

# Avoiding Visual Miscommunication: Choosing Illustrations for Translated Scripture

*“For the word of God is alive and active.” Hebrews 4:12a (NIV)*

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## Abstract

Illustrations often serve motivational functions for readers, especially reluctant readers, increasing their enjoyment of a text and the amount of time they give it. Various audiences require different kinds of Scripture visuals to care about the message and understand it well. Just as translators need to carefully check the words of Scripture, it is important that they also check Scripture illustrations with members of the intended audience, and if needed, change their choices based on this interview feedback. This paper encourages translation teams to check visual elements of Scripture with members of the intended audience, and helps prepare consultants to check illustrations based on local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric.

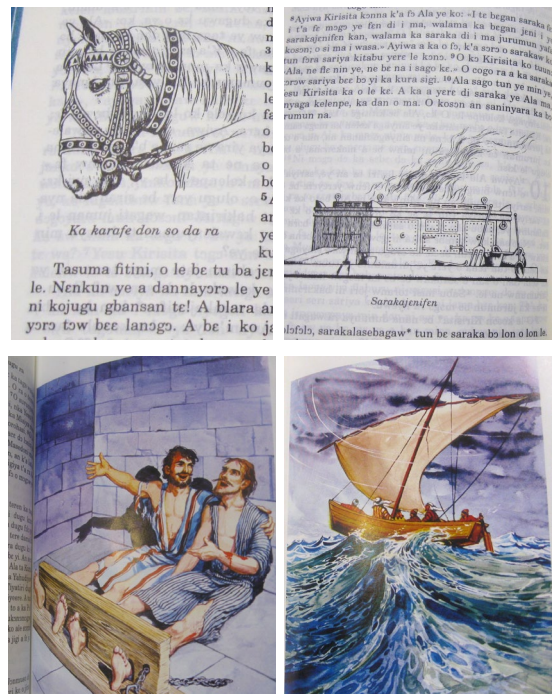
## Motivation

While I was working in Côte d’Ivoire in Scripture Engagement, my friend Karim<sup>1</sup> looked for the first time through the pages of the New Testament in his language. He looked first at the pictures. The illustrations of a horse’s bit in James, an altar in Hebrews, and Paul and

Silas with their feet in stocks in Acts elicited puzzled expressions. He quickly passed by them. When he came to an illustration of a boat in a storm, he asked me about it. I talked with him about the Lord Jesus calming the storm. “I saw this part in *The Jesus Film*,” he said. “Jesus only prayed a very short prayer and the storm calmed down! Where is Jesus here?”

“Well, we can’t really see him here,” I answered, “but this shows us what a big storm looks like.” I remembered how my life had been changed largely through illustrations in a Children’s Bible I saw in a bookstore as a child. It pictured a man named Elijah riding up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and a baby in a basket being rescued from a river. I asked my mother to buy it for me. I wanted to know the stories that went with the pictures. I read the thick volume cover to cover.

Carefully selected illustrations may help the reader to better understand and engage with the text. The illustrations in Karim’s New Testament did not connect with him the way the illustrations in my Children’s Bible had connected with me. This interaction set me on a 15 year journey considering what features of illustrations in many of the world’s Bibles strengthen communication for the most people.



“To Place a Bit in a Horse’s Mouth,” “Altar,” illustrations by Horace Knowles ©The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1954, 1967, 1972. “Acts 16:23-25,” “Mark 4:35-41,” illustrations by Louis Bass ©American Bible Society, 1960. In *Kibaro Diman*. The New Testament in Jula of Côte d’Ivoire.

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym.

## Who Forms the Intended Audience?

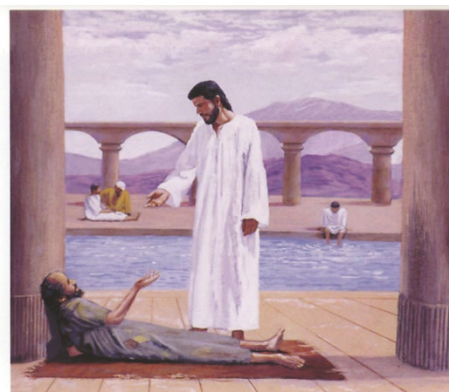
Like most recent Bible translations, Karim's translation is in one of the world's 1,598 developing languages that have vigorous oral use, some literacy and some literature in a standardized written form, but literacy in these languages is not yet widespread (Lewis et al 2015). Most translation teams choose Scripture illustrations for these developing languages from stock sets that have been checked by translation experts for their biblical accuracy, but not checked with members of the intended audience. Most developing language's audiences are mainly not yet advanced students of God's Word who are interested in the least-known vocabulary words and furthest cultural concepts from their experience. As an SIL Literacy and Scripture Engagement Specialist and Arts Consultant, I recommend Translation teams who work with speakers of developing languages select illustrations that help developing literates make the added effort to engage with written Scripture—active illustrations that show key stories rather than foreign places and objects.

