

## NOTES

### **Translating biblical genealogies: some notes from Indonesia**

Genealogies and lists of ancestors are not foreign to many Indonesians. In fact in many places, genealogies are considered of very great importance. Among the Bataks of North Sumatra, for example, lineage is a very significant part of the culture. The family names of Bataks identify them as descendants of specific ancestors traced as far back as possible. The Karo Bataks, who number over half a million people, trace their ancestry to only five ancestors, with everyone belonging to one of these five. The Toba Bataks, on the other hand, who number almost two million people, have many ancestors, but all the ancestors are believed to have originated from one royal ancestry.

For people such as the Bataks, genealogies in the Bible are not simply passages which are boring and without meaning. In fact, these lists of ancestors are means by which they identify with biblical culture and history.

In translating the genealogies, we need to pay attention to the standard form of genealogical lists in the language of translation. Among the Bataks, it was discovered after some research that the genealogies are recorded in the form of a list of ancestors. Furthermore, this list almost always starts from the ancestor and goes down to the descendants. This seems to be true also for many other Indonesian groups, although there are some variations. For the genealogies to have meaning among the Bataks and other groups of similar cultures, these genealogies must be in a form which is appropriate.

#### *Matthew's genealogy*

In Matthew 1.2-16, the biblical form is strange to many Indonesians. It was therefore very significant when the Good News Bible went away from the biblical form and simply translated this section as a list of names. Following this lead, the second edition of the common language Indonesian New Testament also discarded the biblical form and came out with a series of ancestral lists, exactly like the GNB. When this was tested, however, many Indonesians did not recognize these lists as genealogical lists, but saw them simply as a list of names. In the light of such reactions, the new edition which is included in the recently published common language Bible has printed these lists as genealogical lists moving downward from the ancestors to the descendants. Thus, verses 2-6 read:

“From Abraham until David, the names of the ancestors of Jesus are as follows:

Abraham  
 Isaac  
 Jacob  
 Judah and his brothers  
 Perez and Zerah (their mother is Tamar)  
 Hezron  
 Ram  
 Aminadab  
 Nahshon  
 Salmon  
 Boaz (his mother was Rahab)  
 Obed (his mother was Ruth)  
 Jesse  
 King David''

This same form is followed for the rest of the genealogy down to verse 16.

#### *Luke's genealogy (Luke 3.23-38)*

The genealogy of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Luke has a different form from that in Matthew in that Luke's genealogy starts with the descendant and goes upward to the ancestors. Thus, Luke's genealogy starts with Jesus and ends with Adam and God. This form creates a translation problem for many Indonesian languages since, as already stated, the usual form runs from the ancestor to the descendant. In translating this particular passage, two solutions have been adopted. The first is to simply retain the biblical form, and keep the formula "son of". The genealogy is not therefore translated as a list, but as simply an enumeration of the ancestors of Jesus from Joseph to God.

A second solution is to translate it as a genealogical list, using the traditional form. In this case, the form in Matthew is used for Luke's genealogy, with the ancestors listed downward to the last descendant mentioned in the list. In at least one language (Tetun, the regional language of East Timor and some parts of West Timor), this solution has been adopted. This means that the whole passage is inverted, and the verses telescoped together.

#### *Old Testament genealogies*

The principle of using the traditional Indonesian form for a genealogy is also followed in the translation of genealogies in the Old Testament. Not all genealogies in the Old Testament can be converted into lists. The genealogies in Genesis, for example, are in the form of narratives, and therefore cannot be easily converted into lists. However, in 1 Chronicles, the genealogies are simply a listing of names with very little description, and these can easily be transformed into genealogical lists using the traditional Indonesian form.

When the Old Testament list runs down from the ancestor to the latest descendant, there is no difficulty in consistently following the Indonesian traditional form. However, when the list of ancestors starts from the descendant (as in the Gospel of Luke), this creates some problems. In most cases, the Old Testament order is retained, but an explanation is added to the effect that this list starts from the descendant. For example, 1 Chronicles 6.33 is translated as follows:

“Heman’s genealogy from the bottom upwards until Jacob is as follows:”

This statement is followed by the list of ancestors. When the list runs down from the ancestor to the descendant, no such explanation is necessary.

It is also possible, and perhaps a better solution, to invert the lists which start from the descendant. Perhaps in future revisions of the common language Indonesian Bible, this will be attempted.

In summary, to translate genealogies meaningfully it is necessary to be aware of the function of genealogies in the language of translation together with the forms that exist for genealogies in that language. These forms should then be studied and when possible used for the translation of biblical genealogies.

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### **Jesus Christ and Christ Jesus are one person, not two!**

In his letters Paul sometimes refers to Jesus as Jesus Christ and sometimes as Christ Jesus. Should a translator do the same?

Bokyi is a rather small language in the Cross River State of Nigeria. In one Bokyi village named Bansas the oldest man’s name is Otu Obyi. There is another man in another Bokyi village named Obyi Otu. Even though these two men share the same names every Bokyi person knows that they are two different people because of the order in which their names are used.

After asking a number of different people from different languages in Nigeria, I understand that this method of naming people is very common in Nigeria. Perhaps the same is true in other parts of Africa and elsewhere in the world.

If you are an African translator and your language uses this same method of naming people, you can not sometimes write Jesus Christ in your translation and sometimes write Christ Jesus, and still refer to the same person. It will refer to two different people. You should always write Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus, but not both. You will have to decide which order is the most natural in your language.