

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United
Bible Societies*

Vol. 48, No. 4, October 1997

EDITOR: Euan Fry

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Margaret Lawton

J. HONG

CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISIONS IN THE BIBLE: their origins, and their use in today's common language translations

Dr Joseph Hong is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Hong Kong

Some time ago, when I was checking translation draft with the Khmer Old Testament Project team, we were faced with a difficult question: Should the Khmer common language translation follow the model texts (*Français Courant Version* and *Good News Bible*) and allow several verses to be merged into one, as we often see in GNB and CEV? While we were grappling with this problem, other questions were raised regarding the origin of chapter and verse divisions in the Bible, and whether they are inspired by God like the message of the Bible, and should therefore not be tampered with. More importantly, is it legitimate for the translator to change or even do away with this important feature of the Bible?

For many people, these questions seem trivial. Chapter and verse divisions have always been considered part of the Bible. Bible users usually don't bother to ask how these divisions came about. Surprisingly, many Bible handbooks and dictionaries ignore this subject; and in the few that do mention it, the information provided is often limited and the discussion very brief.

It may be the lack of information that leads many Bible users to think that chapter and verse divisions have been part of the Bible text from the very beginning, and that they are therefore inspired by God. But this uninformed view does not help translators much, as they face the issues of being natural as well as faithful, and struggle to express the Bible message in a way that is relevant to the context and the requirements of their own languages.

Among the sample translation principles set out in the book *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (pages 182-3) there is one principle that says: "The basic unit of translation should be the paragraph, with such shifts in verse content or order as may be required." In the light of this principle, verse division and merging of verses is very much a live issue for translators. It is not surprising to see that translators of CEV and the German Common Language translation *Die Gute Nachricht* (GeCL) have

frequently resorted to verse merging as a practical way to reorganize the flow of the message and to ensure naturalness in their translation, while still maintaining the traditional verse numbering system.

However, translators need to bear in mind the consequences of verse merging, even though we know there are good reasons for it. How will terms and expressions found in larger units of text be referred to by future reference tools? How will a Bible user study this text while relying on older research tools such as concordances or commentaries? And when he or she does group several verses into one unit, is the translator tempted to do even more and change the numbering system (in order to “improve” it)? On this matter, I will make a few observations in the last part of this article, based on several major common language translations.

A tradition common to other religious scriptures

It is not only in the Bible that there is the need to divide up a long text. Similar kinds of text division are also found in other books from ancient time as well as in the sacred texts of other religions. Ancient Greek and Latin classics have their texts cut up into sections and paragraphs; so have the works of the early church fathers, and it is believed that writers like Jerome and Augustine might also have had their works subdivided into chapters and sections.

Sacred writings of other religions adopt similar systems of division too. The Koran is divided into chapters called *sura* which are subdivided into verses or *âya*. Likewise, the immense Hindu epic work *Mahabharata* which records legends and philosophical teachings of ancient India is divided into 18 chapters subdivided into 100,000 stanzas.

The origins of chapter and verse divisions in the Bible text

Although Bible scholars have traced the history and credited certain people with introducing the current chapter and verse divisions, there is still some doubt about the background and the beginning of such divisions. And their actual origins seem to be veiled in mystery. No scholar would say that they were introduced by the original authors at the time of inspiration or writing, or by early scribes who copied the text and whose first concern was simply to put in writing the holy message. In fact, we know that originally there were no divisions in the text, no titles, and no punctuation. Sometimes words were not even separated, and it was often the custom to name a book simply after its first words.

Nevertheless, there are some references (Mark 12.26; Luke 20.37; Romans 11.2; Acts 8.3) indicating that by Jesus’ time some kind of text division had already become familiar and some passages were known popularly by titles taken from their subjects. There also seemed to be a cycle of texts for public reading (Luke 4.17; Acts 13.15; 15.21; 2 Corinthians 3.14). Obviously it was impossible to use a long text for public reading without some kind of recognized divisions. Once the text was established as an authority, the need was felt to introduce a practical device to allow convenient use and quick searching of it. Thus various systems were designed to split the text into paragraphs and sections,

especially in the case of the Old Testament books. For instance, scholars studying the Dead Sea Scrolls in recent years have observed some devices for marking divisions in OT texts, such as spaces introduced between passages, new paragraphs set on a new line, or notes added on the margin. The current chapter and verse divisions were introduced much later, in the late middle ages, and were not even numbered in their earliest forms. They were marking systems that grew out of the need of study, as users had to be able to locate a particular text and to quote it quickly.

