

Steve and Debbie McEvoy

Steve and Debbie are translating the Bible for the Migabac people of Papua New Guinea. They lived in Papua, with their children, for many years. The Migabac people celebrated their New Testament dedication in print, audio, and digital forms on July 26, 2019. Work continues, mainly in the United States, on the Old Testament, language development and Scripture Use activities. In addition, the McEvoy's also assist other translation programs in Papua New Guinea with a current focus on developing translation resources for Papua New Guinean translators. Steve & Debbie would love to have you as part of the team taking God's Word to Bibleless people. Please consider how you might partner in their Wycliffe ministry financially or in prayer. See online – <https://www.wycliffe.org/partner/McEvoy>

Steve and Debbie came to Northland Bible Church, Tomahawk, Wisconsin, on Sunday, October 20, 2024. Steve shared their mission work and then a message from Nehemiah 8:1 – 9:3. The following are his notes.

I trust you enjoyed this brief history of our lives in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Thank you for supporting us regularly since 2009! This was only possible through your involvement. After we returned to USA in August 2019, our children have gone through transitions in learning to live in another country while entering or nearing adulthood, and are making great progress in school and work.

We have been able to build on that foundation of our time in PNG as we continue to work for Bible translation in Papua New Guinea, but doing that remotely from here in Wisconsin. During these last few years, I often feel like I am juggling several different hats.

The first hat is the PNG hat as we continue to serve as advisors for the Migabac Old Testament translation program. We began laying the groundwork for this while we were in PNG by starting training with Karis and two other men who were interested in helping in Bible translation. One of those two passed away, and the other decided to work with teaching in the Migabac schools rather than translation. However, since the dedication, four other men from one of the coastal villages also expressed interest in joining the team, so we have facilitated for them to attend some translator training courses. Bomes, the main translator on the N.T., initially wanted to take

a break. However, he has a renewed interest in working on the O.T. He has amazing editing abilities, so we are glad to see him back on the team. The neighboring Dedua language that he used as a source for the N.T. draft has also been working on the O.T., so we have been able to continue to follow in their footsteps for some books. Last year, he completed the draft of Psalms and recently Nehemiah & Esther. He is just beginning work on Exodus. Karis and the rest of the O.T. team are now focusing on completing the checking and revising for Genesis. We have occasionally been able to work with them over Zoom when they have been in Ukarumpa or another coastal town with better internet. We also exchange written notes as we check through what they have translated.

The second hat that I have been wearing is that of a Hebrew student. As you know, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible, that is most of the Old Testament, is written in Hebrew. When we began working in Genesis, I could sense the significant disadvantage I had in not understanding Hebrew at all and needing to rely on other people's explanations about Hebrew. I began studying Hebrew by using a more natural language learning method through looking at illustrations and listening to words, then phrases and sentences of those images in Hebrew. No direct translation was involved, but gradually building vocabulary through association with the images. I was amazed at how much I learned in this way. Then they introduced the Hebrew alphabet, and although it was challenging, I felt that I grasped it pretty well. Following that, I began struggling to read the exact same words and phrases that I had listened to while looking at the illustrations. It was like learning to read for the first time again, and I developed much more empathy for people who are struggling to read their own language that they know so well with an alphabet that they have already learned. I still have a lot to learn but am better at sounding out words than I was.

Initially, I was spending the majority of my time wearing a Greek hat. Incidentally, do you know why the fish was chosen as a symbol for Christians in the early church? It is not just because we are supposed to be fishers of men, but because the Greek word for fish forms an acrostic. That is, it spells the first letter for each of the words in the phrase 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior'.

In PNG, there are still about 160 languages with a potential need for Scripture and nothing started, and many other Papua New Guineans that are working to translate the Bible into their own languages, including many working without full-time advisors. Although English is one of the official languages in PNG, many of these translators feel more comfortable reading and communicating in Tok Pisin, the trade language there. Thus, we have been working together with others to produce translation helps to make it easier for them to benefit from resources with the original Greek language in their translation work. If you have used Bible software on a phone or computer to study the Bible, you may have used links to dictionaries or other resources based on the Greek text, even without even knowing Greek. One project we helped with was to link those kinds of resources with the Tok Pisin Bible to make it easier for translators to access that

information. The other project is a Greek-Tok Pisin interlinear that presents word-for-word glosses for the Greek text, and a parallel reordered literal translation. This can help translators to better understand the original Greek text as they figure out how to express it in their own languages.

