

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 18, Unknown Ideas, Part 2

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This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session 18, Unknown Ideas, Part 2.

We're picking up our previous discussion on how to translate unknown ideas. Those are things that occur or exist in the Bible or in the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic but don't exist in the culture or the world or the language of the people that we're translating for, and so we covered different types last time, and I refer you to that video.

We're picking up on that and carrying on with some other unknown ideas that are challenging to translate. The first of these is biblical names. How do you translate these names of people or places? It could be cities, could be a geographical location like the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee, or the Jordan River.

How do we translate them? The most common way is because these are specific, exact names of people and or places; we usually don't translate them. We transliterate them, meaning we take the word from the original language, and then we just express it and write it out using the sounds that were available in the language that we're translating the target language. So, in one way, we're just copying the world over.

This can be a challenge because names in the Bible are often hard to pronounce. Some of them are easier. Yesu is fairly easy.

Some of those names in Genesis 12, 13, 14, particularly 14, the names of all those kings, Chedorlaomer, and all that stuff. Yeah, so how do we translate? How do we transliterate? So, the challenge is how to reflect that in the target language. So, we try to use the sounds that are available that exist in the target language.

And there are sounds in the Orma language that don't exist in English, and Swahili sounds like those don't exist. So when you take a word from Orma into English, those sounds get lost, and so they just use the closest equivalent to the Orma word. So, what about going into Orma? Well, you've got they have no V. So, the closest approximation to V is F. Right? Both are made with lips.

And so, they will take a word, a Swahili word, like vita, which means war, and they'll say vita. Okay, and they don't have a Z. So, the word zero, they'll say zero. They just don't have it.

So, they use the closest thing there. So it's what's available and what's close to the sound that the biblical language had. Okay, and here's some examples.

And the same process that we're describing here can also apply to when you borrow a word from one language into another language. Okay, so Greek to English. The Greek word apostolos.

How many of you say the 12 apostoloi? Not too many of us. It's the 12 apostles, right? How did it come to be that way? We don't know, but somebody transferred it over. Basically, the letters are the same as close as it can get.

So apostle, and then how do you pluralize apostle? You add an S, just like you do every other word, apostles. Whereas in Greek, they say apostolos is one. Apostoloi is plural.

Great. What about batidzo? Batidzo somehow came out as baptized. So ba, ba.

P got lost somewhere, or P got added somewhere. Actually, is it bap-tid-zo? It might be bap-tid-zo. Sorry.

So, there should be a P on the Greek side. But the DZ, right? We could say bap-tid-zo. We have a D, and we have a Z, but for some reason, those combinations together don't seem to work.

So, they dropped the D part of it and retained the Z, and so you have baptized. Okay. English into Swahili.

This is an interesting one. They don't have consonant clusters. They don't have two consonants together at the beginning of a word or the beginning of a syllable.

So, they have to add a vowel in between it, and then somehow the vowels get tweaked. Instead of I, then you have E's. So day, driver, dry.

So, da-da, is how you get the D-E-R, and then the vowel sounds smoother to them to say day-ray-va, and they don't have a R sound. Most languages don't have R, like in a rooster. They don't have it.

So, it comes out sounding like an A. Kind of like in Boston, they say fah-da. Kah. Yeah, pack the kai in the yard.

Right. So the R goes to ah. Great.

So, you get day-ray-va. Hospital. They say ho-spi-ta-lee because every verb, excuse me, every noun ends in a vowel.

It has to end in some kind of vowel, and so they add a vowel in the end to make it fit the sounds of the language. Okay, what about some words from the Bible, from English, actually via Greek, by the way, into Swahili? So, you have the name Jesus. We have Jesus, right? And from the Greek, it's e-a-sus with a letter I at the beginning of it, whereas in Hebrew, it's ya.

It's an actual Y. So yesus. But that's actually Yeshua. So, this is a permutation of the word Yeshua.