Illustrations are generally the first elements of a text people, especially developing literates, look at to evaluate a text. Many people think of story illustrations as being especially good for children's Bibles. Storytelling illustrations can be helpful to engage adult audience's interest as well. More people from developing languages may read the text if it includes color illustrations that show peak dramatic events. If the illustrations show foreign places and things perceived as irrelevant to real life, people may think the text is not especially worth the hard work of reading. Thus the precious Word of God may likewise be wrongly perceived as irrelevant.

An indicator of the way people process images before text comes from eye tracking studies (Meyers 2015) which show that when most people process a Google Search Engine Results Page (SERP), they fix their attention first on the top result, and to a lesser extent on each successive result, unless the results page contains a picture. If there is a picture somewhere on the SERP, then most people skip the top results, and fix their attention on the first result that has a picture. Similarly, when people pick up a copy of Scripture, the first things they usually look at are the pictures. Illustrations are an initial point of connecting or disconnecting with a message. Storytelling illustrations connect with more peoples' interests, but are less common in most languages' translations; illustrations that provide background knowledge may miscommunicate by placing peak prominence on details, yet are more commonly published in the text. Consider these two illustrations accompanying John 5 in two New Testaments:



**"Some street in Jerusalem."** Illustration by Horace Knowles © The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1954, 1967, 1972. In the Sango New Testament, Republic of Central Africa.



**"When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'"** Illustration © Dr. Farid Faadell. In the Daasanach New Testament of Ethiopia.

The illustration above left miscommunicates by attributing undue prominence to “some street in Jerusalem” and distracting from the action of John 5. The illustration above right attributes prominence to the key dramatic point of the narrative: Jesus healing the ill man.

## About Illustrations

**Interpretive Frame** (hereafter simply “Frame”) is “the purpose or intention of the artist. The audience needs to understand the intention of the artist to interpret a work rightly” (Schrag 2013, 157). Frame is to art what subtext is to discourse. Three common Frames of Scripture illustrations are:

1. **Storytelling Framed illustrations** portray **characters, actions** and **emotions**. These illustrations are likely to engage a reader with a text when they show a key story event.
2. **Background Knowledge Framed illustrations** teach audiences how to picture unfamiliar objects and places. These are the most common type of illustrations in most Scripture translations.
3. **Symbolically Framed illustrations** evoke concepts; for example, for some cultural audiences, filigree borders around sacred text evoke respect for holiness.

If audiences use a different Frame than the illustrator intends, or if the audience expects one Frame but receives a different one, misunderstandings or disinterest may result. Consider placing color Storytelling Framed illustrations in the text, and black and white Background Knowledge Framed illustrations in the glossary to differentiate the two Frames.

## Main Purposes of Scripture Illustrations

People use vernacular Scripture in proportion to their understanding that God and His Word are relevant to daily life (Dye 1980, 39). Illustrations may provide motivation to increase people’s use of Scripture by increasing perceived relevance. Scripture illustrations have four main purposes:

- **Scripture illustrations emphasize the most important elements:** Illustrations are focus markers that indicate peak, or the most prominent aspects of a text. Background Knowledge illustrations accompanying the text of narrative, such as the illustration “Some street in Jerusalem” from John 5 in the Sango New Testament pictured further above, miscommunicate by making illustrated details such as a city street seem emphatic, and distracting attention from main ideas that are not illustrated, such as Jesus healing the ill man.
- **Storytelling illustrations invite and motivate:** Images are often the first things people look at to decide if they want to know more about a text (Myers 2011). People are more likely to continue reading if color illustrations show peak events and make the reader ask, “What happens next?” Illustrations that show key events often motivate reluctant readers, increasing their enjoyment of a text and the amount of time they feel willing to give it (Lapp and Fisher 2009, 37). This is especially true if an illustration shows all the characters, actions and emotions needed to grasp a key story event, such as the Father welcoming home the Prodigal Son in the picture to the right from the Paicî Children’s Bible in New Caledonia.

