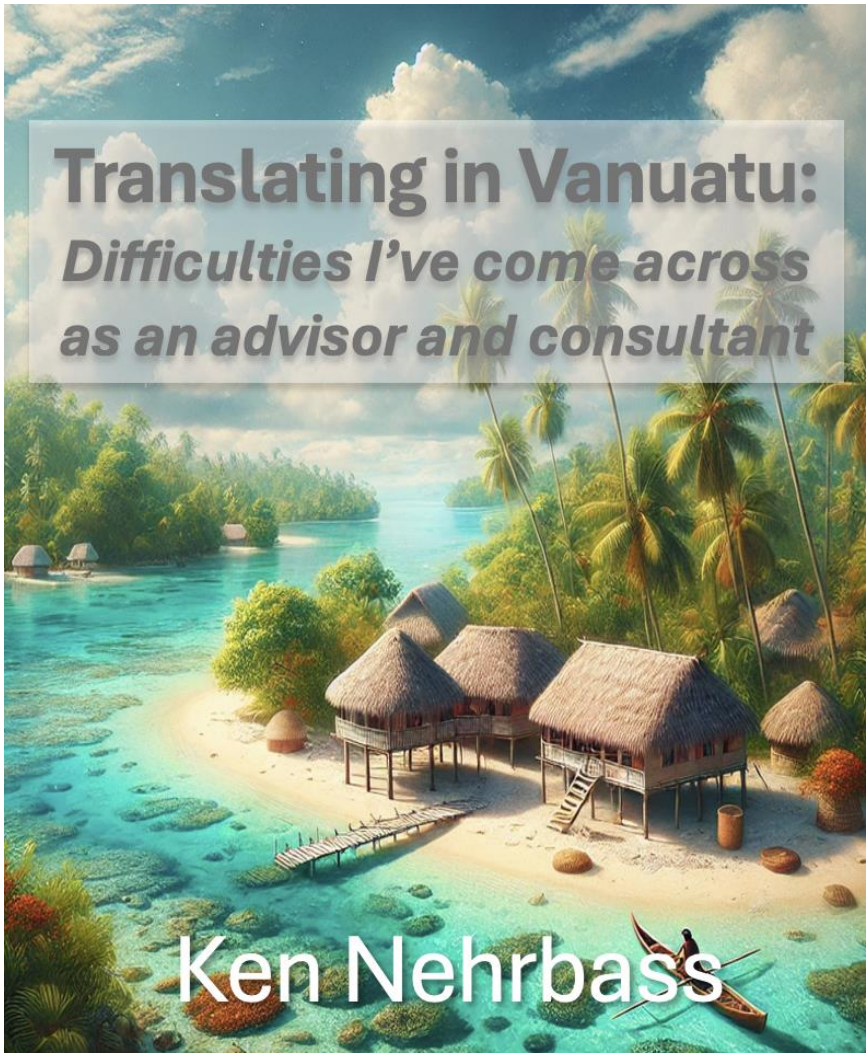
Translating in Vanuatu:
Difficulties I've come across as an advisor and consultant
Ken Nehrbass

# Translating in Vanuatu: *Difficulties I've come across as an advisor and consultant*

## 2011

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# Contents

Introduction ..... 5
Bislama-isms that might not work in vernacular ..... 7
‘taem’ ..... 7
‘go long kalabus’ ..... 8
‘tabu’ ..... 8
‘tekemaot sin’ ..... 8
‘foldaon’ ..... 8
‘sipos man,’ ‘man we’ ..... 9
‘long’ for ‘through’ ..... 10
Problems arising from unfamiliarity with Judeo-Greek background ..... 10
Narratives that have no background supplied ..... 10
The genre of the tricky question ..... 12
The prophetic past tense ..... 12
OT references aimed at a person not mentioned ..... 13
Emotions ..... 14
Too many participants ..... 16
“As God is my witness I swear I’m not lying/do not be deceived ..... 17
Place names, tree names and some people’s names ..... 18
Mis-allocating words, or allegorizing ..... 19
Melanesian grammar issues ..... 20
Connectors ..... 20
Contrafactual ..... 21
Coming and Going ..... 21
As x is blank, y is blank ..... 22
Logic ..... 23

Passive voice ..... 25
General translation problems ..... 26
Genitives ..... 26
For better or worse ..... 26
Rhetorical questions ..... 26
Doublets ..... 27
Section heads ..... 27
Ordering and flashbacks ..... 28
Indirect speech ..... 30
Idioms ..... 30
Metaphors and similes ..... 31
Mixed metaphors in the New Testament ..... 31
Passages where we don't know the meaning ..... 35
Key Terms ..... 42
Layout ..... 43
Sources Cited ..... 45

# Introduction

By the time Bible translation advisors get to the field, they have been trained in Bible translation philosophy and methods. They know theory about handling genitives, implicit information, idioms, rhetorical questions, doublets, direct and indirect quotes. In my pre-field preparation, I used Larson's (1998) textbook, which dealt with many of these principles. Despite SIL's course of study in anthropology, translation and linguistics, I was still drastically unprepared at consultant checking sessions for the translation techniques that my consultants expected me to be employing. I was also unprepared to deal with the specific challenges that Melanesian languages pose for Bible translation. I hope teams who are starting out in translation in Vanuatu will read through this paper so they can be more prepared to meet those challenges.

Throughout the course of our Bible translation project in Southwest Tanna, I kept notes in separate files on my computer with names like "passages that are hardest to translate," "mixed metaphors," and "passages where Bislama doesn't work in vernacular." Every village check, translation session and consultant check revealed more examples for my field notes, right up to the final proofread of the full New Testament. This paper combines all of my field notes.

I found translating the New Testament in Vanuatu to be nearly impossible, as my examples below will show. Impossible, but worthwhile! When I heard the call to Bible translation, I imagined the task would help me to become more familiar with God's Word. Our decade in the SW Tanna translation project exceeded my hopes and dreams. Interacting with the Bible in

this way has taught me how to study the Bible for its meaning. I'm sure it will have the same impact on you. I hope you can consult this paper from time to time throughout your project for solutions to translation problems.

