

The Good News Bible as a Model Text for Other Translations

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Abstract

Since its publication and subsequent revisions, the Good News Bible (GNB) has remained popular among certain segments of the population, used by millions of people. It often serves as a model text for Bible translation projects in various parts of the world that adopt the functional equivalence approach, with far-reaching consequences. This article begins with a brief overview of GNB, examines some issues pertaining to using GNB as a model text, and highlights some areas where GNB could be adapted and localized to better serve the needs of the intended users.

Keywords

Good News Bible, model text, translators, adaptation, users, purpose

Brief overview of the Good News Bible

The Good News Bible (GNB) is an English version translated and published by the American Bible Society. The New Testament first appeared as *Good News for Modern Man* in 1966 and was widely distributed. Subsequent editions of the New Testament appeared in 1967, 1971, and 1976. The Protestant canon of the Bible was published in 1976, titled *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version*. GNB is also known as the Good News Translation or Today's English Version. In 1979, an edition with the deuterocanonical books appeared. GNB was revised and the second edition was published in 1992. The following discussion is based on the second edition of GNB.

GNB uses the dynamic/functional equivalence translation principle popularized by Eugene Nida. The focus is to render the meanings of the

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Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts “thought for thought” rather than “word for word.” GNB seeks to communicate the meanings of the source texts accurately, using words and forms of everyday language that are easily understood by most people. Its aim is to enable readers to better understand the contents of the ancient texts. In various parts of the world where English serves as the second or third language, readers find GNB much easier to understand compared to formal versions, which emphasize the forms as well as the content of the source text. The avoidance of jargon in GNB makes it easier to understand the text, especially for those readers who are not familiar with the contents of the Bible.

GNB has served its purpose and intended audience well. It is a good translation that has benefited multitudes of users, and readers still enjoy the benefits that this version brings. However, one needs to remember no Bible version is perfect. It is not possible for a Bible version to serve the needs and purposes of all users for all time. There is always room for discussion on issues related to style, diction, implicatures, and nuances that are invariably transformed in the process of translating from one language to another. One can debate the merits or demerits of the renderings of specific terms or verses in GNB. For instance, a literal rendering of the Masoretic Text (MT) of Gen 12.3a reads, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” Most of the formal versions in English preserve the plural “those” and the singular “the one” used in the MT. One can argue that the shift between the plural and the singular forms in this verse is theologically significant, and that God’s intention is to bless humankind, though curses may happen along the way. Blessings and curses are not on par with each other, but the former far outweigh the latter. The translators of GNB probably viewed the shift between the plural and the singular forms in Gen 12.3a as stylistic, and decided to use the plural form in both places, resulting in, “I will bless those who bless you, But I will curse those who curse you.” In so doing, GNB gives the impression that blessings and curses are on par with each other, that God is equally likely to bless or to curse, and this conveys a rather different picture of God.

Another example further illustrates the changes in nuance that occur in translation. A literal rendering of the MT of Deut 1.1a reads, “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan” (see NRSV, NJPS). The words provide a hint that the author or narrator was writing from the perspective of someone who is on “this” side of the Jordan, i.e., in the promised land. As Moses did not enter the promised land, someone else must have written these words. GNB translates Deut 1.1a as, “In this book are the words that Moses spoke to the people of Israel when they were in the wilderness east of the River Jordan.” GNB describes the same

geographical location and helps the reader by indicating a clearer sense of direction, but the hint about where the author wrote the text is lost.

It is worth investigating gains and losses that occur in translation, paying attention to fine points of exegesis or theological nuances, and scholars will have different views and positions. Such an examination could be made of every Bible version, not just GNB. The purpose of a particular version and its intended audience will influence translation decisions and the choice of terms. This article does not intend to go into such discussions.

There are people who criticize GNB for various reasons, some because it does not fit their view of what constitutes a translation or their theological/ideological stance. Others lament that it does not include terms or phraseology they are familiar with. For instance, there are users who will look up the word “blood” in a formal version, and if the same word is not used in GNB in the same place, the latter is rejected. Such criticism is often tied to one’s presuppositions, theology, or familiarity with an existing version.

Any assessment of a Bible version needs to take into consideration the *skopos* or purpose of that version and its intended use. The context of the translators and the cultural milieu in which they worked are also important factors. It is not fair to impose present-day standards on earlier works. GNB is a good translation that serves its purpose well. It is not a perfect translation, but this can be said of all Bible versions. This article does not attempt to deal with specific criticisms of GNB or analyze the additions or subtractions of meanings and nuances that invariably occur in translation. Instead, the article will discuss broader practical issues related to using GNB as a model text in translating Scriptures into other languages.