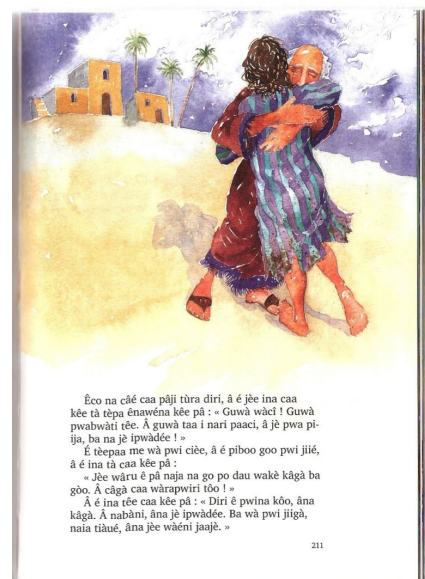


Illustration © Carolyn Cox, *The Lion’s Children Bible*, 1991. In *Jèkùtâ gée na Tii Pwiciîri: The Paicî Children’s Bible*. Wycliffe, 2009.



- **Memory:** When the text and the illustration differ, readers are more likely to remember the story as illustrated rather than the story as told (Peeck 1987, 126-127), indicating that illustrations strengthen memory.
- **Knowledge-giving illustrations inform:** Illustrations may deepen advanced learners' understanding of foreign objects and places. "For readers who struggle, pictures...create or confirm understanding" (Lapp and Fisher 2009:39). Because Background Knowledge illustrations are lower in perceived relevance to the newcomer, they are more likely to benefit a person who is already committed to the study of God's Word.

Some illustrations may both inform and tell a story. The Kambari Tsikimba of Nigeria have no two-story buildings, so they worked with a local illustrator to show Paul being lowered down the wall in Acts 9:23-25. The illustration gives both background knowledge and simultaneously shows an interesting story.

- **Cultural ornamentation adds respect:** Cultural symbols, such as ornamentation around holy text for some audiences, may increase audience engagement by heightening their identification with and respect for the text. Local symbols may help audiences identify with their Scriptures.

## How Scripture Illustrations Communicate and Miscommunicate

Many translation teams choose the same lingua franca of Western pictures for hundreds of translations. Storytelling illustrations could be more powerful when customized to each local culture, just as translation teams customize the translation of words. Customizing storytelling illustrations for each translation is helpful because different cultures use different visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric. In the picture below, what do the "U" shapes mean? What do the honey ants mean? What story do you see?



"The Last Supper." Illustration © Ruth Cook. The Arranta New Testament.

If you were part of the intended audience, the Arranta in Australia, you would understand this New Testament illustration to be "The Last Supper" by knowing local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric.

*Visual vocabulary* is a shared knowledge of the meaning of visual symbols (Hart 2007), such as being able to recognize an Aboriginal "U" shape as a person<sup>2</sup>, and the honey ants (the only source of sugar in the traditional Aboriginal diet) as symbols of sweetness when celebrating Communion.

A *visual grammar* is the set of rules governing composition and interpretation in a visual system (Hart 2007). In some visual grammars, we can only show one specific point in time at a time. Ruth Cook is using a different visual grammar, simultaneously showing the Last Supper taking place in the center and Communion taking place in the four corners of the earth. Cook portrays the past event of the Last Supper and the present, ongoing events of Communion in the same illustration. This use of visual grammar may be akin to the Greek perfect tense: a past act with present ramifications.

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<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginal "U" shape is the mark made when a person sits in the sand.

*Visual rhetoric* describes the tools artists use for reaching a communication goal such as persuasion, education or entertainment (Hart 2007). Cook's visual rhetoric persuades her audience of the present sweetness we gain from Jesus's past sacrifice. Notice the combined use of local and Christian symbols illustrating a climactic text point.

Different cultures have different visual vocabularies, grammars and rhetoric. For example, consider that relative size may indicate relative distance in one visual grammar, but relative power or importance in another visual grammar. Knowing how to read and interpret visual symbols in a given culture is *visual literacy*. An Arranta audience would be confused by a line drawing of casting lots. In their visual literacy, they would expect that illustration above to have deeper significance, and for people to be represented by "U" shapes instead of line drawings. Researching local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric allows teams to create visuals with and for local audiences, and verify they communicate clearly in local visual literacy. People may have some degree of familiarity with other visual literacies, but still prefer their own.



"The Battle of Adwa" (detail), photo Joshua Sherurcij

In traditional Highlands Ethiopian visual grammar, people whom the artist wishes you to perceive as bad are painted with only one eye showing; characters the artist wishes you to perceive as good are painted with both eyes showing. This rule is evident in Ethiopian art hundreds of years old, as well as in modern Ethiopian works. In the painting to the left, "The Battle of Adwa," painted by unknown artists in Ethiopia 1965-1975, we see this characteristic: the defending Ethiopians all show both eyes, and the attacking Italians all show only one eye.



Yiṣu mǎa warram tomonaam sede tá a siet les gǎá 'doy mare yiete, kieye, Kúin miidhanatoká fěde? yie. (Yuǎna 5:6)

Illustration accompanying John 5 in Daasanach

© Dr. Farid Faadell.

