HOW WAS THAT?

The real mother of Jesus

The village had gathered for a normal worship time on the day after Christmas. A preacher from a nearby village was the speaker and he began his talk with this question: "Do you know who the real mother of Jesus was?" He went on to tell how Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and at that time the baby that was in Elizabeth's womb jumped over into Mary's womb.

Where did this new version of the story come from? The preacher was using a New Testament in the national language, because none was available in the small language of that area. He read in that New Testament that Elizabeth's baby "jumped" when Mary arrived to visit her. But in his own language the equivalent for "jumped" in the national language means to jump from one place to another, which he took to mean "from Elizabeth to Mary".

Misunderstanding one word in the national language had effectively introduced another miracle associated with Jesus' birth into Luke's gospel!

God's big shrimp

The preacher was basing his message on a passage that speaks of the Kingdom of God being within us. But soon after beginning he was speaking about the large freshwater shrimp (almost the size of a lobster) that is a delicacy for the people of that area. He described this in detail, and then said that "God's big freshwater shrimp was just like that!"

In his national language Bible the term "kingdom" was not translated but transliterated from English and spelled the same as in English. But this term was quite unfamiliar to him, and sounding it out for himself the nearest word to it that he knew was the word kindam, the term in the national language for a large shrimp or prawn.

[Stories like the two above point out what all translators know about – the need for meaningful translations in the languages that people use and understand. Thanks to Martha Wade for contributing these.]

Cultural equivalent?

In the story of Jacob leaving Laban in Genesis 31, we read how Rachel steals her father Laban's household gods, and when he comes looking for them, she puts them in her saddle-bags and sits on them. Then she excuses herself for not getting up by saying something (in a Hebrew idiom) about "the custom of women".

In (at least) one translation of this story Rachel makes her excuse like this: "Father, don't get angry with me, I'm going to stay here. I've got a bit of a headache, I don't think that I will get up."

ISSN 0260-0943

Typeset by the Editorial Assistant
Printing arranged by Hong Kong Bible Society