Using GNB as a model text

The contexts where Bible translation projects take place vary greatly. In some places, translators have good command of the biblical languages, translation principles, and at least one international language. These translators are able to work directly from the Hebrew and Greek texts and have access to good resources. In situations like this, translators may not need to rely on GNB. However, we cannot assume this is the norm. In many parts of the world, translators have primary or lower secondary school education, with little or no formal theological training, and limited access to resources. In such situations, translators have found GNB particularly helpful, as they can understand it better than formal versions like NRSV. Even translators who are able to work from formal equivalence translations also refer to GNB on a regular basis, for clarity of meaning and choice of terms.

Many translation projects undertaken by Bible societies adopt the principle of functional equivalence, and often GNB serves as a model text.

International languages like Chinese, Spanish, German, and French have translations that are modeled on GNB. Some of these versions, in turn, serve as model texts for other languages in their respective regions, resulting in a proliferation of daughter versions of GNB, used by millions of people. Today's Chinese Version serves as an illustrative case. It is a functional equivalence translation, modeled on GNB, and is itself widely used as a model text for translations into ethnic minority languages in China and Taiwan. Similarly, Today's Malay Version (TMV) is modeled on GNB, and it, too, is often used as a model text for ethnic minority Bible translation projects in Malaysia. GNB exerts a far-reaching influence on Bible versions in various parts of the world. These versions, modeled on GNB, help to make the contents of the Bible more accessible to their users, and are particularly useful for the purpose of outreach and evangelism.

In practical terms, what does it mean to use GNB as a model text? Occasionally this has been misunderstood as seeking to follow GNB rigidly in its entirety, and this could, unfortunately, lead to a literal translation of GNB, with an end product that is not as effective as it could have been.

Using GNB as a model text means reading it to understand the meaning of the source text, but also learning how the GNB translators applied the principle of functional equivalence, and how they dealt with exegetical, textual, linguistic, and communication issues. The result should be a new text that is accurate, natural, and readily understood by its new users, as the GNB is by its own audience. Translators need to be aware that this does not mean following GNB slavishly, trying to reproduce every detail, viewing it as a harsh master.

In addition, using GNB as a model text does not mean that translators should rely solely on GNB. It is important to consult as many Bible versions as are available, including at least one good formal version. Formal versions allow translators to see the grammatical forms and features of the source texts, and GNB helps clarify the meaning of the texts. The merits of consulting at least one formal version alongside GNB have been discussed in previous issues of *The Bible Translator* (see Loewen 1974; Fehderau 1979; Sterk 1984; and Bascom 2017). These versions complement each other. Each version provides a window into the Greek and Hebrew texts, and allows translators to see how other translators dealt with issues of exegesis, translation, and communication. If translators have access to versions in several languages or multiple functional equivalence versions, that will be an added help. They will be able to observe various options presented by these versions, which may help them to find suitable solutions in their languages.

The primary purpose of comparing different Bible versions is to help translators to get at the meaning or the range of meanings of the text. If the versions convey basically the same meaning, though they may use different

words or arrange the elements differently, translators tend to feel comfortable that they have understood the text. This is the case with most parts of the Bible. However, there are instances where the versions convey, or seem to convey, different or contradictory meanings, and this can create difficulties for translators. Take the example of Deut 5.2-3, where Moses addresses the Israelites on the plains of Moab before proclaiming the Ten Commandments. GNB and NRSV rendered the verses differently:

“The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.” (NRSV)

“At Mount Sinai the LORD our God made a covenant, not only with our fathers, but with all of us who are living today.” (GNB)

Deuteronomy prefers to use the term “Horeb.” It occurs nine times in the book, while “Sinai” is used once (33.2; the occurrences of “Horeb” in section headings of English versions are not counted). The usage of the terms “Horeb” and “Sinai” may be due to different strands of traditions or redaction. Both terms refer to the same geographical area or region. To avoid potential confusion, GNB uses the more familiar term “Sinai” throughout the Pentateuch.

The other issue in these verses is the following: With whom did God make the covenant? NRSV says that the covenant was not made with the ancestors, but with the Israelites who gathered before Moses. GNB, on the other hand, states that the covenant was made with both the Israelites and their ancestors.

There is some ambiguity about the term “our ancestors,” which could refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Most scholars, however, see it as a reference to the adult generation who left Egypt and gathered at Sinai, where the covenant was made some forty years earlier. When Moses addressed the Israelites on the plains of Moab, except for a few (Moses, Joshua, and Caleb), that generation had perished in the wilderness and was no longer around (Deut 1.35; 2.14). Most of the people who gathered before Moses on the plains of Moab had not yet been born when the covenant was made at Sinai. So, whichever version one follows, there are issues that need to be addressed.