The fourth hat is the translation consultant hat. Covid made people evaluate alternative ways to interact with others in work contexts, and Bible translation is no different. Although meeting face-to-face is ideal, I have had a few opportunities to work with other language teams in Papua New Guinea over Zoom to help them check the Scriptures they have translated.

When we are translating or checking, there are various layers we need to consider in order to produce a translation that gives an accurate picture with the full color details like this photo. When this photo is printed, the printer is combining three different colors plus black to produce the image. In the same way, we are combining different aspects of language to produce a clear, natural, and accurate story. You may not think about it, but the cultural values and worldview are a vital part of communication. When the target language has a different culture than that which the authors come from, that affects how the story is communicated, and that provides one layer to the translation. The grammars of the languages can also be very different, so that is another layer that needs to be taken into account. Even things like spelling and how suffixes change or don't change the spelling of the root word are an important part of a story. The range and use of vocabulary can also vary significantly between languages. For example, in Migabac, they have very specific words related to coming and going depending on if you are coming or going uphill or downhill or a short distance or a long distance. If I always translate 'come' with the same word in Migabac, I may end up with a story that looks ok but is not really like a full color copy of the original that I intended. Thus, as a consultant, we help the team investigate each of these layers to make sure the story is correctly translated.

The fifth hat is the translation coordinator hat, which is very similar to how a train conductor guides a train along the rails. I had served as the translation coordinator for a few years in PNG in the past, so when the current person needed to leave this role, they asked if I would do this again, now remotely. SIL is currently working in 129 languages in PNG with 162 members assisting those languages, so I get to play a part in organizing consultant checking for those languages and training for the teams. In recent years, about 30 different languages have been checking portions of Scripture each year. This role also involves supervising new translation consultants being trained for that role, and we currently have about 25 trainees, both Papua New Guineans and expats.

Just a couple of these hats would be able to keep us busy, but we are thankful that we are able to support Bible translation in Papua New Guinea through a number of different ways, both in supporting current programs and in producing materials that we trust will help translators and

the people of PNG for many years to come. Our plans are to continue working remotely for now and waiting for God's guidance for when we should take a trip back to PNG.

One of the consultant checks I did last year was the books of Nehemiah & Esther in the related Dedua language that I mentioned. So this morning, I would like to take a brief look at the middle of the book of Nehemiah. If you are not familiar with this book, it is helpful to understand its historical context.

We have seen throughout Israel's history as they came out of slavery in Egypt, went through a period of rule by judges, and then kings, they continued to struggle with idolatry in different forms and rejecting God's law. However, this struggle with idolatry seemed to change after the period of captivity as the Jews began returning to Israel. After the 70 years in exile was complete, some began returning around 539 BC, and soon after rebuilt the temple. However, it wasn't until 445 BC that Nehemiah returns after finding out that Jerusalem was still in ruins. This is a fascinating book where Nehemiah demonstrates good leadership in both faith and action in confronting their enemies and motivating the people to restore the walls in the first half of the book. However, I want to jump into the middle of this book in chapter 8 where Nehemiah is hardly mentioned. We don't have time to look at everything in detail, but first let's read through 8:1-8 to set the scene, and then we will look at the following verses.

8:1-3 At that time, people didn't have copies of the Torah that they could carry in their pocket or pull off their shelf like we can now. Now he is going to give more details about reading the book.

8:4-8 Incidentally, there are several long lists of names in this book, so if you want to find an uncommon biblical name to give your kids, there are plenty of options in this book. We have discovered that some people in Papua New Guinea like to use these uncommon names that most of us never remember hearing before.