So we have the J and the Y thing goes together. Like Germans, they say ya-ah, but they write it J-A. Okay, so the Y is there, but they represent it with the letter J. I'm not sure how the rest of the word Jesus came about from the Greek, and German and English are both Germanic.

So somehow, that Germanic thing is going on there. Not really sure why. Swahili? Yesu.

So very similar to the Greek form, yesus. They just drop the last S, and they get yesu. And in a lot of places around the world, they say yesu.

Jerusalem. So, the J-Y thing, ya, ru-sa-lem, and they add a U at the end because it has to end in a vowel. Nazareth.

So they have R's, they just don't have R at the beginning, that R sound. It sounds like a Spanish R, like in ara. So na-za-re-ti.

So the TH drops out and becomes just a T. So it's still the T. TH is closed in the mouth. Nazareth-ti. And again, we add an I at the end.

Those are some of the processes of looking for ways to write it in another language. What is the closest equivalent sound to the one that's in the target in the source language? Sound or sounds. Okay.

So that's the first step that needs to be done because these, as I said, are specific historical people and places, and we don't translate those. We transliterate. However, sometimes those people and those places just by themselves don't make any sense.

So, the tribe of Judah. So, is Judah the name of a person? Or is it the name of a tribe? And the answer is yes. It's both.

Okay. A type of geography. So if you say Galilee, is that the name of the lake, or is that the name of the region? It's both.

The name of the lake came from the region. So, is it a town? Is it a region? We have the tribe of Judah, and we have the region of Judea. Okay.

So, we need some kind of bridge to clue people into what kind of thing it is that this abstract noun represents. Okay, so after we transliterate, we can build a bridge by adding a corresponding word with the proper noun so that the person who's reading it understands what this reference is. So, Mark 1 10.

Without the black letters, it sounds like this. In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Okay.

Building a bridge, we say the town of Nazareth, Galilee region, or the region of Galilee, baptized by John in the Jordan River, or the River Jordan. Are we adding information to the text? No, it's there. It's already there.

Those are real things and real places. And all we're doing is building that bridge. Let's look at another verse.

This one is a little more complex. Woe to you. This is from Matthew 11:21.

Jesus is cursing these names. Woe to you, Chorazin. Woe to you, Bethsaida.

For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon, which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago. So, first of all, we ask, what is Chorazin? It's the name of a place. It's a city.

Bethsaida is that little town just outside of Jerusalem. Tyre and Sidon are cities in what is today, I believe, Lebanon. But there's a problem.

This is actually personification. Is Jesus cursing the cities? No. Because it said, they would have repented.

Who would have repented? Again, these are the gaps in information that we have to figure out before we can then communicate it. Well, Chorazin, in addition to being personification, is also the part-whole representation that we talked about, that it represents something else, not itself. It's a metonymy, okay? It represents the people who live in Chorazin and the people who live in Bethsaida.

So you have to say, people, you people from the town of Chorazin, you people from the town of Bethsaida, if miracles that occurred in you had occurred in Tyre, the town of Tyre, or among the people of Tyre and among the people of Sidon, and you can judge where you want to add people from the town of, people from the town of, people from the cities of Tyre and Sidon would be a shorter way. They who, those

people living from Tyre and Sidon would have believed long before. It would have taken them less time to believe than it took you to believe.

This is very complex. And so, we translate the names, but then we also translate the association, the figure of speech that we get, and the implied information that we get is that these are towns, and we add that somewhere in the text so that the whole thing would be woe to you people from the town of Chorazin, etc. We have to do that in order for it to be more clear.

Remember what we said: Our goal is effective communication. And if there's a way to remove the stumbling blocks, then let's remove the stumbling blocks. And this is one of those stumbling blocks that we are able to remove.

And it's not, as it were, tampering with the text. It's not diminishing the accuracy of the text. In fact, it's making it even more accurate because it's communicating more clearly.

When it communicates nothing to someone, that's the last option. If we have no other options, then we translate it literally and just let it go. But if there's a way to do it, then let's do it.

