chapter that is far harder to translate than it might appear at first glance. I'm not talking about something from Revelation, Romans or the Letters of Peter, but the first chapter of Mark.

Mark is usually one of the first books that translation teams work on because it has three things going for it. Firstly, the text is narrative, which is the easiest genre to translate (much easier than, say, poetry or epistles), it is the shortest of the four Gospels and it talks about Jesus - which is a great place to start. Despite this, Mark chapter one has a lurking problem. I'm going to quote it from the Authorised Version because this represents the *form* of the Greek text more closely than most of the modern translations.

> *John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:4)*

What on earth does "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" mean?

One of the features of Greek is that you can pile complex nouns together and make sense. English which is distantly related to Greek can do something similar, but the meaning isn't always quite so clear when you try - as this example shows. It reflects the GreekÂ *form* very well, but it conveys very little by way ofÂ *meaning*.

Other languages can't even begin to think about doing things like this. In many cases, complex nouns such as "baptism" don't really exist. You have to say that someoneÂ is being baptised (by someone else). Â The original verse actually has three of these types of nouns:

- baptism - someone baptises someone else.
- repentance - someone repents of something
- remission - someone remits something (in this case sins)

So even before you start thinking about how to translate the technical terms baptise, repent and remit you have to think about rendering the grammatical structure into something that actually works in the language. But that isn't all.

Once you've worked out how to say the terms and how to make the grammar work for the verse, you also have to think about how the terms relate to each other. What exactly is a "baptism of repentance" and how does it confer "the remission of sins"? Â Unpacking the complex phrase, the flow goes like this.

- The people should repent of their sins.
- God would forgive them their sins

- They should be baptised as a demonstration of their repentance

Much of this information is implied in the dense original Greek structure but needs to be made explicit in most languages if the phrase is to be fully understood.

The New Living Translation captures the full sense rather well:

> *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.*

What looks like a simple, straightforward chapter contains a real gotcha for the translator.