KRN
Port Vila
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## Bislama-isms that might not work in vernacular

Watch out for these translation techniques that are idiosyncratic of the Bislama Bible, but which might not work in vernacular.

**'taem'**

The Bislama Bible uses "taem" as a discourse marker for subordinating words such as "as, when, while." For example, "Nao taem King Herod* i save we ol man ya we oli waes long ol fasin blong sta oli trikim hem, hem i kros tumas" (Mat 2:16). The vernacular won't necessarily use the word "when" or "time" to subordinate clauses that way. We discovered that adding the "taem" word actually rips the narrative out of context, and places it in some nebulous setting. Saying "When King Herod found out about the wise men" may indicate to your readers that this story about King Herod is NOT situated between the birth of Jesus and Joseph and Mary going to Egypt. Instead, if we just say, "Then [as opposed to "taem"] Herod found out…" that anchors the setting within the larger narrative.

A case where we DID want to use the equivalent of "taem" is in John 21:14. "This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead." In this case, we DO want to rip the story out of its context, since it's a flashback (see discussion on flashbacks later). So we said the equivalent of "taem Yesu i bin ded mo hemi bin laef bakegen, hem ya nao

long nambatri taem we hemi bin kam lukum ol man blong hem."

**'go long kalabus'**

Often, the Bislama Bible translates "in jail" as "oli putum hem long kalabus" (Mat 4:12, 5:25 and many others). This is probably the right way to do it. However, sometimes it says "i stap long kalabus" (Mat 25:39, Php 1:14, and others) or worse "i go long kalabus" (Luk 3:21, Rev 13:10). This makes it sound like he chose, of his on freewill, to go to prison the way someone would choose to go to a restaurant. Instead, maybe you should translate it "John had been put in prison."

**'tabu'**

Tabu might not communicate holiness. It means "off limits" but does not mean "good or correct." A solution that has been offered is to say the equivalent in your vernacular of "tabu mo stret."

**'tekemaot sin'**

"Jisas i tekemaot sin blong yumi": Many people in Vanuatu think that this means Jesus took away our sin. It's gone. We don't do it anymore. When you translate words about atonement or forgiveness, make sure it means "he took away the **punishment** for our sins" and not just "he took away our sins."

**'foldaon'**

Bislama says "i foldaon" for kneel, or lay prostrate. But foldaon probably doesn't mean to lay prostrate in vernacular; it probably means TO FALL

WHILE WALKING. You'll want to say your equivalent of "nildaon" or "bodaon." See Mat. 17:6.

"Foldaon" is also used in Bislama as a metaphor for sin. Make sure that your vernacular uses "foldaon" that way before you translate sin that way. See Mat. 5:29, 30.

**'sipos man,' 'man we'**

When the Bible makes generalizations, such as "Those who are proud will be humbled," the Greek had these in the singular, so the Bislama Bible did the same (inadvertently, I think): "Man we hem nomo i leftemap hem blong i kam haeman, bambae God i mekem hem i godaon. Be man we hem nomo i mekem hem i stap daon, bambae God i leftemap hem" (Mat 23:12). The problem is that your readers may literally think you're talking about one person. "That person over there who is proud, God will humble him." Instead, you may need to translate GENERALIZATIONS in the plural: "God will humble proud people, and exalt humble people."

There are scores of examples where the Bislama Bible does hypotheticals in the singular. For example, "I no gat man we i save wok blong tu masta wantaem. ***Sipos man*** i mekem olsem, bambae hem i laekem wan, be i no laekem narawan" (Mat 6:24). Again, you probably want to make these plural, lest your readers think it means "if that guy over there acts like that, he'll like one, and hate the other." Instead, translate these in the plural, to avoid confusion. "If people act like that, they'll hate one and love the other…"

**‘long’ for ‘through’**

Bislama has one preposition, *long*, to mean “through, to, toward, at, in, from, on.” You may find it very difficult to translate the concept of “through” as in “…through Christ.” (Rom. 8:2, 2 Cor 1:5, 3:4, 5:18, Gal 3:14).

**Solution**: If you don’t have a good vernacular word for “through” don’t force it! Just spell it out the long way: “Christ made a road for us to…” or “since we believe in Christ…” rather than “through Christ.”

Another example is “..the miracles God did through Paul.” You could avoid “through” by saying “the miracles God gave Paul the strength to do” (Acts 19:11).

# Problems arising from unfamiliarity with Judeo-Greek background

Below are some problems that arise because Melanesians may not be familiar with the Judeo-Greek background, such as prophecy, oaths, and names of people and places.

**Narratives that have no background supplied**

Occasionally, you may need to fill in some background for a story to work. Consider Luke 4:12, “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison.” It doesn’t say earlier in the text that John *had* been put in prison. You may want to avoid some impression that you’ve left out a detail by saying, “John was put in prison, and Jesus heard about it.”

Also, Luke 1 has John the Baptist as a baby, but chapter 3 has him as a grown up, so those with more “free” translation

philosophies would say he grew up in Luke 3:2. Otherwise, you could put something in the section head like “John had grown up and preached…”

There’s a surprisingly difficult verse to translate in Romans 5:7, because a key piece of narrative background is missing: “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.” What’s missing is the REASON that someone would be dying for this person or that person in the first place. If the whole narrative background were supplied (and you may choose to supply it) it would say “IF A PERSON WERE IN TROUBLE, rarely would someone give their life TO SAVE THAT PERSON. But IF A good man WERE IN TROUBLE someone might choose to give his life TO SAVE THAT PERSON.”