Early forms of chapter and verse division

Several forms of text division are known to have existed before the introduction of the current chapters and verses. One kind involved dividing the Hebrew text into large sections called *parashoth* and is believed to have existed before the 4th or 5th century CE. Jesus probably referred to such sections in his comment concerning the "passage about the bush" (Mark 12.26).

As for the Greek text, several ancient systems of division have been preserved. The oldest known one is found in codex Vaticanus dating to the 4th century. It split the Greek text into sections according to breaks in meaning. The next kind of division involved sections called *kephalaia* and *titloi*, and is found in codex Alexandrinus; it was believed to be in use as early as the 5th century.

By the 6th and 7th century, a system of division into chapters seems to have taken shape and can be seen in a text called the *Tours Pentateuch* from North Africa or Spain. Some scholars believe that by the early 11th century, some kind of chapter division was well established in the Vulgate Bible, accredited to Lanfranc, the Archbishop of Canterbury (died 1089).

Another system of division which dates back to ancient times deals with smaller units called *stichoi*, and was based on fixed numbers of syllables and letters. In time these text units were developed into lines of writing used as a standard measure for literary works. We may note here that the word "verse" comes from the Latin *versus*, which means a line or a row.

The Bible text was also divided into other small units called *côla* and *commata*. Both words mean a structural phrase or unit of meaning, a feature which has its origin in the ancient art of literary expression. This division into meaning-based lines was first applied to poetic books in the Septuagint and is found in the codex Vaticanus and the codex Sinaiticus.

Regarding verse division, the Hebrew text of Jewish tradition presents one of the most important sources. Division of the Hebrew text into verses may date back to the time when portions of the Scripture were translated into Aramaic. These verses were called *pesuqim* and their use varied considerably over the centuries and was not firmly established until the 9th century. However, the two dots (*soph pasuq*) marking the end of a verse might have come into use after 500 CE.

By the 10th century, the *pesuqim* became a well established feature, as can be seen in a Hebrew text edited by Aaron ben Moshe ben Asher. Scholars believe that the current verse division of the Old Testament

was derived from these *pesuqim*, which were given their final form by Rabbi Isaac Nathan ben Kalonymus in a Hebrew concordance to the OT text, compiled around 1447 but printed in 1524. These verses, however, remained unnumbered.

It was a Latin text that had the honor of being the first to have numbered verses. As early as in 1509, a Latin edition of Psalms known as the *Quincuplex Psalterium of Lefevre d'Etaples* was published with numbered verses. When the first Hebrew Bible supplied with verse division appeared in 1524, its division was adopted by an Italian Dominican, Sanctes Pagninus, into his Latin translation of the Old Testament, combined with his own verse division of the New Testament. Verse numbers were placed in the margin in this Latin Bible, printed in Lyons in 1528. Pagninus (1470-1541) thus became the first person to produce a full and printed Bible supplied with numbered verses.

The current chapter and verse divisions

Two persons separated by almost three and a half centuries are given the credit for introducing the chapter and verse divisions which we have in our Bibles today. The first was an English theologian lecturing at the University of Paris at the beginning of the 13th century, Stephen Langton, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1207. Langton is known to have divided the Vulgate text into chapters of fairly equal length some time between 1203 and 1207. His work immediately won great popularity, because it came at a time when there was an academic boom and a strong demand for Bibles in Paris. Large numbers of Vulgate Bibles in smaller formats were produced and made widely available to people for the first time.

Later, a model called the Parisian Bible was established as the standard format for the Vulgate, with typical features such as Langton's chapter divisions and book order, an introduction called the Prologue, and glossaries at the end. In the centuries which followed, the Parisian Bible exerted a great influence on Bible production, and as a result Langton's division of the text into chapters was widely accepted and formally adopted into other Latin Bibles, as well as Bibles in other languages.

The second person referred to above was a French printer-editor called Robert Estienne (1503-1559). He is regarded as the designer of the verse divisions that we have in our Bibles today. In 1551, shortly after moving to Geneva, he published a Greek-Latin New Testament, in which he himself divided the whole text into verses and also supplied it with a critical apparatus. In 1555, he published a Vulgate Bible combining Rabbi Nathan's verse division of the OT with his own verse division of the NT.

