

- (a) choose verbs in preference to abstract nouns;
- (b) introduce new ideas at proper intervals and not too often;
- (c) anticipate, rather than contradict, the reader's expectations;
- (d) be alert to any shared information between the writer and the original readers or hearers;
- (e) make pronoun references clear;
- (f) vary the style, including both short and long sentences;
- (g) use familiar patterns of ordinary speech;
- (h) introduce characters and events in time or logical order;
- (i) explain unfamiliar ideas in terms of familiar ones;
- (j) avoid paragraphs that are too long or complicated;
- (k) select forceful and colorful language (yes, even in the Bible!);
- (l) open with punchy beginnings and close with powerful endings;
- (m) guard against suggestive terms or terms that may sound funny;
- (n) listen to the sound of words and syllables;
- (o) don't rely on silent punctuation marks; and
- (p) never use more than three unaccented syllables in a row.

R. KOOPS

## **OF GOPHER AND GALBANUM: translating biblical flora into Nigerian languages**

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This paper is a summary of the material I have compiled in my "botanical guide" for Nigerian translators working on the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Bible. It is also a commentary on that material. Since I started this project I have had an opportunity to look at several Nigerian translations to see what happens in practice when resources are limited or not available. I have also been able to learn some new facts about biblical flora and some important things about Nigerian botanical terms and the way those terms are used.

As my major resources in this project I have used *Plants of the Bible* by Michael Zohary and the recent *Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Plants* by F. Nigel Hepper. *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage* by Nogah Hareuveni has also been helpful along with various commentaries. Reference is made throughout my guide to the UBS publication *Fauna and Flora of the Bible* (abbreviated to FF in this article).

### **General observations**

Among the major Nigerian translations there is considerable variation in approach with respect to the translation of botanical terms. The southern languages are much more ready to transliterate from English – Igbo, in fact, transfers many words without any change to their English spelling. Hausa, on the other hand, insists on using local words, whether they are appropriate in context or not.

There also seems to be a lot of ignorance of the botanical facts, which is mainly due to the lack of resources in the hands of translators. In this situation translators may be excused for not knowing very much about the plants and trees of the Holy Land; but it is a pity when they are unaware of botanical information in their own languages. For instance, it is a surprise to see *fig* in an Igbo Bible, when wild figs are fairly common throughout Nigeria.

### **Problem areas**

#### *Hebrew species difficult to identify*

In the Pentateuch we would include here the famous “gopher” wood which Noah used to build his ark. Zohary makes no reference to it, which suggests that he may take the word as descriptive (perhaps meaning “resinous” as in the Jerusalem Bible). FF identifies “gopher” as the Evergreen Cypress. About all we can conclude is that it was probably some kind of evergreen or conifer.

A second instance in this category is the “goodly trees” (RSV) of Leviticus 23.40. The Hebrew *peri 'ets hadar* has two overlapping problems:

- 1) Does *hadar* mean “good/choice/beautiful” or is it the name of a species of tree?
- 2) The structure of the phrase is ambiguous. Does it mean “the fruit of a good tree” (or “... of NAME tree”); or does it mean “the good fruit of a tree”?

There are many other terms which are also difficult to identify: oak/tamarisk, fig/sycamore, bdellium, and pistachio are just a few controversial examples that come to mind.

The problem for most translators in Nigeria is that without commentaries they do not have an up-to-date knowledge of these problems. Our handbooks and guides for translators do not cover some of the problem passages, and even where they do, the recommendations may be out of date.

#### *Species found locally but not used or well-known*

In this category are figs, cassias, and acacias. In the south we could also add the date palm. Younger translators who have grown up in the towns and cities simply do not know that these trees are abundant in Africa – unless they have taken a special interest in trees, that is. The Igbo Bible has *osisi fig* when it is quite likely there is an indigenous word for “fig” in Igbo. (It is possible, however, that English “fig” was chosen as a neutral term to avoid conflict between different terms in different Igbo dialects.)

#### *Species not found in Africa*

When faced with completely unknown species, translators have been taught three possible approaches: 1) to look for a local functional equivalent, 2) to use a descriptive phrase, or 3) to use a general term.

All of these approaches have been followed in the translations I have examined, but not always in appropriate ways. Let us consider them one by one.

1) **Functional or cultural equivalents** work fine for poetic and certain other texts; but when local equivalents are substituted freely, there is the risk of violating the historical and factual nature of the Bible. The substitution in Hausa of *aduruku*, *katambiri*, and *durumi*, for “poplar”, “almond”, and “plane” is a case in point. We will discuss this further below.

This issue also arises with respect to the present Hausa translation of “olive”, which is *zaitun*. *Zaitun* is borrowed from Arabic and not commonly used outside of the Bible, where it has “stuck”, partly because of its use in the name “Mount of Olives”. Olives are not grown in Nigeria. However there is a very common tree (*itili*) which produces a black, olive-like fruit, which yields oil and is a favorite snack food. It is not related to the olive botanically, but it seems to me that it can be used without apology on the grounds of cultural equivalence.

Another case where cultural equivalence arises is that of the mysterious “mandrake”. Contrary to what FF says, commentators do not agree on the identity of what Reuben was collecting in the fields of Mesopotamia (Gen 30.14). Zohary says that the species *mandragora* has never grown in Mesopotamia. The Genesis context suggests, although it does not say directly, that the plants in question had something to do with fertility. The most popular aid to conception in the Middle East, according to FF, was the “mandragora”, which term was used in the Aramaic and Greek translations of Genesis. Whether or not the Hebrew term *dudayim* was itself a cultural equivalent depends on where the text was written, a topic we can not go into in this short paper. “Mandragora” in any case seems to be a cultural equivalent translation rather than being botanically exact. English versions have copied the Aramaic and Greek.