Eph 1:12-13 is missing some implicit information that needs to be supplied if it is to make sense. Here I will put the missing information in bold. Try reading it without the bold and see if you would know what it referred to. “in order that we **Jews**, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you **Gentiles** also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”

You will probably find that your readers miss the logical progression in Mat 22:31-32 “have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ ? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” Readers may not see how God being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has to do with being the “God of the living.” What is missing is some explanation that if Jacob and Isaac and Abraham are up in Heaven worshipping God right now, there is obviously a resurrection of the dead. We translated the passage.

"[Regardless that they-TRIAL died a long time ago] I am the God whom Abraham Isaac and Jacob continue to worship…"

**The genre of the tricky question**

The genre of a tricky question (meant to trap Jesus) in the gospels is probably unfamiliar to your readers. We found that readers focused solely on the **POINT** of the Pharisees' question, or on Jesus' responses, rather than realizing that the narrative was really about tricking Jesus. Such stories include the questions about paying taxes to Caesar, marriage at the resurrection, and even Jesus' question to the leaders about "whose son is the Christ." Jesus didn't want us to figure out whether the Messiah is David's son or David's master- the point of the question was to show that he was tricky, wise- he outwitted his enemies. Unfortunately, there's no such explanation in the text.

**Solution**: Instead of having your section heads say "Paying taxes to Caesar," "Marriage in heaven" and "Whose son is the Christ" you could have them say "The leaders tried to trick Jesus by asking about taxes" "The leaders tried to trick Jesus by asking about marriage in heaven" and "Jesus tricked the leaders by asking whose son the Christ is."

**The prophetic past tense**

Greek puts prophecies from the OT in the past tense, probably to show that God has firmly made up his mind- it's a sure thing. E.g., "I have made your enemies sit at your footstool" (Luke 20:43; Acts 2:35, 7:49: Heb 1:13, 10:13). People familiar with Greek and Hebrew

know this is a special literary device used in prophecy- let's call it the prophetic past tense. However, your readers may find it confusing for prophecy (by nature something regarding the future) to be in the past tense.

John 19:24 is a quote from Psalm 22:18, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for them." The Bislama translation does not have past tense or future tense markers in this verse, which sort of solves the problem, but if you're using an English source, it will be in the past tense.

Oli tekemaot ol klos blong mi
oli seraot long olgeta,
mo oli sakem daes blong luk se
hu bambae i tekem kot blong mi.

Another simple example is Romans 4:17, a quote from Genesis 17:5. The Bislama does not have tense, but English is in the past:

Mi mi mekem we yu yu stamba blong ol man blong plante ples.

Your vernacular might be more clear if you translated it with future tenses: "They will take my clothes and divide them…" or "I will make you the father of many nations." (You can do that, assuming your consultant allows the rendering).

**OT references aimed at a person not mentioned**

There are a number of OT verses in the NT which are aimed at Jesus or God, but the text does not specifically state that. The readers might assume the

passage is God speaking to people, rather than Jesus; or they may think it's God speaking, rather than people speaking to God. A tough example is Mark 1:2-3:

> "I will send my messenger ahead of you,
> who will prepare your way" --
> "a voice of one calling in the desert,
> 'Prepare the way for the Lord,
> make straight paths for him.'"

This verse is to be understood as God speaking to Jesus about John the Baptist. Unfortunately, none of those names are mentioned in the verse.

Other times, the verse speaks *about* Christ (rather than to him) but that's not clear. One example is Rom 15:21:

> It is written:
> "Those who were not told about him will see,
> and those who have not heard will understand."

Those with a free translation philosophy might say "It is written about Christ, 'Those who were not told..' "

**Emotions**

Emotions such as ashamed, astonished and afraid can confuse readers. It's not always clear WHY the people were astonished or ashamed. You might need to explain a bit. Consider Acts 16:38: "The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed." Why would they be alarmed that Paul and Silas were citizens?

What's missing is the background- it was illegal to imprison a Roman citizen without a trial. They were alarmed because they had broken the law. (Also Acts 22:29).

A harder example is in Acts 24:25: "As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.' " Why was Felix afraid? Sometimes head-tail linkage helps explain the emotion. Something like "Paul talked so much about righteousness [therefore] Felix was afraid."

Consider Rom 9:2: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." There is no apparent reason why he would be in anguish. (The background information would be that he's in anguish over the plight of the Jews). Those with a more free translation philosophy would put that in the text (arguing that this information is implied). You could also try to stick it in a section head.

Another example is in 1 Cor 2:3. Paul said "I came to you with fear and trembling" but there's no apparent reason why he would have been afraid and trembling. He seems to have meant, "I came to you in humility and with the fear of God." If you want the readers to understand what Paul meant by fear and trembling, you may need to use equivalent emotional terms, or give the reason for the emotions.

An interesting example is in Philippians 2:26 [Epaphroditus] longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill." It's not necessarily clear to audiences why Epaphroditus is distressed. In fact,

many readers will take that to mean "Epaphroditus KNOWS you heard he's ill AND WILL ASSUME HE HAS BROKEN SOME COMMAND OF GOD, INCURING SICKNESS, THEREFORE he is distressed THAT YOU WILL JUDGE HIM FOR GETTING SICK." To avoid this sort of miscommunication, you could say, "Epaphroditus is distressed because HE KNOWS YOU'RE WORRYING since you heard he's ill."

Regarding "ashamed," consider Rom 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel" either means that he isn't embarrassed to believe something that other people consider foolish or divisive, or it means that he's not ashamed to be imprisoned for the gospel. That leads us to some other examples of "ashamed." 2 Tim 1:16 Onesiphorus was not ashamed of Paul. It's not obvious why Onesiphorus *might* have been ashamed in the first place, warranting Paul's assertion that he's *not* ashamed. Perhaps Onesiphorus *could have been ashamed* because Paul was a prisoner.

Also, in Heb 2:11 it says "Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers." There's no apparent reason why he *could* or *might* have been ashamed in the first place. In this case, "ashamed" may not imply shame, it may be just be litotes, and you could word it, "He was thrilled to call them brothers."