Again, we don't want to put an undue burden on the reader so that they read it and can't figure out what the text is saying. What would they do? They'll quit. They'll give up.

And we don't want that. We want them to engage with the scriptures, and we want it to be all those things that we say. Okay, in addition to biblical names, another one is weights and measures.

And it depends on the weight. It depends on the measurement of what options we have. And these are suggestions.

These are not hard and fast. Thou shalt do this this way. Okay.

So, we have to look at what the measure is, what the amount that the Bible mentions, and what that is equivalent to in today's world. And we can use Bible dictionaries. We can use other resources, commentaries, and translation notes. Sometimes, you'll find that one reference will say, oh, a cubit is 18 inches.

Another one will say, well, a cubit is 20 inches. Another one will say a cubit is anywhere from 18 to 24 inches. So, you're not always going to get a straight-up answer.

So, for example, cubit, shekel, hand breath, fathom, sometimes measure, sometimes nothing, like in Ruth chapter 3 when she spent the night in Boaz's threshing floor, and then he gives her some grain, and it says he gave her three of wheat. It doesn't really say measure. It doesn't say there's no noun there.

There are just three of them. And so, we have to guess, okay, what amount is there? Okay.

So, the first thing is, what is the word? What is the way of measuring or the measurement? And then what is the amount? Then, once we get that amount, we can use a term in the target language that gives a close approximation to about the same amount. And if you have a word like shekel, or let's say denarius, denarius is probably more common than shekel, then you're probably going to use it the same way each time. You wouldn't use it one way in one book and one way in a different way in a different book.

Okay, let's look at some examples. Genesis 6:15, the length of the ark is 300 cubits; its breadth is 50 cubits, and its height is 30 cubits. Again, how long is a cubit? So you get some translations that use feet, and some use yards. One is like 450 feet by all these others, and they start with how long a cubit is.

So, if it's 300 cubits, and a cubit is 18 inches, which is 1.5 feet, 300 times 1.5 is 450, so that's where they got it. So, the approximate length is about 450 feet, and then the width and height are as follows. Okay.

The Orma actually has a word that corresponds exactly to a cubit. A cubit is the length of a person's arm from the elbow to the tip of the fingers. And Ormas, when they measure out something like, I'm going to give you this length of cloth, and I'll cut it and sell you the part that you are buying.

And they'll go like this, that's one, like that, that's two, like that, that's three. I've seen them do that. It's already there, and it's very close.

We don't have to quantify the exact size of the man's arm, or, you know, because arms vary, different people have longer and shorter. But it gets a really good approximation of what the biblical text says. In other words, dun-dun.

So, it's 300 dun-dun in length, 50 dun-dun in width, and 30 dun-dun in height. In other words, from the ground up. All right.

Another one. I'm talking of Hagar and being driven away with her son Ishmael. And she went and sat down, opposite to him, about a bow shot away.

Sorry, what's a bow shot? Okay, how far can a person shoot a bow? Now, these aren't the super high-powered compound bows that you get at sporting goods stores. It's probably just a regular bow and arrow with a branch, and then... So let's just say, for the sake of clarity, that it's about 50 yards. And so, how do you communicate 50 yards in a language like Orma? Well, a yard is equivalent to how far you can step if you take one step.

Okay, so it's about three feet or three feet plus. The Ormas are tall people, and so their steps are a little longer than mine. They actually have a word for step, and that step is taraku.

And so they use the word taraku, and we used this in Genesis. She went 50 taraku away from the boy. Does that work? Yeah, it works really well.

So, we're using an Orma word that's a close approximation, and it fits, it's understandable, and then they can picture in their mind, okay, if I'm stepping 50 yards, I would be way over there. Okay, that's how far she was away from her son. Okay.

John 2.6 Now there were six stone water pots containing, here we are, two or three measures. Is a measure of liquid different than a measure of dry? Yeah, probably. They might be close, but all right.