The book of Deuteronomy emphasizes the immediate responsibility of those who are alive rather than of the previous generation. This is a rhetorical technique used in the book to place responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the hearers, lest they shift the blame to their ancestors and claim innocence. This technique is retained in the rendering of NRSV. Was

the covenant made with the ancestors? Yes, but in Deut 5, the ancestors are gone and no longer in view. The focus is on the responsibility of those who are alive. Various parts of the Old Testament emphasize the corporate personality or unity of the Israelites. Although most of the Israelites who gathered on the plains of Moab had not yet been born when the covenant was established at Sinai, they were present, so to speak, in the bodies of their ancestors. Hence the covenant was made with them as well.

NRSV provides a literal rendering of the MT, which says, “not with our fathers.” Why did GNB use “not only” instead of “not”? In order to understand the verses correctly, readers need to be aware of the emphases and rhetorical techniques used in Deuteronomy. Most readers probably do not have easy access to such information. GNB therefore translated the verses in such a way so as to enable modern-day readers to grasp the meaning of the text more easily. The renderings provided by NRSV and GNB are both correct, though they adopted different translation and communication strategies.

When different Bible versions seem to say different things, translators should not automatically assume that one version is correct and the others are wrong. Instead, they should try to figure out why each version translated the text as it did. Often it is difficult for translators to handle issues like this, and consultants need to work with the team to provide advice and input.

Once they have understood the meaning of the text, translators need to find the most natural and effective way to express that meaning in their cultures. GNB shows the translators concrete applications of the principle of functional equivalence. Translation choices and adjustments made in GNB are language specific, intended for the English-speaking audience and their culture, and some of the adjustments made in GNB may not be applicable for translators working in other cultures. Translators try to find the most effective way to communicate the message to their audience. Sometimes their rendering may be similar to that found in GNB, but at other times it may be closer to that found in a formal version, or different from both. It is not uncommon that after consultants have explained the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek texts to the translators, the most natural way for them to say the same thing in their language is essentially a literal rendering of the Hebrew or Greek texts! Translators must not assume the rendering in GNB is the ideal and therefore must be followed. The focus is on the effective communication of meaning in their culture. Often translators lack confidence to make the necessary adjustments. Consultants need to work alongside the teams on a regular basis to come up with suitable solutions.

Adapting the Good News Bible

Translators aim to produce a translation that communicates the contents of the Bible effectively in their own cultures. As indicated above, this does

not mean following GNB rigidly in all its details. At times, adaptation and localization may be necessary to suit the needs of the audience. Some possible areas of adaptation are listed below. The list is by no means exhaustive.

1. Poetic texts

A substantial portion of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is classified as poetry. It is difficult to translate poetry from one language to another. GNB uses indentation in layout to set poetry apart from prose, and sometimes preserves the parallel lines found in Hebrew poetry. However, to avoid repetition, GNB sometimes combines two Hebrew poetic lines into one. The intention may have been to convey the meaning of Hebrew poetry in a succinct fashion, but it is also likely that the GNB translators took the position that modern English speakers dislike having the same thing said two different ways in close juxtaposition. However, translation teams need to be aware of their own audience's attitude to repetition—for some cultures this is a desirable stylistic feature.

GNB often presents Hebrew poetry as English poetry simply by dividing it into poetic lines. The many varieties of Hebrew parallelism can still be seen and create a poetic effect. But there was little concerted effort to come up with translations that readers would easily recognize as English poetry, within its traditional conventions such as rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration, among others. At times, poetry is rendered as prose, perhaps with the assumption that good prose is preferable to bad poetry. In any case, translation teams that use GNB as a model should be aware once again of their own audience's attitudes towards poetry and prose. It may be that adopting the same approaches as GNB is the best way forward (whether to convert to prose, or to present it in indented lines). But in some contexts it may be worth the effort to craft recognizable poetry in the target language.

In cultures where poetry is widely used and viewed positively, translators may want to explore the option of translating biblical poetry using the poetic forms in their language. This is something that translators need to think through in order to come up with a policy. It is difficult for translators who do not have sufficient grasp of the biblical languages to attempt to translate Hebrew poetry into poetic forms in their language. However, there are teams that have made serious efforts in this endeavor. It involves a great deal of work, but may well be worth the effort. One translation project in South Asia has a poet on the team, and he has successfully employed some poetic features in his language to deal with poetic texts in the Bible. One of the features of Mongolian poetry is the use of alliteration, and this feature is employed in the translation of Psalms. Translation teams need to formulate policies on how to deal with biblical poetry, whether to translate these texts using the poetic features available in their language, or follow the strategy

used in GNB. This is not a matter of right or wrong, but a matter of policy. Deciding how to deal with poetry also raises the issue of the composition of a translation team. If a team decides to translate biblical poetry using poetic features in their culture, they will need a poet, or at least someone who is good in poetry. Without such a person, the team is limited in their options of how to translate poetic texts in the Bible.