**Too many participants**

When your story has too many participants, the readers can get confused. Remember the landowner in Matt 20:1-16, who hired servants throughout the day and paid them an equal wage? He doesn't pay them, his

servant does. So the story has servants, workers, and a landowner. Many of Jesus' parables do this. In Mark 12:1-12 (also Mat 21:33-46; Luk 20:9-19*)*, the landowner goes on a trip, has his steward take care of the day-laborers. You'll need to come up with names for each of these roles so the readers can follow the story.

2 Thess 2:3-9 is the quintessential example of how you can confuse your readers by giving vague names for participants. Rather than naming the participants "antichrist" "sin" "Jesus" and "God," Paul names them:

- the man of lawlessness (v. 3) = antichrist
- "secret power of lawlessness" = sin
- the one who holds "the secret power of lawlessness" (v. 7) = Jesus/God
- lawless one = antichrist (v. 8 and 9)

**"As God is my witness I swear I'm not lying/do not be deceived"**

Paul defends himself throughout his epistles, insisting that he truly did receive a calling from God as an apostle, that he used to persecute the Christians but now no longer does. Apparently, people thought this news about Paul's apostolic calling was a lie, so he had to say in his letters, "I'm not lying about this." But the background of these accusations is not clear in the text, so your readers may miss it. See 1 Tim 2:7 "And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle--I am telling the truth, I am not lying--and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles." Your readers may not know what Paul is *not* lying about (that he has a calling as an apostle). Maybe you can make that more clear.

Other times Paul defends himself by saying "God is my witness" for the same reason.

Additionally, some epistles implore the reader not to be deceived- but there's no apparent reason why they *might* have been deceived in the first place. (The background of the epistles is that there were false teachers deceiving the churches on these very points Paul was addressing). One example is 1 Cor 6:9, "Do not be deceived. Sexually immoral…will not inherit the kingdom of God." Apparently some teachers were saying that such sinners *could* inherit the kingdom of God. A much more difficult example is Gal. 6:7. "Do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked." We're not sure what the church *could* have been deceived about here.

**Place names, tree names and some people's names**

Your audience can't tell whether Macedonia is a man or woman's name, or a place, or some restaurant, or what. You probably need to say things like "a *village* called Bethlehem" rather than "Bethlehem, a *province* called Galilee, the *leader/king/ruler* called Caesar, a *woman* named Joana, an *area* called Gerasa." Not a fig, but a tree called fig. This is good form in storytelling anyway. At least on Tanna, they start with "a man named x" rather than "X went…"

There is an additional problem when the Bible uses two names for a person or place (especially when the two are *within* a single paragraph- your readers may think you're talking about two different people). Some examples are: Sarah/Rachael; Jerusalem/ Zion, Saul/Paul, Jacob/Israel, Simon/Peter, Elymas/Bar Jesus,

Silas/Silvanus, Gerdasa/Geredenes, Lake Tiberius/Sea of Galilee. I'll give one example from Acts 13:6-8:

> There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery.

Note that the sorcerer is called Bar-Jesus in v. 6, and Elymas the sorcerer in v. 8. Highly literate people who are familiar with the Bible can tell this is the same person, but it's not actually clear. Readers may think there are two sorcerers. We "solved" that problem by translating v. 8 like this: *"But that sorcerer **BAR-JESUS** spoke against Saul and Barnabas. (That sorcerer's name, in Greek it's Elymas, which means sorcerer)."*

**Mis-allocating words, or allegorizing**

Your reading community may tend to always read certain phrases as metaphorical, or to fit them into certain Bible stories. Our readers took "pain/sickness" to be a metaphor for sin; readers may assume that sickness is a

result of punishment. They may use the word “pain” or “sickness” for “punishment.” Are you sure you want to equate punishment with sickens and pain?

Additionally, references to “at the beginning” (e.g., Luke 1:1) were initially read as “when God made the world” rather than “at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.” The phrase, “eat and drink for tomorrow we die” in 1 Cor 15:32 seemed like a reference of the Last Supper to our readers, since Jesus said something similar. You can disambiguate these by choosing a phrase that looks quite different.

# Melanesian grammar issues

## Connectors

Most texts you collect will be traditional stories, or “life stories.” They are assumed to cohere and make sense. However this might not be the case for how Melanesians read the Biblical text. There is a good chance that the Bible, especially more difficult passages, will be read in a string of unrelated, or segmented self-contained stories. (Have you noticed how public readers in Vanuatu say each verse number: “verse 14...verse 15...?”) You can help the understanding of a passage by clarifying the logic using all the discourse connectors in your vernacular. First work out yourself how each verse relates to the last and the following and explicate that if

necessary with head tail linkage or the appropriate discourse marker.

**Contrafactual**

If you translate literally “I have not come to abolish them but fulfill them,” (Mat 5:17) the readers may read the first few words and think the sentence is going to mean “I did not come AT ALL.” To avoid this confusion, contrafactuals may be handled like this: “It’s not that I came to abolish; I came to fulfill.” 1 Cor. 15 is full of contrafactuals such as “If Christ has not been raised….” (1 Cor. 15:14).

Other contrafactuals need to be solved by adding the concept of “merely”. One example is in: 1 Cor 1;17 “I wasn't sent to baptize.” Paul WAS sent to baptize (cf the great commission) but he means “I wasn’t sent MERELY” to baptize.

**Coming and Going**

In Melanesian languages, you need to get from point A to point B. Not so in English. For example, Mark 15:46 says “So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock.” But in Melanesian languages, you may need to fill in the gaps: “Joseph **went** and bought linen cloth, **went** and took down the body of Jesus, **took** it, wrapped it in linen, and **went** and put it in a tomb…” In Acts 14:13, the priest of Zeus put a wreath on the cow. It works better to say “he WENT and put a wreath on the cow.