The neighboring Daasanach live in the Ethiopian Lowlands. They do not have the Highland Ethiopian cultures' one-eye rule, so returning to our illustration accompanying John 5, pictured to the left, we see it follows Daasanach visual grammar. However, their neighbors in the Highlands would misinterpret this illustration by the rule above as meaning that both Jesus and the ill man were bad. This illustrates the following principle: because an illustration communicates a story well for one culture does not necessarily mean it will communicate rightly for another culture, even a neighboring culture. To follow local visual grammar, translation teams can commission new illustrations designed specifically for their audience, or they can choose existing illustrations that follow local visual grammar.



Detail of one of a series of Dax (pseudonym) banners in Asia. (Anonymous.)

Colors in different cultures have different associations that can attract or distance audiences. On the banner to the left, this tree symbol and the colors red, yellow and black represent the Dax (pseudonym) people in Asia. The banner's sewn text (not shown, below this image) poetically describes God creating the universe. This is one of a series of banners that artistically engage the Dax with the major themes of Scripture. Learning what kinds of illustrations tap into their audience's symbol systems and preferred artistic styles can help a team engage their audience more deeply.

### Contextualization Issues Related to Scripture Illustrations

If the translation team works with a local artist, the team will need to decide their philosophy of contextualization. Earlier, we considered three main interpretive Frames that artists use to create Scripture illustrations: *Storytelling Frame*, *Background Knowledge Frame* and *Symbolic Frame*.

The category *Storytelling Frame* may be subdivided into *Historical Storytelling Frame*, which shows a story in its original culture, time and place, and *Contextual Storytelling Frame*, which shows a story in the audience's culture, time and place. All interaction with Scripture narrative is like "time travel." We can travel back to the text using the Historical Storytelling Frame, or the text can travel forward to us using the Contextual Storytelling Frame.

Many people believe only the Historical Storytelling Frame can be true to Scripture. In the Scripture Engagement text *Translating the Bible into Action*, for example, Hill and Hill (2008) discuss using visual arts for posters, calendars, banners, paintings and Scripture illustrations to help people engage with God's Word. They approve only of the Historical Storytelling Frame:

If the picture is illustrating a historical event from the Bible, it should be as accurate as possible in terms of the countryside, houses, and so on. It isn't historically correct to portray Jesus as though he came from Africa and lived in a mud hut. It is equally incorrect to have pictures of Jesus with white skin, blue eyes and fair hair! Jesus was born in the Middle East and would have had a light brown skin and dark hair (225).

On the other hand, the majority of the world's Christian artists and some Bible translation teams contextualize the illustration of Scripture to their audience's culture, place and time.<sup>3</sup> Balian artist Nyoman Darsane uses Contextual Storytelling Frame and says, "Bali is my tradition. Christ is my life."

John and Jaynie Stark, the Kambari Language Project Advisors in Nigeria, both have backgrounds in graphic design. The Kambari team worked with a local artist to create their illustrations, including the one below showing Peter grieving his denial of Jesus. Peter's expression looks like bitter weeping in Kambari culture.

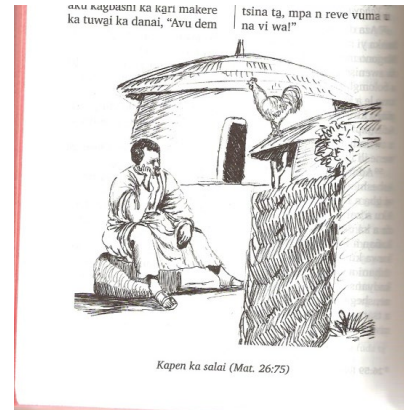
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<sup>3</sup> For a few examples of Contextual Storytelling Framed illustrations, see the *Life of Jesus Mafa* Cameroonian series at [www.jesusmafa.com](http://www.jesusmafa.com), or Balian artist Nyoman Darsane's work at <http://www.omsc.org/art-at-omsc/darsane/darsane-portfolio.html>, or search "Asian Christian Art" on Google and click on "images."



John Stark explains the team's rationale for creating new Contextual Storytelling Framed illustrations:

For us, the key was always to have a given picture help the reader or viewer understand the teaching or main point of a story. Anything that looked unnatural to them in an illustration would draw their attention to that item. For instance, if you're looking at people warming their hands around the fire at Peter's denial of Jesus, how are the people arranged, who is closest to the fire, what position do the people stand or sit or squat in? What does the fire ring look like? When these elements are normal [for Kambari culture], they provide a setting for the key point of the story. If these elements are not natural to the Kambari reader, the readers focus energy on the unusual element rather than on the visual narrative contained in the illustration (Stark 2015).



"Peter wept bitterly." Illustration accompanying Mathew 26 © the Kambari Translation Team, Nigeria.