Estienne's work immediately proved successful and was adopted into other languages, for instance in the French NT he published in 1552, and in the English NT in 1557 and the famous Geneva Bible in 1560. The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible supplied with chapter and verse divisions, all the previous English texts being divided only into paragraphs. Like the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible and the King James Bible also adopted Estienne's verse divisions. Thanks to these English Bibles and

Bibles of other major languages dating to this period, Langton's chapter divisions and Estienne's verse divisions have been carried on into the text of modern versions.

Reasons for verse merging in today's common language translations

People involved in translating or reviewing the Bible certainly agree that chapter and verse divisions are a very important feature of the text. For example, these divisions have served or still serve as units of measure for the work to be done in many projects as well as for the calculation of salary paid to translators. However, common language translators do not hesitate, if need be, to lump two or even more verses together, or to redivide the text into new paragraphs disregarding the current chapter and verse divisions. This is particularly the case in CEV and GeCL and to a lesser extent, Today's Chinese Version (TCV) and GNB. There are at least three reasons for doing so:

1. The current chapter and verse divisions are not perfect

The chapter and verse divisions that our modern Bibles have inherited from Langton and Estienne are not ideal. However, it has to be admitted that both Langton and Estienne have succeeded in maintaining a good balance in the lengths of chapters and verses while at the same time having regard for the contents of the text. For example, counting the verses in the Gospels reveals that the average number of verses in a chapter in these four books is always within the reasonable range of 38-47. Likewise, for the first five books of the Bible, the average number of verses in a chapter is constantly between 28 and 35 (see chart below). Moreover, a closer look will show that not many chapters in these nine books contain less than 20 verses and very few chapters have more than 60 verses, or, in the case of the Gospels, 70 verses. In other words, Langton has made an effort to maintain chapters of fairly equal size and Estienne has avoided going to extremes in numbering the verses.

Book	Total No. of Verses	Total No. of Chapters	Average Verses per Chapter
Matthew	1,068	28	38.14
Mark	678	16	42.38
Luke	1,150	24	47.92
John	878	21	41.81
Genesis	1,531	50	30.62
Exodus	1,213	40	30.33
Leviticus	859	27	31.81
Numbers	1,288	36	35.78
Deuteronomy	958	34	28.18

Nevertheless, there are some places where their division of the text is somewhat artificial and confusing and does not reflect a logical transition from one discourse or story to another. This is true of both chapter divisions and verse divisions.

For example, the transition between chapters 7 and 8 in John is not properly drawn, as it is more logical that 7.53 and 8.1 should belong to one discourse unit. This is why CEV merges 7.53 with the beginning of chapter 8. The situation here is further complicated by the fact that according to some manuscripts the first section of chapter 8 was missing or found at other places in the book. Likewise, John 7.1 may be treated as the end of chapter 6, for it does not sound logical to begin a new passage, in this case a chapter, by saying "After this" (John 7.1 TEV). That is why CEV does not keep the expression "After this", considering it merely as a link that can be left out at the beginning of a chapter. There are similar instances in other places in the Gospels.

At the level of verses, divisions are also found at some unsuitable places. For instance, in Psalm 19.4-5 the last line of verse 4 could have been made the beginning of verse 5, since both this line and verses 5 and 6 talk about the sun in the heavens. CEV solves the problem by keeping this line as part of verse 4, but places it with verses 5 and 6 to form one separate block.

New evidence in manuscripts affecting the rating of textual variants has also led to complication in verse numbering. This is particularly the case for the Gospels, in which a small number of verses considered to be less acceptable variants of the text are handled in special ways (Matthew 17.21; 18.11; 21.44; 23.14; Mark 7.16; 9.44, 46; 11.26; 15.28; Luke 17.36; 23.17; 24.12, 40; John 5.3b-4). A comparison between several major common language translations shows that there are at least four possible ways to deal with these verses:

- to place both the text and the verse number in a footnote, thus creating a break in continuity in the verse numbering system of the text proper; this is the practice of GNB, TCV, GeCL, and the Spanish Common Language translation *Dios Habla Hoy* (SpCL);
- to keep both the text and the verse number in the text proper but place them between brackets and explain the reason in a footnote; this is the solution of the *Français Courant* translation (FrCL);
- to keep the verse number in the text proper without supplying the text, thus leaving a blank in the text proper, as in the *Français Fondamental* version (FF);
- to merge the verse number in question with the previous verse number, but place the questionable text only in a footnote, supplied with an explanation (CEV).