Another example is in Philippians 2:19: “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.” The verse doesn’t make sense to some readers, because if Timothy is going to the church in Philippi, how will Paul be the one who receives news? The coming and going in this verse is actually “Timothy will visit you AND RETURN TO ME, giving me news...”

Another issue related to deixis is the way Melanesian languages need the verb “went” to show that the event happened once, rather than happening continually. Consider the difference in meaning between “Mi kakae laplap” and “mi go kakae laplap.” The first sounds like it is habitual, the second obviously sets up a narrative.

**As x is blank, y is blank**

In English we can say “You’re as funny as I am smart.” Funny is not actually being compared to smart here. Instead, two things are considered similar because they have the same degree of intensity. And the expression doesn’t explicitly state the degree- the reader is left guessing “Does that mean that he’s not funny at all, so I’m not smart at all? Or that I’m really funny?” This type of comparison is nearly impossible in Vanuatu, especially when the two things being compared do not really have anything to do with each other. The problem is, ni-Vanuatu readers need it to be straight-forward, rather than leaving guesswork as to what the comparison means.

2 Cor has a number of these comparisons, especially 2 Cor 7:14: “But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well.” There isn’t really a connection between the two events “what we told you” and “our boasting about Titus.” What’s really happening is Paul’s saying both statements have a high degree of intensity. “What we told you is totally true, and our boasting about you to Titus turned out to be true, too.” See also 2 Cor 1:5, 11:10.

Rev. 18:7 is another example: “Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself.” John the revelator probably put in the comparison to show irony- someone who had a lot of luxury now has a lot of grief. But Vanuatu’s languages don’t seem to allow for this type of comparison. You might just have to say “She had a lot of luxury, and in the same way, she’ll have a lot of grief.”

**Logic**

Check if your language is reason-result, result-reason, or allows both. On Tanna, logic is marked with asyndeton. “He didn’t know how to swim, he drowned” means “He drowned because he didn’t know how to swim.” How are effects or results shown in your language?

- Consider an example in 1 Cor 7:28: “…he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning.” The “he is not sinning” may look totally unrelated to the fact that Paul was saying, “in the act of getting married, he’s not breaking a

rule (that would have prohibited him from getting married).” In fact, translated literally, the verse sounds like Paul is saying, “he can do whatever he wants- he’s not sinning.” You’ll need to make the logic more clear. You could say: “Let him get married as he wishes; it’s not that he’d be breaking a rule if he did that.”

- The letters of John use the “if…then” construction several times (1 John 2:3, 4:12, 18). Unfortunately, the if-then logic will probably not be clear to your readers. Consider 1 John 4:12, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” What is the connection between loving one another, God living in us? Once you determine the logic, you can spell it out in your translation. We said, “If we love one another THAT SHOWS THAT God lives in us, love has born fruit in our lives.”
- Look at Romans 14:15, and all of the logical steps that are implied. “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” With the steps filled in it would be “If your brother is distressed because **you’re eating food that he considers a sin to be eaten**, you are unloving to continue eating it in front of him. When you eat in front of him, **you make him think you’re giving homage to spirits**, **and you may end up influencing him to eat the same sorts of foods**, giving him an unclean conscience (because he

thinks it's wrong to eat those foods) and therefore he would actually be sinning willfully **by choosing to do something that he believes is wrong.**

- Look at the logic in Philippians 1:14: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." The logic is not necessarily obvious to all audiences. The point is "I've been persecuted, my faith serves as an example to others, so they go out and are not afraid of persecution."
- James 2:10-11 is another example. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." Your readers may have a hard time figuring out the logical connection between breaking one law and therefore being guilty of breaking all the laws. Good luck with that one!

**Passive voice**

You may not have passives, and even if you do, your readers may wonder why you are hiding the agent of a clause by putting it in a passive. Even if you can literally translate "we are being given over to death" but it is more natural to say "People are persecuting us" (2 Cor 4:11).

# General translation problems

You're certainly familiar with the problems mentioned in this section, and I won't take much space to explain the problems, which are addressed elsewhere (Blight, 1999; Nehrbass, 2012) .Here, I will quickly give specific examples of verses that I found problematic for a Melanesian translation, and the solutions we employed on the advise of consultants, national informants, and exegetical helps.

**Genitives**

Your vernacular equivalent for the Bislama "blong" probably doesn't work with Greek genitives like "baptism of repentance." You'll need to reword them, e.g., "baptism that shows repentance" (Act 19:4).

**For better or worse**

"It will be worse for you than Tyre and Sidon" (Luk 10:14). If you don't have a word for worse, you may need to do what the Bislama did: It was bad for Tyre and Sidon, but it will be really bad for you.

**Rhetorical questions**

You will often need to translate the meaning of a rhetorical question instead of the actual question. Example: "So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" (Luk 16:11). Because it says "heaven" the readers will be tempted to answer the question by saying "God." But the actual answer should be "nobody." You

would need to translate it: “If you don’t take care of money on earth, nobody will give you things in heaven.”

**Doublets**

Vanuatu’s languages have very limited lexicons, and often do not have synonyms to translate nearly synonymous doublets. You have two choices with doublets.

1) You can use and intensifier. Matt. 9:35 refers to “diseases and infirmities.” You can say “every kind of sickness.” Rom 1:18 says “ungodliness and wickedness.” If you don’t have two words, you can say “all bad deeds.” For Matt. 5:12 “rejoice and be glad” if you don’t have two words for glad, the doublet can be intensified to “be really glad.”

2) You can translate them if you have two similar lexemes.

Another type of doublet is the **Repeating vocative.** Greek says “Jerusalem Jerusalem” or “Mary, Mary” to show an emotional vocative. Repeating someone’s name in Vanuatu probably doesn’t mean you’re going to say something serious. You’ll have to find out what the repetition means in your vernacular.

**Section heads**

Bibles designed for highly literate people employ section heads as cues to help people find the story they’re looking for. For newly literate people, your section heads can instead be used to get the point across when it isn’t specific in the text. An example is the transfiguration. English headings say “The transfiguration” (Luk 9:27).

