Hanni Kuhn

Hanni Kuhn has a diploma in theology from Theologisches Seminar Beatenberg in Switzerland and an M.A. in linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington. She joined SIL in 1971 and was involved in translating the New Testament into the Berom language of Nigeria, which was published in 1984. She also served for a time as advisor for the Lendu translation project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire). She completed studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is now serving as a translation consultant, based in Togo, West Africa, specializing in Old Testament.

The problem: different backgrounds

The vast majority of SIL members hail from Western countries, countries with a long Christian tradition. This heritage has left its mark not only in the faith that is confessed in the churches, but also in the languages and in the arts. As a result, even though we are said to live in the post-Christian era, it is a fact that even those people who are not religious still have a stock of knowledge-however vague-which has to do with the Bible, including the Old Testament. But this knowledge is lacking in the non-Western world, the area where SIL mainly works. Many SIL members are not fully aware of this lack or else underestimate its effects.

The solution: a ramp

For several years now I have been recommending to new teams that they use what I call the ramp approach when starting to translate. Longman's English Dictionary defines a ramp as "a sloping floor, walk or roadway leading from one level to another." When the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids, they constructed ramps as they went along to transport the building blocks to ever higher levels. Closer to home, we drive up a ramp from one floor of a parking building to the next, and again to the next, until we find a place to park the car. Without ramps, the car could not be driven to a parking place.

As for people who have no prior knowledge of the Bible, leading them straight to the New Testament is like asking them to climb or jump to a level that is really out of their reach. They need a sort of ramp to make the ascent gradual, namely, a certain amount of Old Testament background. And it has to be made available *before* the New Testament is translated, not afterwards.

A custom-made ramp

The shape and size of this ramp-whether short and steep or long and gradual-will depend on the local situation in which a translation project takes place. The background that needs to be built up in an unevangelized language group will obviously be more extensive than in a group with a well-established church that functions in a trade or national language. But even in this latter situation, a ramp will be helpful because it will introduce important people, events, and expressions referred to in the New Testament.

Just because people have become used to all sorts of terms and expressions from the Old Testament in their "church language" does not guarantee that they really understand their meaning. We think translating the New Testament into the people's own language is crucial to their understanding it. Why then should we not do the same for at least that part of the Old Testament that will help people to fully profit from the New Testament?

Some of the texts that I propose in the following outline as content for a ramp are less essential than others. I've marked the less essential ones as optional. Of course, there may well be

situations where background that has not been included in the outline will be found necessary too. For example, the Jewish concepts of sacrifice and ritual purity may be very different from the ones known in the receptor culture. In this case, it may be necessary to add some passages from the Book of Leviticus.

To pacify those translators who are impatient to get on with one of the Gospels, two portions from the New Testament may be introduced which need little additional background to be understood. They consist of some parables and some teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, and they could be placed before and after EXO 1-24.

Remember, it is the *principle* of the ramp that is important, not so much the exact details of its size and content: the ramp has to be provided *before* New Testament texts are translated that would be obscure without it.

Benefits of the ramp

The most obvious advantage of the ramp is that it provides background knowledge vital to understanding much of the New Testament. But there are other benefits as well. The great majority of the Old Testament texts proposed for the ramp are stories, many of which are the favorites children hear in Sunday school in the Western world. Reason enough, then, to make them available for the children of our receptor cultures. The parables and the passages from the Sermon on the Mount (see step 1 and 2 of the ramp) have a special usefulness too, particularly to preachers and teachers in their ministries.

Last but not least is the usefulness of these materials in literacy programs. We all agree that we need to train people to read as early in a translation project as possible so that we will have readers by the time the translation is published. We also know that short booklets are more manageable for new readers than long ones. Therefore, if the entire content of the ramp is produced according to the following seven steps, a small library of post-primer materials will have become available.

Step 1. Passages from Genesis

To provide background on Adam and Eve, the problem of sin, cherubim, Cain, Abel, Noah, ark, covenant, Melchizedek, angel, patriarchs of Israel, Lot, circumcision, Sodom, Esau, prophet.