A look at the plant itself, and especially the fruit, suggests the possibility of using the wild eggplant (“yellow”) as a cultural equivalent. This is being tried in Berom. This plant does not have the cultural significance which the Hebrew *dudayim* has, but the translators include that in a footnote. The Tiv used a form of *ikehegh*, which refers to “certain seeds said to have magical properties” (Abraham). The plant is not well-known, however. I would favor a common plant which looks like the mandragora with a footnote saying that the biblical variety was believed to induce conception. Berom has followed this approach.

Other species which may be suitable for translation by a cultural equivalent would be: the “lentil”, translatable as some kind of bean; the “pomegranate”, translatable as some kind of bush fruit, with a note indicating that the biblical variety was cultivated and very tasty; the “pistachio nut”, translatable by a nut like the shea-butter nut or cashew nut.

Under this general topic of cultural equivalence I would like to add

the problem of giving local names to biblical species, which I fear is what some translators are tempted to do in an effort to avoid transliterations. For instance in the Hausa Bible *durumi* (a type of fig) for “plane” is debatable, as is *katambiri* (a gardenia) for “almond”; *baure* (fig) as a translation of “almond” in Genesis 43.11 seems quite wrong.

2) An example of the **descriptive phrase** approach is “small white seed” (GNB) for “coriander” in Exodus 16.31. A formula which some translators have followed, which I don’t like much (especially in poetic text) is, for example, “an animal like a horse” (meaning “camel”). I came across this frequently in one particular draft of Psalms. A phrase like “a plant like rice” gives the impression that the original readers did not know what the plant was – they had to have it explained to them. I would much rather see the unfamiliar item in the text, along with a classifier and/or a footnote giving the comparison to a local plant.

3) The **general phrase** is an approach that GNB is fond of. So the Nigerian versions which have followed GNB literally throughout have many examples. Of the three possible approaches I find it the least upsetting to the smooth flow of the reader’s thought in a passage. Translating “oak” as “great tree” (NIV) or “sacred tree” (GNB) is entirely appropriate, as the significance or function of the tree is more important to the story than the name of the species. Fortunately we are overcoming the resistance to the use of footnotes, so now, for historical accuracy, the species name can be added in a footnote.

### *Finding classifiers*

Many Nigerian translators have used “classifiers” with names that are transliterated. I am not sure whether they knew when they did this that they were “adding” to the text, or whether they were simply copying GNB. There are some of these classifiers, however, that need to be investigated. When Igbo uses *osisi pepiros* (literally “tree of papyrus”) I wonder if the classifier *osisi* is broader in meaning than the English “tree”, or if the translators think that papyrus is a kind of tree.

We need to urge translators to investigate the botanical terms of their own languages, and the way those terms relate to each other. This should be part of workshops or other training programs. It is not only important for them to know the most common species, but also to be conscious of their general terms (for potential use as classifiers). Do people have general terms for “vine”, “grain”, “shrub”, and “resinous trees”? In this regard Genesis 1.11 raises a fairly difficult problem straight away. There are two botanical general terms together: the Hebrew *deshe* “green growth”, “fresh shoots” and *esev* “herbage”, “plant” are both general terms. Some translations in English are able to reduce these to one; for instance, “vegetation” (RSV) and “all kinds of plants” (GNB). In any case the passage requires careful treatment.

### *Inconsistencies*

Every project should have a concordance and translators need to be reminded to use it. I also encourage translators to keep exercise books in which they collect terms by category (animal names, bird names, plant names, and so on), to help them remember what they did earlier. In this survey I found even the major languages sometimes failed in this regard. Hausa, for example, uses "fragrant rubbing oil" for Hebrew *tsori* "balm" in Genesis 43.11, but "fragrant oil of healing" in 37.25. Yoruba uses *igi shittimu* for "acacla" in Genesis 25.5, but *igi akasia* in 30.1 and 35.7.

We have to be careful not to be overly concordant, however. Note the following, which I have taken from Zohary:

- 1) Hebrew *shoqed* and *luz* should be translated the same (both mean "almond").
- 2) 'elah and 'allah should be translated as "terebinth" while 'elon and 'allon should be translated as "oak".
- 3) *Berosh* covers three species: when it is coupled with "Lebanon" or 'erez ("cedar") it refers to the Cilician Fir; elsewhere it refers to the Evergreen Cypress or to the Eastern Savin.

### *Errors*

It is embarrassing to find straight out mistakes in Bibles. How did Hausa get "fig" for *shoqed* ("almond") in Genesis 43.11? And all three major Nigerian versions translate the "burning bush" as a fire in a forest, jungle, or uninhabited area. The problem in this case is the lack of a general term for plants which are bigger than grass and smaller than trees. This is made worse by the fact that in Nigerian English the most common meaning of "bush" is "uninhabited, wooded area". Finding a good equivalent is not easy. I have suggested *danyen itace* "green tree" for Hausa.

### *Poor transliteration*

I am troubled by the failure of some translators to adjust transliterations according to word patterns in their languages. In one case the following are taken directly from English without any adjustment: fig, olive, vine, oak, tamarisk, mandrake, plane, balm, and almond. But perhaps none of these is quite as difficult for the rural reader as "myrrh"!

### **Conclusion**

What I have dealt with above could be considered a summary of the present state of "quality control" with respect to the translation of botanical names into Nigerian languages. It is clear that translators need more in the way of help and resources in this area. And perhaps many of them also need to give more attention to studying the range of botanical terms in their own languages.

I hope to continue this study as well as to deepen it by further research into individual terms. Contributions from other areas of the world would enable me to broaden it also in terms of application.