Your section head can instead explain the significance: "God proved that Jesus is the Messiah when Moses and Elijah came from heaven."

**Ordering and flashbacks**

Melanesians usually tell stories in chronological order. You may need to join verses and re-work the order so it is chronological. Consider the nativity in Luke 2:6-7. In English it says "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, [7] and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." But you may need to tell what happened first, first, and what happened second, second: They got to Bethlehem, they found there was no room in the inn, and while she was there, she gave birth… (You would have to join v. 6-7 to make that chronology work). Also Luke 10:34 "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine" may need to be re-ordered "he poured olive juice and wine, then bandaged them." Note that Luke 3:20 has John the Baptist put in prison, but 3:21 has him baptizing Jesus. You might need to explain that 3:21 took place before 3:20.

Look at the order in the song in 1 Tim 3:16

He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,

was taken up in glory.

This is not in chronological order. Since Melanesians read narrative in chronological order, the song may need to be rearranged. The chronological order is

He was seen by angels,
appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

Additionally, look at Rev 18:8

Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

This English translation has her [Babylon] dying and then being plagued with mourning and famine and fire. Your readers may find it awkward for death to come first.

Because Melanesians expect stories to be in order, you may find flashbacks difficult to deal with, such as in Acts 11:19: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.” This didn’t happen as the story unfolds in chapter 11, it really happened in Acts 8:1 “On that day a great persecution broke out against the

church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

John 21:14 may not look like a flashback: "This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead." However, the mere fact that it mentions Jesus raising from the dead again may be confusing, as if he has risen **again** from the dead. So you have to find a way to put in pluperfect marking, such as "…the third time he appeared to his disciples after that time he had raised from the dead."

**Indirect speech**

Sometimes you'll want to turn direct quotes into indirect quotes, and sometimes you'll turn indirect quotes into direct ones. For instance, if you don't have a word for "command" you could render it as "He commanded them to whip Jesus" as "He told them, 'Whip Jesus.'"

**Idioms**

Some of the idioms you will be able to retain. Others won't work. One problematic idiom is in Matt 26:24: "It would be better if he'd never been born" (Mat 26:24, Mark 14:21) causes readers to think too much about what it has to do with being born. The idiom just means "He'll get a big punishment." Here are some others that we could not retain:

- cup/baptism for suffering (Mark 10:38-39)
- working with hands (1 Thess 4:11)
- fire (enthusiasm) (1 Thess 5:19)
- rather be dead than be deprived of this boast (1 Cor 9:15)

**Metaphors and similes**

Metaphors have three parts: the subject, the similarity, and the thing compared. John is as strong as a rock. John is the subject, the similarity is strength, and the rock is the thing compared. In the Bible, sometimes the similarity is left off. Examples: "You are like children in the market place." I doesn't say HOW they are children in the market place. You may need to do exegesis and make a decision about what the point of similarity is. In this case, is it that children in the market place are hard to please? or they are fickle? or is it that they are immature? Here is another contested example: "The last day will be like a woman in labor." Does it mean "It will come inevitably, as labor does?" Or "It will be painful as labor" or "It will come unexpectedly." You'll have to decide, based on your exegesis (or leave it ambiguous). Other examples are clear to us after exegesis, but not clear in the source text. You'll want to make them clear: "The Son of man will return like a thief in the night." It means "The son of Man will come at an unexpected time, like a thief does (at night)."

Special problem: mixed metaphors

**Mixed metaphors in the New Testament**

Metaphors and similes are tricky enough to translate, but you can often do so. If the readers don't "get" the metaphor you can explicate it in the text. For instance, "coming like a thief" can be explicated nicely "coming surreptitiously like a thief does" (1 Thess 5:2).

The difficulty with metaphors is that they "don't work" in people's minds when the wrong verb is chosen- if there is a verb that doesn't collocate with a noun. For instance, "shipwreck" does not collocate with "faith." (1 Tim 1:19). So you can say "people will destroy their faith like a canoe crashes into the reef."

However, the Bible has numerous *mixed* metaphors, which significantly complicates things. It is one thing to say our faith is an anchor (Heb 6:19) - but it's another to say our faith is an anchor in the Holy of Holies. The problem this poses for translation is that a metaphor on its own can be explicated, but a mixed metaphor doesn't "work." Readers may be left wondering "why is there an anchor in the Holy of Holies in the first place?" The mixed-metaphor may be so odd to the readers that they may worry so much about the metaphor not "working" that they miss the intended point.

Sometimes, it seems the author started with one metaphor and then changed the subject before following through with the meaning of the original metaphor. The best example would be the mirror in James 1:23-24 "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." To many commentators (and I agree) it seems James meant to use the mirror analogy to say "someone looks at his face in the mirror **and sees a smudge,** but walks away forgetting **to do anything about the smudge**." That is, it seems James was going to start a metaphor about having the Bible expose sin in your life, and doing nothing about it. However, James finished the analogy by emphasizing only the part about walking away from the mirror and forgetting, rather than emphasizing the **not doing something about the sin/dirt that the mirror/Bible exposed.**

Often, mixed metaphors can be separated into two parts, and you can choose the verb that collocates with each noun. For example, "everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49). There are two metaphors here, one about salt, one about fire. If it were merely a metaphor comparing trials to fire, that would be easy enough to translate or explicate. But the mixed metaphor of salt and fire can become meaningless to the readers because fire does not collocate with the verb "to salt." We rendered the verse with the appropriate collocating verbs: "fire will *fall* on people like salt is *sprinkled* on people."

Below are about 15 of the mixed metaphors I've found in the New Testament.