Translation approach: Start with the Joseph story [1‡] then the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, [2‡] and last, the primeval history, [3‡] as this is the most difficult part of Genesis to translate.

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[1] Popup
The Joseph story (that is, 37:2-35; 39:1-48:22; 49:29-50:26) is one long narrative, thus an ideal training ground for new translators. The omitted portions (37:1 and 36; 38:1-30; 49:1-28) can be added later when, or if, all of Genesis is published as one book.

[2] Popup
The genealogy in chapter 36 may be omitted. It only needs to be added in a one-book production of Genesis.

[3] Popup

Publication: four booklets on the primeval history (GEN 1-11.26), Abraham and Isaac (GEN 11:27-28.9), Jacob (GEN 28.10-37.1), and Joseph (GEN 37:2-50.26).

Optional. NT Parables and Passages from the Sermon on the Mount

LUK 8.4-15 Sower and Seed; LUK 15.1-32 Lost sheep/coin/son; [4‡] LUK 19.11-27 Talents; MAT 6.1-34 Teaching about charity, prayer, fasting, riches in heaven, light of the body (optional), God, and possessions.
Publication: one booklet.

Step 2. Exodus 1-24

To provide background on the Israelites, Pharaoh, Moses, burning bush, Aaron, Passover, Mount Sinai, the law, tabernacle, sacrifices, priests, Levites.

Israel in Egypt (EXO 1-13); Exodus to Sinai (EXO 14-24).

Publication: one book or two booklets.

Optional. More NT Parables and Passages from the Sermon on the Mount

LUK 16.19-31 Rich man and Lazarus; LUK 10.25-37 Good Samaritan; LUK 18.9-14 Pharisee and customs official; LUK 12.13-21 Rich fool; MAT 5.17-48 Teachings about the law, anger, adultery, divorce, vows, revenge, enemies.

Publication: one booklet.

Step 3 (optional) Israel in the Desert (Numbers 11-14; Joshua 2)

To provide background on Israel's forty years in the desert, Rahab, Balaam, Korah.

Publication: one booklet.

Step 4 (optional). Ruth

To provide background on Ruth, ancestor of Jesus.

Publication: one booklet.

The genealogies in chapters 5 and 11, and the "table of the nations" in chapter 11, may be omitted. It only needs to be added in a one-book production of Genesis.

[4] Popup
In Luke 15:2 the expression 'teacher of the law' appears, but the term 'law' has so far not been introduced. Translators should, therefore, add an explanation in the form of an introductory note. The same applies to 'Jerusalem' in Luke 19:11. In step 4 the names 'Jericho', 'Samaritan', and, if the passage about the rich fool is added, also 'King Solomon' will need an explanation.

Step 5. Passages about David and Solomon

To provide background on Samuel, David, evil spirits, Jerusalem, Solomon, Queen of Sheba.

1SA 16	Samuel anoints David
1SA 17.1-54	David and Goliath
1SA 25	David, Nabal, and Abigail
2SA 2.1-7	David anointed King over Judah
2SA 5.1-10	
2SA 11	
2SA 12.1-25	
2SA 23.1-7	
1KI 2.1-4	
1KI 3	
1KI 10.1-13	

Publication: one booklet.

Step 6. Passages about the Prophet Isaiah

To provide background on the Prophet Isaiah, voice in the wilderness, new Jerusalem.

ISA 6	Isaiah's call to be a prophet
ISA 11.1-12	The coming king of David's royal line
ISA 40.1-11	Words of hope
ISA 52.13-55.13	The suffering servant, God's love for Israel, God's offer of mercy
ISA 65.17-66.14	The new creation, God judges the nations

Publication: one booklet.

Step 7. (optional) Jonah

To provide background on Jonah, the big fish, Nineveh.

Publication: one booklet.

Following the 7-step ramp, translators are advised to start the translation of the New Testament either with the gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Luke.

The needs created by evangelism and discipleship efforts in the local churches should be taken into consideration in making decisions as to the order of translation of the remaining New Testament books and, if desired, further Old Testament translation. If it is decided not to translate the whole Old

Testament, it is nevertheless advisable that, at some point, at least the remaining chapters of Exodus be translated.