

There are a few places (Gen 36.20-21 and 1 Chr 1.38) where Seir, although connected with Edom, clearly refers to a person, and in these places the GNB translates as "Seir". However, there is also at least one place where "mount Seir" cannot possibly refer to Edom. Joshua 15 describes the borders of the territory assigned to the tribe of Judah. Verse 5 begins to describe the northern border, beginning in the northeast, and proceeding westwards past Jerusalem (verse 8) and on to "mount Seir" in verse 10. The context makes clear that this is a mountain only a few miles west of Jerusalem, certainly not anywhere near the country of Edom. Yet many, if not all, of the current editions of the Good News Bible tell us that "the hill country of Edom" is to be found there between Kiriath Jearim (verse 9) and Beth Shemesh (verse 10). Some printings of the British edition do in fact have "the hill country of Seir" in this verse, so it is obvious that someone saw the problem at some point in the history of the GNB text. On the other hand, when the Translator's Handbook on Joshua was prepared, the edition with "Edom" was used, and somehow the authors failed to note the difficulty, telling us that "the hill country of Edom, as elsewhere in TEV, translates 'Mount Seir'." Obviously the next editions of the GNB and the Joshua Handbook will have to correct this slip, but in the meantime it can serve us again as an effective (if rather embarrassing) example of this trap into which it is all too easy for all translators and editors of the text (and even writers of Handbooks) to fall.

NORM MUNDHENK

### **The translation of *shekel***

In Hebrew, the word *shekel* refers basically to a weight. Although usually used when referring to the weight of gold or silver or some other metal, it also refers to the weight of food (Ezek 4.10), cassia (Ex 30.24), and Absalom's hair (2 Sam 14.26).

In the Good News Bible, a decision was apparently made to translate the term as a weight except when the context shows that it is being used as the equivalent of money, to pay for something. In cases like this, "fifty shekels" is translated as "fifty pieces of silver" or "fifty silver coins". There is in fact a problem here, since it can be seriously questioned whether anything that might be called a coin or a piece of silver of the size of a shekel was in use during the Old Testament period. It might well be best to use weight equivalents to translate "shekel" in all passages. But if we grant the validity of the distinction the GNB is

making, we still find that there are places where the translators or editors did not apply it as carefully as they should have.

The problem comes in passages where the text refers both to the idea of payment and to the idea of weighing. In Genesis 23.16, the RSV tells us that "Abraham weighed out for Ephron...four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants." Now of course it might be argued that when four hundred are in question it is easier to weigh than to count, but it seems unlikely that this was really the position of the GNB translators. The GNB says that "Abraham...weighed out...four hundred pieces of silver, according to the standard weights used by the merchants." When we consider that it is most unlikely that four hundred separate pieces are really intended by the Hebrew, and that the reader is likely to wonder why Abraham had to weigh the 400 pieces, it seems clear that the context here calls for an actual weight—perhaps four and a half kilograms.

The case is perhaps even clearer in Jeremiah 32.9, where Jeremiah weighs out seventeen shekels of silver to pay for his cousin's field. Here the GNB tells us that Jeremiah "weighed out the money to him; the price came to seventeen pieces of silver." This seems to imply that only after doing the weighing did Jeremiah discover that it took 17 separate pieces to reach the correct weight. But this is hardly the point the Hebrew is trying to make. The Hebrew means that the agreed price was silver weighing a total of seventeen shekels. Again, it would be better here to omit the reference to "pieces" and simply say "the price came to 195 grams of silver" (or whatever modern equivalent the translator feels is correct).

It may be useful to point out problems like this, so that other translators do not follow the GNB and fall into the same trap. But it is even more important to recognize that even when a decision has been made as to how a particular concept or term is to be handled in a translation, every passage must still be checked individually, to make sure that the agreed translation really does fit.

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### **Write in good royal style**

In your Good News Bible read 2 Kings 18.13-37. In this section, King Hezekiah is referred to as: King Hezekiah, Hezekiah, and the king. This may be good royal style in the English language, but in the Bokyi language of Nigeria that I am familiar with it is not good style at all. What about your language?