Our Bible research tells us that a measure of liquid is roughly 10 gallons. So, you read in some translations that it was 20 to 30 gallons. Is that close enough? Sure.

Is it exact? No, but it doesn't need to be. Because we're trying to paint a mental picture. We're trying to give the idea that this is about how much liquid was in these water pots.

Okay, an Orma. They have the word debe. Debe is a water container.

We would say, in English, a jerry can. That's not a word that's common to everyone in America, but it's a water container, and you can buy jerry cans at the store. And so a jerry can let's call it five gallons, okay? And if one measure is 10 gallons, how many jerry cans is that? Two, right? So, that would be four to six debe or four to six jerry cans.

And so, they can imagine because every day, ladies go to the well with their debts, fill them up with water, put them on their heads, and come home with it. In the morning, they go and get water with the other ladies. In the evening, they go and get water with the other ladies.

And so, a debe is a regular thing that everybody knows. Probably from the time the children are very small they know roughly the amount of a debe, okay? So in that regard, using the word debe gives us a very good close approximation to the amount of liquid, the amount of water that they put into those jars. Okay.

For translating weights, kilograms are probably one of the most universal measurements around the world. I think everybody here in America, and even sometimes here in America, uses kilos. We talk about kilos of this and kilos of that.

You're told that you get 20 kilos on the plane for your suitcases. Technically speaking, a kilogram is a unit of mass, not a unit of weight. But let's not split hairs if we don't have to.

So, to translate the weight, one of the choices is to translate using kilograms. Okay, John 1939, Nicodemus bought spices to embalm Jesus, weighing 100 liters. It almost sounds like the word liter, but it's not exactly.

And a litra, according to the biblical resources, is 325 grams. And so a hundred of them would be 32.5 kilograms. That's a whole lot of spices.

That's like a really heavy suitcase full of spices. So we can say Nicodemus bought spices weighing 32 kilos—distances by road.

This is a trick here. And they can be difficult to reflect in the target language the distance that's depicted in the Bible. So if they're used to kilometers and thinking in kilometers, then you can use kilometers.

That's probably the most straightforward way to convert the biblical distance into a modern usage today. However, not all cultures think in kilometers. Because maybe they don't drive.

I was talking to one man in this town in Tanzania where we lived, and I said, so where do you live? He says I live outside of town. And I said, well, how far away is it? And he says, oh, about 40 cents. Sorry, what? Well, he doesn't have a car, and so he has to take public transportation.

And every distance from like 1 to 5 kilometers would be 10 cents, or and then 5 to 15 would be another 10 cents or whatever it was. They have it all figured out in their mind. Everyone knows who rides these public vehicles.

And so, they can tell you I live 40 cents away. They're saying I live the equivalent of what it would take to go in this bush taxi from here to there. So then that communication, to me, it meant absolutely nothing.

I had no concept. If they're a pedestrian society like the Orma people, we're out in the bush. There are no vehicles.

I was the only vehicle in town. And they walk everywhere. So, they're a pedestrian society.

How do you communicate the pedestrian society concept? Or to that society, these biblical distances? You can say, oh, it's so many minutes away. Well, the problem is when we first got there, nobody had watched. And they didn't think in minutes.

Like if I was in Nairobi and my friend said, well, how far is your village from here? I'd say a 12-hour drive. Okay, so they have a concept. They drive in the bush.

I drive in the bush. They have a concept of hours. When you work with people that don't have timepieces, then they don't have that at their disposal to say, oh, it's a 10-minute walk, or it's a two-hour walk, or it's an all-day walk.

So, what do you do? Okay, Act 1:12 is a Sabbath day's walk. So, we're told that's a distance of 2000 cubits.

I'm not sure why they measured something linear along the ground in cubits, but that's how it is. Okay, a cubit again is 1.5 feet. So, two cubits is three feet.

Again, three feet is roughly a yard. So, this would be one pace would be two cubits. So, 2,000 cubits, you divide that by two, you get 1,000 paces.