- "trampling salt" (Mat 5:13) There are two metaphors here, one about trampling trash, and one about salt. Either metaphor on its own would be simple enough (given that we knew what Jesus meant by comparing our lives to salt or trampling). The problem is that nobody actually tramples salt, so the meaning can easily be missed.
- "Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:14) If Jesus had simply continued the metaphor about the indwelling of Christ being compared to a well, it would be simple enough. What is problematic is that wells don't "well up to eternal life."
- "unless a seed dies" (John 12:24) A simple metaphor would have been to compare death and burial to planting a seed. This is a mixed metaphor because seeds don't actually die. It seems that Jesus meant "unless a seed is buried like we bury dead people." Our reading

community found the translation of "unless a seed dies" to be unacceptable.

- "prune to be clean" John 15:2. Pruning does not collocate with cleaning.
- "May your money perish with you." Money can disappear, but people **perish** (i.e., go to hell)- and not with their money. (Acts 8:20) To explicate the metaphor, you'd have to say "may your money disappear, and may you go to hell."
- "be indebted only to love" (Rom 13:8) Paul talks about real debts to this point, and then uses debt as a metaphor for paying back love to people. It is problematic because love is not usually owed.
- "living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1). At its foundation, this is a metaphor comparing discipleship to sacrifice, which is easy enough to understand, but requires the idea of death. A living sacrifice complicates the metaphor. In fact, it employs irony, which may not be an available literary device in Melanesian languages.
- "Baptized into death" and "nail sins to the cross" (Rom 6,:4, 6:6) Here baptism is a metaphor for induction, and death is a metaphor for ceasing to sin, or perhaps it is a metaphor for the certainty of persecution. The mixed-metaphor "baptized into death" is enigmatic for readers.
- "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20) This metaphor is enigmatic because "first fruits" is meant to be understood as "the first to be raised again" but the text gives the impression that Jesus is "the first of those who have fallen asleep."
- "in a flash- in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor 15:52). It seems like Paul started out a metaphor about the speed of lightning, and then changed it to that of blinking.

- "yes/no" (2 Cor 1:16-19). At first Paul was using "yes" and "no" to refer to the certainty of God's promises, then he changed the metaphor to mean that Jesus is God's "yes."
- "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him." (2 Cor 2:14). The metaphor started out comparing the visibility of the suffering of the apostles to a Roman triumphal procession- extremely difficult to explain to a Melanesian audience; and then Paul mixes in the metaphor of perfume emanating everywhere.
- "the veil" (2 Cor 3:13-18). What is problematic about this metaphor is that the "veil" is first taken to mean something that blocked people from being blinded by the brightness of Moses' face; but later the *meaning* of the veil metaphor changes to mean something that blocks knowledge of the gospel.
- "the thorn in flesh" is also a "messenger of Satan" (2 Cor 12:7). The metaphor starts out as a thorn that causes pain, like a trial in Paul's life. Then the metaphor changes to a messenger.
- "rooted and built up" (Col 2:7). The metaphor begins by comparing the church to a plant, and then to a building.

**Passages where we don't know the meaning**

People talk about the "plain meaning of the text." And in most cases, it's fair to say that there is a plain meaning. But sometimes the commentators just don't know what a passage means. That doesn't mean the passage is automatically

difficult to translate - some of the most difficult passages to understand are rather pithy and can be translated literally with ease. But a translator should know what a passage means before he translates it. When none of us agrees on the meaning of a passage, that becomes a challenge. Below is a list of about 50 of NT passages that I've found most difficult to understand the meaning. In order to translate these passages, it will take a great deal of study and discussion with your team before you'll be satisfied – if ever! (Note that about 25 are from the letters to the Corinthians- the most difficult books to exegete).

- Mat 1:19 what does Josef being a righteous person have to do with dismissing Mary quietly? Was it that he was righteous, so he wouldn't want to cause someone injury by publically disgracing him or her?
- Mat 27:66 what was the seal? Was it blocking the tomb, or just a royal announcement?
- Luke 7:35 "But wisdom is proved right by all her children." In the context, this seems to mean "you can tell John the Baptist and I are righteous by the fruit of our ministry." But that's a far cry from what the text actually says.
- John 4:24 "must worship in spirit and truth." We don't know what it means to worship in spirit and truth. Maybe:
    - worship with sincerity and all their heart
    - worship the right way, and the way the spirit guides them
- John 11:16 Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Is this comment sarcastic or not?
- John 16:4 "I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell

you this at first because I was with you." What does Jesus being with you have to do with why he didn't warn them. Perhaps:

- the bad things were happening to him and not to them
- he was sheltering them, but now he'll be gone

- Acts 1:4 what is "the gift my father promised?" Is it the Holy Spirit?
- Acts 1:6 "are you now restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Were the disciples asking if Jesus was going to now seat as king in Jerusalem and shoo out the Romans?
- Acts 5:41 "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." What made them happy to be persecuted? Was it because God saw that their faith was so strong, they could obviously handle a great deal of suffering?
- Acts 7:20; Heb 11:23 what does it mean that "Moses was no ordinary baby?" That he was handsome?
- Acts 12:23 "He was eaten by worms and died." Did the worms kill Herod or not? Were these intestinal worms or maggots?
- Acts 22:23 Who was throwing dust on whom? And why?
- Romans 1:17 "A righteousness from faith to faith" or "by from faith first to last." What does that mean?
    - That faith has always been part of God's plan, or
    - That the only way we're saved is by faith
- Rom 4:16-17 "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are

of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed--the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

- What does giving life to dead have to do with this?
- What does it mean that he "calls things that are not as though they were?" Does it mean He calls the universe into existence, or He does things that he said beforehand he would do?

- Rom 15:2-3 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." What is the connection between "Christ did not please himself" and "the insults of those who insult God have fallen on Christ?" Is "what's missing" in this text something like "For Christ did not think about himself when he was being insulted?"
- 1 Cor 1:12 I follow Paul"; another, I follow Apollos; another, I follow Cephas ; still another, I follow Christ. Is the last bit, about "I follow Christ" a quote of some faction in Corinth, or is it Paul's argument that Paul himself follows Christ alone?
- 1 Cor 2:16 what does it mean that "we have the mind of Christ"?
- 1 Cor 3:21 "God gave you everything for your benefit." In the context it seems that he's saying "God gives you all your teachers to help you" but

maybe it means “God gives you everything for your benefit.”