Either Contextual or Historical Storytelling Framed illustrations may miscommunicate if the audience uses a different interpretive Frame than the artist intends. If the audience interprets the Contextual illustration above in Historical Frame, people who see the hut behind Peter may think he lived in a Nigerian village; if they interpret it in Contextual Frame, they may believe the story has ramifications for Nigerians. Conversely, if a Toussian translation team in Burkina Faso publishes an illustration in Historical Storytelling Frame that shows the tax collector beating his chest, Toussian people are likely to use Contextual Storytelling Frame and understand that the tax collector was angry rather than repentant, interpreting contextually by their own cultural cues. They would need to be taught to attribute a different emotional meaning to the gesture of beating one's chest in Historical Storytelling Frame. Illustrating the tax collector bowing deeply with the right arm over his heart and the left arm behind the back would immediately communicate deep repentance with no explanation needed in Toussian culture. Translators contextualize language, (the tax collector did not speak Toussian,) so some Translation teams believe we may also contextualize visual language.

Historical Frame may miscommunicate that the biblical narrative has little relevance to the current culture, time and place. Diane Friesen describes, "When I show Moloko people [in Cameroon] standard Scripture illustrations from Western-drawn sets, they go right back to talking about something else; when I show them the *Life of Jesus Mafa* pictures, they want to talk with me about the Bible stories." Contextual Frame may be compared to the Greek perfect tense for some audiences: past acts have present ramifications.

Contextual Storytelling Framed illustrations allow the local illustrator to follow local visual rules such as how far apart people should stand, what gestures they should use, and how emotions should be shown. Trying to compromise between Historical Frame and Contextual Frame by choosing illustrations that make faces blank is very likely to miscommunicate emotion, because people will attribute meaning to the lack of expression.

Historical Frame makes unfamiliar background, time and location of an event clear, but may confuse people about emotions, attitudes and relationships. Contextual Frame immediately conveys the attitudes, emotions and relationships in the story without further explanation, but may miscommunicate about background, time and location.

These two approaches to showing Scripture narrative, Historical and Contextual, follow different rules of visual rhetoric. Either may be appropriate and capable of being used well when the audience correctly understands the interpretive Frame. A team should check how the intended audience interprets each

Frame and for what uses local leaders and uniformed native speakers approve of each. Let the audience decide whether and when to use Historical or Contextual Storytelling Frame, what artistic style is best to convey each, and what kinds of publications are appropriate for each.

## Choosing and Integrating Illustrations in Scripture

What if the illustrations we insert into the text to define something lead people to think that the most foreign concepts are the main points of God's Book? What if by publishing Scripture illustrations from standard sets without first checking them with the local community, we are confusing or distancing readers? If these are problems, what should we do?

Teams can work with local artists to create illustrations that communicate Scripture specifically for their audience in a local artistic style or choose from stock sets. Arts or Scripture engagement consultants can help guide your team into better understanding of local visual literacy. Involve Christian leaders in the decision-making. Many teams have a 'reviewers' committee' of local pastors who should be asked about this. It is also helpful to ask advice and feedback from different members of the intended audience.

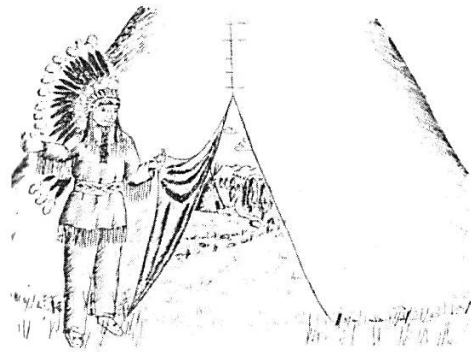
**How Teams Can Choose Illustrations from Stock Sets:** It is wise to publish illustrations most highly approved by both community leaders and uninitiated native speakers rather than to assume that because an illustration works well for another audience that it will also work well for your intended audience.