And so, in Orma, we would say about 1,000 taraku, which is the same word that we used before. So that one is a better communicator that they go a thousand paces away from their home and they can't go further than that. So, they always kept within that distance.

I didn't talk about measuring small things, but there is a way of doing it. Again, you're trying to use culturally common ways of measuring things. Just like I said, they have the dundun where they measure something like this.

They also have, if you have something that is like a foot long or less, they measure it from here to here and they go like this, one, two. So, they will say that it is one or two or three hands. Another thing is what does the culture use when they don't have the same like a tape measure.

They don't think in feet. They don't think in inches. In the Bungu language in Tanzania, they're fishermen.

And so, we have the word fathoms in the Bible. How many fathoms was the water? How deep was the water? How many fathoms deep was the water? And you know that in Paul, when he was shipwrecked, they made soundings, and they got that the distance was so many fathoms. And so, I asked this guy, so when you guys measure the depth, what scale do you use? He said, well, you say people.

Sorry, come again? What do you mean? And he said, well, this is one person from here from this fingertip to this fingertip is your wingspan. And so what they do is they take a rope, right, and say one person, two people, three people weighted down with a rock. They throw it in there.

And how many people deep is the water? Fascinating. People, human beings, are so intelligent and creative. We use what's at our disposal to manage, to deal with, and to interact with our world.

So, we try to use those things. And again, the whole thing of short distances, things that you don't have a tape measure for. You know that with horses, the expression is how many hands high is the horse? Why do we say hands? Well, if you think you're out in the Wild West, nobody has tape measures.

Come on. Right? And so you put your hand around the leg of the horse. This is the, let's say, that's the hoof, and this is one hand, and then this is another hand, and this is another hand, and this is another hand.

So, a hand is the width of a person's hand. Now, they always measure the horse only up to the shoulder, never up to the head. Why? Because when you go up the horse like that, you stop right there.

You can't get any further than that. Right? But they don't go up the side of the horse like that. They just say this horse is 16 hands high or 14 hands high.

So, we still do the same thing, or we used to anyway, and they still talk about horses' heights being in hands. So, we will use what's common in the culture to measure the item that we are talking about and try to get an approximation. Again, we don't have to be exact.

None of us really knows how long the cubits were or the shekels were money. The difficulty in translating money is that as soon as you choose a particular currency, that currency will be accurate for a period of time, but after a while, it starts to lose its value. When I was a kid, I had a lot more lawn mowing business, so I would go and buy a can of gas at the gas station, and it was 25 cents or 35 cents or 40 cents or 50 cents.

So, if I said, yeah, I'll give you 50 cents for a gallon of gas, it's like, yeah, but you're way short, dude. You need to multiply that by what? How many? Six? Yeah, California gas is over four dollars a gallon. In Texas, it's about \$2.50. Okay, so if we say gallons to dollars, the amount of gallons will stay the same, but the value of dollars will change.

So, what do you do with that? So, after five or more years, whatever currency you use will be different, and then you will not have an accurate depiction. The challenge is how to depict this relative value using some kind of metric, some kind of measurement scale that should remain constant for a number of years. So again, we determine the value of that particular currency, and what is it today in dollars? Or if I was in Mexico, I would say, what is it in pesos? In Kenya, I would say, what is it in shillings? And then you can extrapolate the equivalence of what it was in the Bible, and so you get an idea of today's currency.

But again, we said we can't use dollars, pesos, and shillings because they will change. So, you select some kind of known cultural reference that will give an approximate amount to the biblical value. Like what, for example? Well, it's really hard to come up with an amount, particularly amounts that are very, very big and amounts that are very small, like the widow's mite.

How many of us have used the word mite as a form of currency? Not too many of us. Or a farthing. Or pence.

I mean pounds. We don't know what those things are. Even though you can't buy anything with pennies today, you can say that thing is worth five cents or two cents.