Among the four solutions the first one is the most common. However it has the disadvantage of leaving a verse number and its text missing in the text proper and this may cause trouble for the reader when referring to a concordance or commentary. FrCL offers a better solution but it may still mislead the reader into thinking that what is between brackets is just a note or an aside and is not necessarily a less acceptable variant of the text. The CEV solution seems the best in that it maintains continuity in verse numbering while at the same time highlighting the questionable text by placing it in a footnote. But then again, it may not be easy for

future concordances and other reference books to refer to words and expressions occurring in this kind of text.

2. *It is sometimes necessary to rearrange the text in order to produce a natural and meaningful translation*

To achieve this as well as keeping the verse numbering unchanged, verse merging seems to be acceptable and the only possible solution. A common language translator is concerned not only with the accuracy and faithfulness of his translation, but also with its naturalness and smoothness in the language. Some languages have rigid word order and sentence structure; consequently, they often require a restructuring of the text or a rearrangement of words in order to sound natural. This is particularly true of languages like German and Chinese which follow stricter patterns of word order.

Here it is interesting to take Chinese as a case in point, as it is not an inflectional language; it is often the exact position of a word, a phrase or a clause that determines grammatical function and meaning as well as the naturalness of the text, in other words, an acceptable style. For instance, a comparison between GNB and TCV shows that while TCV has followed GNB as a model, the Chinese translation has to resort more often to verse merging than does the English. The following are some examples:

Psalm 132.3-5

GNB ³ I will not go home or go to bed;
⁴ I will not rest or sleep,
⁵ until I provide a place for the LORD,
a home for the Mighty God of Jacob.

TCV ³⁻⁵ Before I find a place for the LORD .
and find a home for Jacob's almighty God,
I will surely not enter my home;
I will surely not sleep,
and will surely not doze off.

Exodus 30.19-20

GNB ¹⁹ Aaron and his sons are to use the water to wash their hands and feet ²⁰ before they go into the Tent or approach the altar to offer the food offering. Then they will not be killed.

TCV ¹⁹⁻²⁰ When (Before) Aaron and his sons enter the Tent, or approach the altar to offer a sacrifice, they have to wash their hands and feet with the water in this basin. In this way they will not be killed.

Genesis 9.12-13

GNB ¹² As a sign of this everlasting covenant which I am making with you and with all living beings, ¹³ I am putting my bow in the clouds. It will be the sign of my covenant with the world.

TCV ¹²⁻¹³ I will make my rainbow appear in the clouds, to be the everlasting sign of the making of the covenant. This is the covenant

I make with you and with all the living beings; the rainbow is the sign of the covenant I make with the world.

The above examples show that verses are merged in the Chinese translation but not in the English. The reason is simply because Chinese sentence structure requires a rearrangement of the content in order to sound smooth and natural.

3. In a few cases where the text contains a lot of repetitions, such as long listing of names, rearrangement may be allowed so as to give a less heavy style

In this modern age that seeks economy and efficiency, it is understandable that common language translators may sometimes choose to do away with repetitions and prefer a more condensed structure. This is particularly the case for books containing long lists of names, such as genealogies in Genesis, lists of clean and unclean animals in Leviticus, and census records in Numbers.

It is not uncommon to find that for this kind of long list, more verses are lumped together at a time to form large text units, which are unlike merging two or three verses for the two previous reasons. For example, in many passages in the first five books of the Bible, CEV often combines three, four, or even more than ten verses together (see Genesis 10.6-20, 21-31; Numbers 1.4-15, 20-46; 4.34-49; 13.4-16; 29.17-34; 31.36-47; 33.16-36; Deuteronomy 12.5-19; 27.14-26)). In one instance, CEV, GNB, TCV, GeCL and FrCL all go as far as rolling 72 verses into one big unit (Numbers 7.12-83)!

Verse merging: a comparison between major common language translations

Six major common language translations are selected to show to what extent their translators have resorted to verse merging. The following chart contains figures indicating the frequency of verse merging observed in each book, regardless of the number of verses involved in each case. Of course, any merging has to involve at least two verses. This is not an exhaustive study; only the books listed are examined.