- 1 Cor 4:6-12 is it sarcastic or not?
- 1 Cor 4:15 what does it mean to have “ten thousand guardians in Christ?”
- 1 Cor 6:13 “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food”--but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” We know Paul disagreed with the quote about food for the stomach, but what did the Corinthian quote mean in the first place? Did it mean “The flesh is irrelevant, it will be destroyed, so we can do whatever we want, as long as our spirits are clean?” Or did it mean “Men want sex as much as the body wants food, so give us a break?”
- 1 Cor 7:36ff Is this passage about a man who is engaged to marry a woman, or is it about a father who wants to marry off his maiden daughter?
- 1 Cor 11:10 “For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.” What do the angels have to do with wearing head covering?
- 1 Cor 12: 23-24 what are the parts of a person’s house that are ignoble?
- 1 Cor 14:32 “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.” Does this mean that when a prophet gets a word from God, he knows how to wait for the proper time to speak?
- 1 Cor 15:8 “as to me born at the wrong time.” Was Paul saying that he should have been born decades earlier, so he could have been a true apostle during

Jesus' life on earth? Or does it mean that he is as disfigured and has as miserable a life as if he were an aborted child?

- 2 Cor 1:9 "felt the sentence of death" is this metaphorical or real?
- 2 Cor 1:23 what did Paul mean by "to spare you"? To not shame them?
- 2 Cor 2:6 "the punishment inflicted on him" was Paul speaking about a certain person? Was it the man in 1 Cor 5 who slept with his stepmother?
- 2 Cor 2:11 How would Satan outwit them?
- 2 Cor 2:14 What did Paul mean by comparing the apostles' lives to a triumphal procession?
- 2 Cor 4:7 What treasure do we have in clay jars?
- 2 Cor 4:10-11 What does it mean to "carry the death of Jesus in the body?"
- 2 Cor 4:12 What does it mean that "death is at work in us?"
- 2 Cor 5:13 are they crazy?
- 2 Cor 5:21 became sin; we became righteousness of God. What do those phrases mena?
- 2 Cor 6:4 how do they commend themselves?
- 2 Cor 7:10 worldly sorrow brings death, 7:11 "what longing"
- 2 Cor 7:12 "the one who did wrong" Is that still referring to the man who slept with his stepmother in 1 Cor 5?

- 2 Cor 10:1 What does Paul mean by timid and bold?
- 2 Cor 10:5 How do you “make thoughts obedient to Christ”? Is it about making TEACHINGS correct according to the teaching of Christ? Or something else?
- 2 Cor 11:21 "to my shame we were too weak for that." Is Paul being sarcastic?
- Gal 2:18 “If I rebuild what I destroyed I prove that I’m a law breaker.” Does Paul mean “If I go back to following the Mosaic Law I prove that I am a sinner because the act of rejecting the Good News of Jesus is the worst sin of all?
- Gal 4:9 What does Paul mean by “be like me as I was like you”? Does he mean “You were not following the Mosaic law, as I no longer do, and when I was with you, I didn’t; but now that you’re persuaded to follow the Mosaic law, and I’m not, I want you to follow my example by not following the law?”
- Gal 4:14 “you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” Does Paul mean “you would have given anything to help me, regardless of the cost? Was Paul speaking about his sight problems?
- Eph 1:3 What are “spiritual blessings?”
- Eph 6:18 What does it mean to “pray in the spirit?”
- 1 Tim 1:20
    - all womankind was saved by the birth of the messiah
    - women should be quiet and bear children if they want God’s approval

- 1 Tim 6:13 Was does it mean by Jesus “made the good confession to Pilot”?
    - he told Pilot he was the Messiah
    - he spoke the truth
- 2 tim 4:17 Was Paul delivered from a literal lion’s mouth, or the death sentence?
- Hebrews 6:2 What was “the elementary teaching of laying on of hands”?
    - appointing elders
    - praying for people
- Heb 12:12 What does he mean by “strengthen feeble arms and straighten weak knees”?
- James 4:5 “The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely”
- 2 Peter 2:11-12 Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord.” Who exactly is being slandered?
- 1 John 5:7-8 “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”
- Jude 23 “snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” What is meant by clothing?

**Key Terms**

Sometimes you need a whole sentence to spell something out, which wasn’t actually prominent in the text. Spelling it out can be distracting and make it seem

like that was an important part of the text. You could choose to be less literal, and put the literal, in-depth rendering in a footnote. Take Matt 23:24 as an example, "You strain the gnat but swallow the camel." You would need to spell out what a camel is, and why Jews would try to avoid swallowing gnats, and why it would be so bad to swallow a camel. The rendering might look like this: "You are so careful not to be dirty in God's eyes all the time, like when you're drinking from a cup you are sure not to swallow a small fly called a gnat, but you really are so dirty in God's eyes it's like you've eaten a very dirty animal in his eyes called a kamel." You could just put all that in a footnote, and do a rendering in the verse like: "You are trying not to be dirty in God's sight, but you break so many laws you're very dirty in his sight!"

## Layout

English Bibles use layout to communicate meaning. Indentions to show poetry; section heads are not "the Word of God;" footnotes are meant for study, not to be read straight through when the reader reaches the bottom of the page. Here are some suggestions regarding your layout:

- Your readers might not know what parentheses are, or exclamation marks, or why poetry is indented. You may choose to use quotation marks to show quotes within quotes, but the readers may not follow it.
- Also, your readers might not know that the section heads and book introductions aren't the word of God. How will you indicate that they aren't "the Bible."

- You'll need to decide about paragraph breaks. Are you going to follow a standard translation?

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