Verse 8 is an interesting verse for me as we see the role of these Levites. By this time in Israel's history, Aramaic has become the common language of the people in this part of the world, including Jews. The NASB says they were translating what was read so the people understood it. Many other English versions say something like 'explained' or 'made clear'. This is the reason we are doing what we are doing- translating so that the Word of God can be clear to the people of Papua New Guinea. This is one distinction between Christianity and many other religions of the world. We believe this text inspired by God is meant to be understood in the way people understand best. Translation of the Bible has a long history even right here. The Greek translation of the Old Testament was completed well over 100 years before Jesus was born. Translation of the New Testament books began decades after they were written as the Gospel spread to people speaking other languages, and now more people have access to the Bible in their own language

than ever before. Translation work has accelerated so that it appears possible that Bible translation work can be in progress for every language in our lifetime.

Let's look at 5 different responses the people had at this time as we skim through the rest of this chapter and the start of ch. 9.

8:9-11 They were weeping & grieved. Why would that be? This may be the first time these people heard what was being read and explained, and they were probably feeling convicted as they realized that they were not living in the way God intended. We will see a follow-up related to this response at the start of the next chapter. There have been many times we have been checking Scripture with the Migabac people, and they say that this is hot talk, which means that it is convicting.

8:12 They celebrated because the Scripture was clear to them. We have also witnessed the Migabac people respond in this way. One day while we were checking a section that I happened to read, an older woman started laughing. Sometimes, Scripture can be humorous, and different people may find different parts funny. However, I didn't think there was anything someone would think was funny in this part, so I asked, what, is my pronunciation funny? They said, no, she is laughing because she is happy that the story is clear to her.

8:13-18 They obeyed what was commanded. This feast they celebrated was a harvest festival celebrating the Lord's provision. And living in booths was to remind them of the time they lived in temporary shelters after God brought them out of Egypt. When I was helping check this book with the Dedua language team, they identified a few items they wanted to start doing better when they returned to the village. Later in Nehemiah, he reestablished the process for the people to give their tithes to the Temple for needs of the Levites. The Dedua people said they too need to give to the church to support the pastors and leaders there, so in the same way they were seeking to obey following the example in the story.

9:1-2 They mourned and confessed their sins. This returns to their weeping and grieving after they first heard the Scripture read. When we are convicted, the proper response is to confess, or to admit that we are wrong. When the Migabac people celebrated the dedication of the N.T., not everything went as we would like. Anita was a friend of ours who came to photograph the event. She left a backpack with a camera lens and some other things in the house where they were staying in the evening, and someone stole it. When the leaders in our village found out, they were very upset, and the next morning they publicly confessed that even though it was some people from another area who took this, they took responsibility for this theft from their guests and admitted this never should have happened. In this case, they were confessing primarily to us and the community, but it was a perfect example of what it means to admit our responsibility before God.

9:3 Finally, they worshiped the Lord, which is actually what they started with in chapter 8 before they read the Scripture, so their time together in this story began and ended with worship. Their worship involved bowing down to show their submission. Then if you read the rest of the chapter, you can see their testimony of praise in their worship as they recognized God's character and his work in the history of the Israelites, even when they repeatedly rejected him. We desire that our video at the beginning in the same way demonstrates the work of God in our lives and the lives of the Migabac people, and we can praise and worship God as we remember what he has done and anticipate that God will continue to be faithful in the future.

How do we respond to reading and hearing God's Word when it is clear to us? It can become easy to read the Bible without giving it a lot of thought, especially if we have been reading the Bible for a long time, and I am speaking to myself here. It is helpful to prepare our mind to approach Scripture with fresh understanding and consider how God wants us to respond to it. The law plays its part in making us aware of our failure to meet God's perfect standard, which should convict us and lead to confession. And we can rejoice when we understand the Good News that Jesus came to make us right with God through his death on the cross, and we can receive that gift through faith in Him. Then we can follow how he wants us to live as revealed in the Bible, which includes worshiping him, acknowledging who He is and what He has done. In that way we can respond just as the Israelites responded when they heard Scripture translated and explained to them.

Our desire is that God will continue to use us to make Scripture accessible and understandable to all people, whether that is here in America or halfway around the world in Papua New Guinea and everywhere in between. We want all people to be able to understand and believe the Good News, and while the number of languages that haven't started Bible translation is shrinking, there is still much work to be done.

This cannot be accomplished alone. It takes a wide variety of roles to support Bible translation around the world. Once again, thank you for the part you have played in this ministry. If you would like to know more how you can serve, please talk with us. Let's pray...