Or that person contributed three cents to the offering. We know that that's an incredibly small amount of money. And probably, as long as we still have penny coins, it will still work for us.

What are the coins that they have in their culture that could be the equivalent to a very, very small amount? In Swahili, they have the breakdown of a shilling. A shilling is the main one. And then you have smaller things that break down from shillings.

And ndururu is 1/20th of a shilling. And a shilling is worth 25 cents. So it's not very much.

Do they still use that today? If you say, I am totally broke. I don't even have ndururu. People say, okay, I get it.

You know, I don't even have. And so we would say, I don't even have two nickels to rub together. Okay, so the widow's mite, what she contributed, she contributed two cents or whatever.

Very large amounts. 10,000 talents. Okay, we'll get there.

But this is the challenge that we face. All right. One option that can work in many, many places is a day's wage.

Many cultures have that concept that if someone comes and does some work for you at your house, and they work basically all day, whether they count hours or not, they start in the morning, they go home in the afternoon, you might give them a set amount. Here in Texas, \$10 an hour, roughly. Eight hours, 80 bucks a day.

But we don't need to say \$80 a day. We just say a day's wages. And that's a day's wage for a temporary, casual laborer.

Okay, so then you use that as your scale to calculate the equivalence to the biblical amount. Examples. By the way, just as a note, many of these monetary amounts are also weights.

So, when you have a temple shekel, they have a scale that has sides that go up and down on both sides. They put the standard amount on one side, and then they weigh things against it on the other side. So if this is the side with the shekel, then this is the shekel, and then you have to pay the equivalent of that until then it equals out, and you've paid a shekel.

Mina, Becca, Gara, and Talent were all some kind of physical object that was weighed, and that was the standard. Okay. An example is from Matthew 18:24, the unforgiving servant in the parable.

We can be a little more relaxed with parables because parables are illustrative anyway. So, he owed his master 10,000 talents. How much is one talent? One talent is the equivalent of 6,000 denarii.

Denarius is one day's work. So, this is the equivalent of 6,000 working days. Right? So that's for one talent.

What about 10,000 talents? This is the equivalent to 150 years. We can't even think that high. Or it's roughly equivalent to 60 million dollars.

Okay, so even though I said before it may not be a good idea to use dollars and cents, if you told somebody he owed his master 60 million dollars, it doesn't need to be exact. We get it. That's this enormous amount of money that no one could ever repay.

So, it does get the point across. In these parables, in this hyperbolic over-exaggeration, hyperbole, 60 million dollars would probably work. It would probably sound better to me anyway, as an English speaker, if I heard this than 150,000 years of wages.

Yeah, and we get the point. All right. So, he owed his master 60 million dollars.

The other person who owed that person who was forgiven owed 100 denarii. Again, a denarius is one day's wage. And so 100 denarii is 100 days, which is about a month, about three months.

Three, a little bit over three months. So, it would be a good equivalent to say he owed him three months' wages. Or what you could earn in three months.

Okay, conclusion. So, the objective in translating these weights and measures and money is to use these terms that are familiar to the people so that they can envision and picture in their mind the amounts being mentioned in the Bible. It's not critical to be exact or precise, but if it's close, it still works.

It gives them the idea. What if it's really, really hard to communicate, or you want to use a particular word, but you don't want to explain it in a long way every time that you have to use it in the Bible? So, talent.

And then you go, and it's how many hundreds of years or whatever like that. Okay. This is where the paratextual information that we have available to us is put in a footnote.

Explain it in the glossary. Mention it in the footnote and say, tell someone to look in the glossary. How much is a talent? A talent is this much.

Then, you can even make a reference to the verses that mention talents. So, the servants that were given ten talents, five talents, one talent, you can say, this is about how much it was. So using the paratextual information that we talked about will really help the text itself to stay short and concise without overburdening it with too much extra explanation, while at the same time communicating sufficiently well so that those gaps in communication are sufficiently filled and the people have that access to that information.

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