- **To accompany the text of Scripture, look for stock illustrations that show the most engaging stories rather than the hardest words.** While both increasing knowledge and increasing perceived relevance of Scripture are important to people's engagement with Scripture, increasing interest is more important than increasing knowledge of hard words in the text (Dye 1980, 39; Dye 2002, 89-98). If many people are moderately literate or mildly interested, engaging color illustrations of intriguing stories may motivate them to give the extra effort needed to read the text. We can invite participants to enter the story by illustrations that show a point of commonality or suspense that may intrigue them in finding out more.
- **Reject stock illustrations that do not engage people with the main themes of Scripture.** Since publishers allow only a few color illustrations, do not waste them on providing background knowledge of details. For example, choose events that show the Lord Jesus's power and compassion, rather than only providing background knowledge. Illustrations miscommunicate when they distance readers from the story by their foreignness or seeming irrelevance.
- **Check stock illustrations with the community, noting the level of engagement they evoke as well as the level of added comprehension they provide.** Show local people possibilities for illustration types, and ask their preferences for artistic styles and content.
- **Consider placing Background Knowledge Framed stock illustrations in black and white in the glossary.** Background knowledge illustrations in the main text of Scripture may miscommunicate by emphasizing details as though they were main points, so it is wise to consider placing them in the glossary.
- **Ornamentation:** Some teams may find it helpful to indicate respect for sacred text by enclosing both the cover and holy text within ornamental borders, and filling otherwise empty spaces in holy text with ornamentation. Some teams may find it necessary to publish a diglot and enclose the original Greek in borders as well. The cover in particular, even for portions, should signal by local standards what kind of a publication it is, be it Holy Writ or a children's comic book. Footnotes, introductions, glossaries or other helps that are not part of the original text of Scripture should generally not be enclosed by ornamental borders, because these are not to be marked as sacred.



**How Teams Can Work with a Local Illustrator:** The added effort to tell the story in local artistic styles as well as in local words may well broaden the audience who interact with the translation.

- **Observe local visual arts and recognize their key features.** Research if local works or local symbols already exist that the other community members would like to use in their Scriptures. Consider what local styles are well respected for what purposes and who is gifted in their use. Look for an illustrator who is open to working with the team and making revisions.
- **Allocate extra funding for a staff illustrator who is gifted in respected local styles.** Make an illustrator part of the funding model, the same as translators. Make illustrations part of the team's translation workflow rather than using stock illustrations.
- **Make a contract** agreeing to the local illustrators' terms of use for the finished work. Specify pay, ownership, and scope of use.
- **Research the level of localization the intended audience appreciates for what purposes.** Consider commissioning illustrations of local people obeying Scripture exhortations or local portrayals of key concepts, such as the Cheyenne illustration "Jesus is the Good Shepherd" shown to the right. A Cheyenne shepherd leads the viewer through a teepee door to a different land. For Cheyenne, this portrays what Jesus does as Shepherd, even though it does not look Jewish. Localization may enhance the audience's engagement with the message.
- **Apply translation principles to work with the local illustrator in local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric.** Just as consultants work with local translators to express Scripture in words, they can work with local illustrators to express Scripture using engaging images. Agree together when the illustrator will use Background Knowledge Frame, Symbolic Frame, Contextual Storytelling Frame or Historical Storytelling Frame.
- **Read the artist the passage to be illustrated and verify comprehension.** Ask the illustrator to sketch a few rough drafts and show these to the team before completing those which the team approves, to avoid pouring many hours into rough ideas the team later asks to be significantly altered.
- **Calligraphic renderings** of key Bible verses could be a good use of illustrations for some audiences rather than images of people or places.
- **Ask local illustrators to sign a copyright or licensing agreement.** The publication should credit the illustrator according to the illustrator's terms of use.
- **Consider calling on an Arts Consultant to be a bridge between your regional translation teams and local artists.**



"Jesus is the Good Shepherd." Illustration accompanying John 10 ©Hazel Shorey, 2007. In *Ma'heonemôxe'estoo'o: Cheyenne Scripture*.

- **If in the whole of Scripture we find illustrated a variety of men, women and children, a wider audience may feel the story is for them.**

*Audience surrogate characters* in illustrations are those with whom the audience identifies; people tend to enter the world of the story through the eyes of a character that they see as similar to themselves in some way. In this Children's Bible to the right, see if you can find the two audience surrogate characters popping their heads over the side of the boat. Illustrating a variety of kinds of people helps the same variety of audience members engage with the story of the text.

- **Community Check a small number of illustrations in a given style** and verify to what extent the intended audience likes that style before commissioning many illustrations in that style.
- **Check every illustration** with uninitiated native speakers as well as with leaders.
- **Make revisions before publication.** Based on community responses and consultant feedback, ask the illustrator(s) to revise the work before publication.



Children are audience surrogate characters in *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007.

## How to Check Illustrations for Specific Audiences

Verify with different types of audience members if color illustrations of peak events, black and white pictures giving background knowledge, and/or ornamentation would help or hinder their understanding and engagement with the message of Scripture. Because visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric differ from culture to culture, translation teams do well to **consultant check** and **community check** each potential illustration with their intended audience rather than assume they can use the same illustrations that have been used for other audiences.

