Selecting Illustrations for Translated Scripture

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Carefully selected Scripture illustrations may help the reader to better understand and engage with the text. 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 (Peeck 1987; Lapp 2009).

Teams can work with local artists to commission illustrations that communicate Scripture specifically for their audience in a local artistic style, or they can 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 local members of the intended audience about their preferences by showing them various possibilities.

Illustrations are not required. However, more people may read the text if it includes color illustrations that show peak dramatic events. Black and white illustrations in the glossary may deepen advanced learners' understanding of foreign objects and places. Cultural symbols, such as ornamentation around holy text for some audiences, may increase their engagement by heightening their identification with and respect for the text.

Color Pictures

Stronger uses: Color illustrations receive more initial attention than any other element in a book. A potential reader looks at color illustrations first to learn what the book is about and decide if it is worth pursuing further (Petersen 2015). People are more likely to continue reading if color illustrations show peak events and make the reader ask, "What happens next?"

Weaker uses: On the other hand, color illustrations that teach people how to picture unfamiliar objects or places may narrow the audience to those who are already dedicated students of Scripture and push away the less-engaged.

Black and White Pictures

Stronger uses: Black and white illustrations may either show key events in the text, or define unknown concepts in the glossary. Illustrations chosen to define difficult words that are found in more than one passage generally belong in the glossary.

Weaker uses: Illustrations, placed within the text, which define hard words or illustrate foreign settings may misplace prominence – that is, they may steal attention from major events to emphasize small details that readers misinterpret as main points. Also, illustrations that show people with blank, unemotional faces may miscommunicate about the correct emotional tone of the passage.

Ornamentation

Stronger uses: Local symbols may help audiences identify with their Scriptures. Teams working in some areas 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.

Calligraphic renderings of key Bible verses could be a good use of illustrations for some audiences. 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.

Weaker uses: 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.

Community Check with Christian Leaders

The illustrations found in stock sets have already been checked for biblical accuracy, but they also need to be checked with each audience to verify how well they communicate locally. Illustrations created by local artists also need to be checked with leaders and revised.

Ask the main Christian leaders, whose decisions many are likely to follow, what kinds of illustrations they believe need to be in what kinds of Scripture publications. The translation team should show them various possible options from stock sets or the work of local illustrators and seek leaders' advice and approval.

Community Check with Intended Audience Members

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.

Test each potential illustration with three or more Uninitiated Native Speakers (average members of the intended audience) who represent different demographics (women, men, old, young, more or less educated), both before and after reading them the accompanying Bible passage.

Research both how well they understand it and to what extent the illustration interests them. Before interviewees hear the Scripture, verify what they understand from the picture intrinsically. After they hear it, if working with a local illustrator, ask for their suggestions to improve the draft illustration. If weaknesses are found working with stock sets, then provide options to exchange the proposed illustration for a better one. Haaland (1984) suggests these four checking questions:

a.   *Content*: What do you **see**? What else do you see? 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, consider adding,

e.   How does this illustration make you **feel**?

If earlier questions show weaknesses:

f.   How could the local artist **improve** it? *Or:* Which of these other pictures do you **like better**?

Follow standard community checking procedures and practices as with text to ensure understanding and avoid miscommunication.

Credit the Illustrators

If the translation team works with local illustrators, they should sign a copyright or licensing agreement for the use of the final version. Whether the team uses illustrations from stock sets or work with a local illustrator, the publication should credit the illustrator according to the illustrator's terms of use.

Conclusion

Illustrations need to be checked with the audience just as text of translated Scripture needs to be checked with the audience. There is a difference, however: the translation team needs to translate the whole text, but they can choose which parts to illustrate. Often teams choose to show the hardest words and furthest cultural concepts in the text to increase the audience's background knowledge. However, building audience interest in God's Word through event-oriented illustrations that show key stories may be a more important consideration than defining hard words.

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 a finishing knowledge of the difficult details. 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.

For more in-depth research on this topic, please see:
http://scripture-engagement.org/content/avoiding-visual-miscommunication

Bibliography

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