The chart shows that CEV and GeCL are the two versions which resort to verse merging the most. In other words, their translators have really applied the principle in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* that the basic unit of translation should be the paragraph, not the verse. It is worth noting that the German Common Language version which is almost as old as GNB (NT first published in 1967, OT in 1977), has outdone GNB in verse merging. It is often the rigid syntax of the German language that calls for a reshuffle of the text content.

The highest frequency of verse merging, however, is seen in the more recent CEV text, for which naturalness, spontaneity, readability and comprehension are among the concerns given high priority. At the other end of the scale are the French and Spanish common language translations. Their surprisingly low frequencies of verse merging may be because those languages are more flexible in positioning words, phrases

and clauses, and consequently it is easier for translators to maintain both the verse order and the naturalness of their translations.

	GNB	CEV	TCV	GeCL	FrCL	SpCL
Genesis	16	83	19	73	17	7
Exodus	14	75	12	77	8	3
Leviticus	26	77	33	78	4	1
Numbers	44	108	47	113	17	27
Deuteronomy	10	77	16	49	3	5
Psalms	5	1	12	9	5	11
Proverbs	2	0	2	9	5	0
Matthew	4	9	0	3	0	1
Mark	3	12	3	3	1	1
Luke	3	8	4	9	1	1
John	1	14	1	5	1	6
Total	128	464	149	428	62	63

Conclusion

With an increasing number of common language projects going on around the world, we will be seeing a growing tendency towards verse merging and text reshuffling, as translators are becoming less bound to the text divisions handed down to us from centuries ago. CEV and GeCL are, among others, two translations which represent progress, a breakthrough in the attitude of both translators and users.

The fact that translators have resorted to verse merging is clear enough; but it is still necessary to maintain the current chapter and verse numbering system, for it makes research and study of the Bible easier. It was for this reason that centuries ago Langton and Estienne did their work and introduced the current text divisions. And they certainly did not claim that their work was inspired by God in the same way as the message of the Bible was.

However, there are other questions which arise. Where will this trend of verse merging lead us to? How far will the practice be developed? Most interestingly, what will such practice mean for users of the Bible? As I have already mentioned, readers using a Bible translation with a lot of verse merging may have trouble when consulting concordances, lexicons, or commentaries. Eventually they may need to keep referring back to a formal translation in order to figure out which word or expression is located in which verse.

Finally, we may ask the important question: Will we be tempted to change the current system of chapter and verse divisions in order to improve it? Or will we ultimately be led to discard it and introduce a totally new and better system, thus making all the old reference books obsolete? This question, of course, is beyond the scope of this article, but the issue may stimulate our thinking and our imagination. A rethinking

of text division for the whole Bible would necessarily involve people all over the world who have an interest in the Bible, not least those who use it and uphold it as a message of love from God.

Before this day of rethinking arrives, it is desirable that common language translators and reviewers should at least be given some advice like what is in the following:

- Text rearrangement and verse merging need to be exercised with much caution.
- There are obviously good reasons for model texts such as GNB and CEV to sometimes lump verses together. But they should not be followed blindly. What sounds natural and logical in one language may not sound the same in another language.
- Until a better, officially approved new system is put in place, the current chapter and verse numbering system should be maintained as far as possible.

These were the points I shared as well with the members of the Khmer Old Testament Project team.

D.J. CLARK

PARABLE OPENINGS

Dr David J. Clark is a UBS Translation Consultant based in England

Do we understand the parables as well as we think we do? Many of the parables are among the most familiar parts of the Bible, and many people have known them since childhood. We often take it for granted that because we know the story, we also understand it. In case we should forget, the section headings in the Good News Bible (and several other versions) are always there to remind us. The purpose of this article is to question some of these assumptions; we shall look at the parables themselves, especially in the Gospel of Luke, and see what clues they give to their interpretation. In particular, we shall look at the opening words of the parables as a means of establishing the focus of the parable in the eyes of the writer.

Passages considered in this study

What exactly is a parable? In the absence of any generally agreed definition, we start by admitting all the passages in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke which may have a claim to be included. It is more important to avoid leaving out something that might be relevant than to avoid including something that might not. Nevertheless, the boundary between a parable and an extended metaphor is not easy to define, and the limits of this study must be somewhat arbitrary. The list of passages considered is given below. This is set out with parallel passages shown in parallel columns. The references follow the order of Luke's Gospel