**Consultant Check Scripture Illustrations:** It would be helpful to check Scripture Illustrations with two or more of the following kinds of Consultants: Anthropology, Arts, Literacy, Scripture Engagement, and Translation. Illustrations need the same level of consultant attention as the text of Scripture. In addition to normal consultant questions, here are some questions consultants could add to their workflow:

- a. Have you researched the characteristics of local genres of visual arts?
- b. How well do stock illustrations or commissioned local illustrations match the local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric?
- c. How well do storytelling illustrations focus attention on the main events of Scripture? Which storytelling illustrations best communicate the relevance of Scripture for people who are moderately interested in the text?

- d. Are background knowledge illustrations in the glossary? What background knowledge illustrations do we need there? Do any of the illustrations in the text show minor details we should move to the glossary?
- e. Would it be wise to indicate our respect for the holiness of the text in the eyes of our audience by any special symbols, text borders, covers or colors? Conversely, are there holiness markers that should not ornament non-sacred text like the glossary?
- f. Have you checked these draft illustrations with uninitiated native speakers and with community leaders? What questions have you asked? What feedback did you receive? How has the illustrator acted on the feedback you have received? How have you changed your choices of stock illustrations based on the feedback you received?

**Community Check Scripture Illustrations:** Just as we teach translation teams to carefully check the words of Scripture, it is important we also teach them to check Scripture illustrations with members of the intended audience and change choices based on interview feedback to avoid visual miscommunication—not just misunderstandings about details, but also misunderstandings about the main themes and purposes of God’s Word. Here are three methods for checking illustrations with a community:

1. **Interview Method of Community Checking:** Teach teams to interview three or more uninitiated native speakers about each illustration. The interviewer checks the illustration both before and after reading the accompanying Bible passage: before, to see what people understand from it intrinsically, and after, to allow them to make accurate suggestions to improve it. Haaland (1984) suggests these four checking questions:
  - a. *Content:* What do you **see**? What else do you see? *or* What is this picture about?
  - b. *Meaning:* What do you **learn** from looking at it?
  - c. *Strengths:* What **do** you **like** about it?
  - d. *Suggestions:* What **don’t** you **like**? Is there anything that may offend someone?

Although not in Haaland, I suggest adding,

- e. How does this make you feel?
- f. How could we improve it?

Interviewers need to help interviewees feel comfortable expressing what they really think, rather than what they assume the interviewers want to hear. The artist should not be the only interviewer, or people may not feel free to express what needs to be improved. The interviewer needs to be careful not to answer the questions or show expressions that would lead people to adjust their answers. The interviewers report the community’s ideas back to the artist and the translation team. It may also be important for the illustrator to interact directly with the audience to see how people react to his or her experiments. The team does not need to take all advice, but if they hear the same ideas from two or three people, they should strongly consider implementing it.

2. **Sorting Method of Community Checking:** The interviewer presents several accompanying illustration possibilities, and either asks which of several illustrations interviewees like best, or asks interviewees to sort illustrations into preferred and not preferred stacks. Smith (2007) used this method to check responses to covers on a series of eight Bible Study booklets. She gave a group of West African women’s Bible study leaders the eight booklets, which contained similar kinds of content. On their covers, four had images of local fabric patterns, and the other four had covers with Western clip art. The leaders took the four with covers showing the local fabric patterns and said, “These are ours. We will teach them.” They pushed the four with Western clip art back to the foreign missionaries. “These are yours. You teach them,” they said.

3. **Behavioral Response Method of Community Checking:** A third way to verify the effectiveness of illustrations, best used alongside one of the other two methods, is to provide people with various types of illustrations and observe audience responses to different illustrated content.

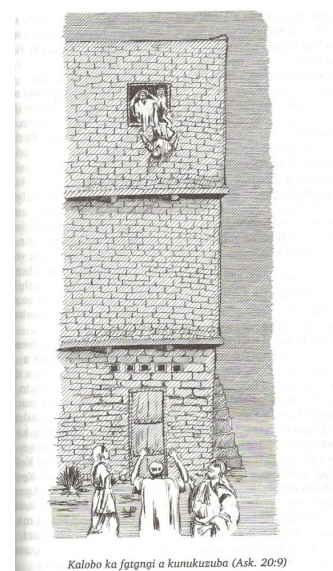
Smith (2007) worked as an illustrator in West Africa. A community development worker there asked Smith why people were not acting on her teaching even though she was using contextual illustrations. Smith went with the community development worker to the region where she was working, and took photos of local wells and water pots. She pointed out that the local materials were not the same types as those in the illustrations. A local illustrator redrew the illustrations. On seeing their own pots and wells, local people responded to the health lesson, “Oh, you mean you want us to boil our water?”

## Recommendations to Avoid Visual Miscommunication

1. **For illustrations in the main text of Scripture, especially those in color, consider selecting those that show the most dramatic points in stories.** Color illustrations receive more attention than black and white ones. Many audiences show more interest in books if they have strong storytelling illustrations.  
  
