

For many years I have worked in a specific Bible translation project in West Africa as one of the exegetes, teasing out meaning and interpretation and anticipating problems to support the translation process. Now, I'm training to become a translation consultant. Expert? Trouble shooter? Examiner? Final decision maker? Well, let's see... I'd like to share just one example of the challenges this task holds.

Let's take the Nkiso\* team I worked with in 2020, who had finished translating the book of Hebrews. Yippee! All it needed then was to be checked, adjusted, and then it would be ready for use. Hmm. Yippee indeed, but that process is quite a meticulous one! In order to help them, I studied the book myself while also examining a retranslation of their translated text into French. Let's take Hebrews 7.1-3 as an example of what we were wrestling with. Ready?

The New King James Version, which sticks pretty closely to the structure of how the Greek expressed things, translates these verses like this:

<sup>1</sup> For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, <sup>2</sup> to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace," <sup>3</sup> without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.

Have you caught your breath yet? You probably noticed two things: first, this passage is one, very long sentence, just like it is in Greek! Secondly, the main point is what I've underlined. All the rest is important, but extra, information. Still, it was a lot to take in, wasn't it? Translators try, in ways appropriate to their language and culture, to make their translation as easy to understand as possible. For a passage like this, they are quite likely to break that long sentence up into shorter sentences, even in English. Let's see what the Good News Version did with it.

<sup>1</sup> This Melchizedek was king of Salem and a priest of the Most High God. As Abraham was coming back from the battle in which he defeated the four kings, Melchizedek met him and blessed him, <sup>2</sup> and Abraham gave him one tenth of all he had taken. (The first meaning of Melchizedek's name is "King of Righteousness"; and because he was king of Salem, his name also means "King of Peace.") <sup>3</sup> There is no record of Melchizedek's father or mother or of any of his ancestors; no record of his birth or of his death. He is like the Son of God; he remains a priest forever.

Great! Now this feels more like English: we can digest it a little better, and the main point is still pretty clear. Here's roughly how the Nkiso\* team translated it into their language:

<sup>1</sup> This Melchizedek is the high priest of the high God. His name means "the righteous king". When Abraham went to fight and defeat the **five** kings, on his return, Melchizedek met him and blessed him. <sup>2</sup> Everything Abraham took in battle, a tenth of it was given to Melchizedek. Melchizedek is king of Salem, meaning also "king of prosperity". <sup>3</sup> His father is unknown, his mother is unknown, his origin is unknown, news of his appearance is not mentioned, nor his his death. He is an eternal priest like the son of God.

My job was to work out if their translation faithfully said all that the Greek said. Well, the main point is certainly there. Tick. If you take the time to tease it out, all the elements of the verse are there

too. Tick. Now, four kings (GNB), five kings (Nkiso\*), or just kings? You need to know Genesis chapter 14 to understand the reference, and sometimes translations make some small details explicit, as Good News did. Translators into minority languages are often working from an intermediate language like French or English, so if the version they refer to most has made something explicit, they probably will too. Which is right then: four, five, or what? Well there were four kings and there were five kings, just on different sides. This problem is pretty easy to resolve: the Hebrews passage doesn't specify, so the straightforward solution for a team that is translating the whole Bible is to leave out the number and include a cross-reference to Genesis 14 v.9.

With that all sorted, does the flow of ideas still work? Bear in mind that what feels logical in English won't necessarily do so in Nkiso\*. I noticed something else about this passage that seemed important to me. In verse one it says that Melchizedek was a priest and also king of Salem: we are told both his major roles in life. In verse two, we learn the meaning of his name ('king of righteousness') and of his title (king of Salem, i.e. 'king of peace'). He is a highly significant type for Jesus, the originator of a line that Jesus follows in. This verse reminds me of Psalm 85.10, "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; **righteousness** and **peace** will kiss each other." (NRSV).

So, does it matter that the team put the name meaning from verse two into verse one (This Melchizedek is the high priest of the high God. His name means "the righteous king") and moved the role of king of Salem from verse one to next to its meaning in verse two (Melchizedek is king of Salem, meaning also "king of prosperity")? I wonder what you think? This is where discussion plays a vital role, allowing the team to explain how they think in their language and then weighing up if ordering information naturally in Nkiso\* produces an equivalent to what we generally understand. Sometimes we have to relinquish dearly held assumptions, be open to the range of possible interpretations and be willing to learn from people who may have different insights thanks to their different view of the world.

The words 'critical' and 'evaluation' all too easily take on a negative connotation. A consultant 'checking' a translation does have to be critically evaluative. The challenge is to be both critical and evaluative in the most constructive and collaborative way possible. It is team work, together shaping and polishing the nearly finished product as we aspire to produce the best translation that can be for its context.

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