This illustration to the right from the Denya New Testament of Cameroon has all the characters, actions and emotions needed to interest the potential audience in knowing more about the Book.
2. **Place illustrations showing details of difficult vocabulary in the glossary.** Putting Storytelling Framed illustrations in the text and Background Knowledge Framed illustrations in the glossary helps prevent people confusing background knowledge with stories.
3. **Place illustrations showing background knowledge with the main text of Scripture only when they provide both story and information.** Eutychus falling from an upper story (Acts 20:7-12) may need an illustration such as the one to the right if people do not know about multi-story buildings.
4. **If initial checking reveals the preferred local visual grammar is significantly different from that used in standard sets of Scripture illustrations, rather than selecting from standard sets, work with a local illustrator to create storytelling illustrations.** Using illustrations from standard sets may still work for glossary illustrations, but you should check with the intended audience to verify.
5. **Use the same artistic style throughout a publication for all illustrations that intend the same Interpretive Frame.** Use different artistic styles to help signal different Interpretive Frames.



“Jesus calms the storm.” Illustration © Louise Bass 1960 American Bible Society. In *Nywe menomenyeé meké*. Denya New Testament. Yaoundé: CABTAL, 2010.



Kalobo ka ftagngi a kunukuzuba (Ask. 20:9)  
Illustration accompanying Acts 20 in the Tsikimba language of Nigeria © the Kambari Translation Team.



Use one artistic style for Background Knowledge Frame, another for Historical Storytelling Frame and another for Contextual Storytelling Frame. This helps people not mistake one Interpretive Frame for another.

6. **Background Knowledge Framed illustrations are most helpful when they show what people do with things more than what things look like.** The stock illustration on page 1 that frequently accompanies James 3:3 could be stronger by showing how someone uses a bit to guide a horse to make the metaphor clear about controlling our tongues, rather than simply showing what a bit looks like.
7. **A description may be more helpful in the glossary rather than an illustration when an illustration may be hard to understand.** What is essential about a “rudder,” for example, is best put in words, “a wooden blade that can be turned to change a ship’s direction of movement.” Words are better than picturing the exact kind of rudder James used in his day. People may not recognize that kind of rudder today.
8. **Create and test a few Contextual Storytelling Frame illustrations.** Community check them and a few from stock sets that use Historical Frame. Determine what Frame serves what purposes well. If Contextual Storytelling illustrations are not commonly viewed as appropriate for Scripture illustrations in books intended for adults, research other domains that may be considered appropriate for them, such as story books, calendars, notecards, posters, or devotional publications that may help more people become interested in Scripture.

### A Brief Word about Visuals in Other Media

These principles for creating and checking illustrations in print Scripture using local visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric may also be helpful for creating and checking Scripture visuals in other works such as local calendars, performances, smartphone apps, videos and other kinds of visual communication. We can avoid visual miscommunication by working with a culture’s own creators and checking each part of a product or production with a small representative audience before presenting the work to a larger audience. We can ask the main Christian leaders, whose decisions many are likely to follow, what kinds of visuals they believe need to be in what kinds of works.

### Conclusions

Teams may either create illustrations with the community or carefully check what kinds of stock illustrations involve the community with God’s Word. Consideration of communities’ visual vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric ensures teams clearly communicate Scripture, not only from the text, but also through the story illustrations.

Many translation teams believe that because stock illustrations from published sets have been checked for biblical accuracy that any of them are necessarily good for any translation. However, because an illustration communicates clearly for one cultural audience may not mean it communicates well for another cultural audience, even a neighboring one. Training for translation teams needs to include advice on how to check potential illustrations with uninitiated native speakers as well as with community leaders to engage them with God’s Word as well as to inform them. Teams can make thoughtful choices of illustrations part of their normal translation workflow rather than thinking about illustrations only at the end of their work.

Often teams choose to show the hardest words and furthest cultural concepts in the text to increase the audience’s background knowledge. This may be important for the advanced learner. However, building an audience’s initial interest in God’s Word, since illustrations tend to be the first things they look at, is

often best accomplished through illustrations of key events. Teams' primary criteria for publishing Scripture illustrations should probably be increasing the number of people who may be interested in Scripture through story illustrations that engage most people in wanting to know more, and secondarily to increase the advanced student's knowledge about the most foreign objects and places in Scripture through glossary illustrations.

Choosing to illustrate interesting events in the text may help build audience interest in the story of Scripture, and this interest may be more foundational to audiences' relationship with God than knowledge of details about what objects and places looked like. Translation teams need to give the same careful attention to emphasizing the main ideas of God's Word through illustrations in the text, and defining the details of God's Word through illustrations in the glossary, as they give to discourse analysis and key term choices in the written text of Scripture.

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