2. *Titles of individual psalms*

In the Hebrew Psalter, there are 116 psalms that begin with superscriptions (e.g., Pss 3–9). Most of the superscriptions either attribute authorship to, or indicate some relationship with, David, Asaph, or the Korahites. There are also superscriptions that say “A psalm” (Ps 98), “A psalm of thanksgiving” (Ps 100), and “A psalm; a song for the Sabbath” (Ps 92). There are fifteen psalms with the superscription “A Song of Ascents” (Pss 120–134), the meaning of which is debated and explained in various ways. GNB omitted the titles for the Songs of Ascents and placed the titles of the other psalms in footnotes. Most translation teams that use GNB as a model handle these superscriptions in the same way as GNB.

Some teams have chosen not to follow the practice in GNB and instead have preferred to deal with all the superscriptions in the same way. Several translation teams noted that their communities are accustomed to Bible versions that have the superscriptions printed as titles in the text and have decided to do the same. They placed all the 116 superscriptions at the beginning of the respective psalms and did away with footnotes. Other teams felt that superscriptions are not that important for the readers and decided to put all of them in footnotes, including the titles for the Songs of Ascents.

A related issue is the verse numbering of the psalms that have superscriptions. In the printed Hebrew text, the superscriptions make up v. 1, or part of v. 1 (as in the case of the Songs of Ascents). On the other hand, most English versions, including GNB, do not assign any verse number to the superscriptions.

Translators who worked on TMV, modeled on GNB, decided to use the verse numbering found in the printed Hebrew text for the Psalter. Prior to the publication of TMV, Malay-speaking Christians had been using Indonesian Bibles, primarily the formal version, Terjemahan Baru Indonesia (TBI), and to a lesser extent, Today’s Indonesian Version, the Indonesian counterpart of GNB. For the Psalter, these Indonesian versions adopted the verse numbering used in the printed Hebrew text. Owing to the familiarity of Malay-speaking Christians with the Indonesian Bibles, it made sense for the translators of TMV to adopt the same verse numbering for Psalms. After the publication of TMV, a few readers who were familiar with the verse

numbering used in English Bibles alerted the Malaysian Bible Society to the “mistakes” in verse numbers of certain psalms, but on the whole, the adaptation has been well received.

3. *Transposition of contents and verses in Isa 38 and Zech 4*

GNB transposed the contents of Isa 38.21-22, placing those verses between v. 6 and v. 7. The reordering of the verses improves the flow of the story and fits the narrative sequence of the same event recorded in 2 Kgs 20 (see vv. 7-8). Similarly, the contents of Zech 4.10b-14 were placed after v. 5 and before v. 6. This improves the narrative flow of the story. Bible versions in other languages that are modeled on GNB often did the same thing in these chapters.

The editors of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), the text on which the OT translation of GNB is based, suggested the rearrangement of these two passages in its textual apparatus. The recommendations in BHS reflect the confidence of the editors and other scholars of that time. The solution adopted by GNB is in line with the suggestion made by the editors of BHS.

For Isa 38 and Zech 4, thus far no ancient manuscripts or versions have been found with the order of events as presented in GNB. This observation serves as a reminder that a good dose of caution and humility is needed in dealing with these texts. There are various possible reasons for the order of events recorded in the MT of Isa 38 and Zech 4. Some argue in favor of the integrity of these texts as they stand; others argue that the “convoluted” orders are the result of scribal carelessness, confusion, or mistakes that crept in during the process of textual transmission. How scholars handle these texts will depend on their views and approach to dealing with textual difficulties.

The immediate feedback from some users of versions that follow GNB after reading Isa 38 and Zech 4 was that the translators had wrongly ordered the verses and they asked their Bible societies to correct the mistakes. In order to avoid this issue, some Bible societies, after discussions with the consultants, decided to follow the content of these chapters as they appear in the MT, with sequential verse numbering, in subsequent reprints. As a result, readers stop complaining about these chapters.

Different communities will probably react differently to the restructuring of these chapters as presented in GNB. Some may find it useful and appreciate such attempts. On the other hand, if it creates complications for the readers, translation teams can explore the possibility of following the sequence in the MT, a practice adopted by most English Bible versions (e.g., NRSV). It may be possible in some cases to indicate the sequence of events

without reordering. For example, for Isa 38.21-22, NRSV (and others) uses a pluperfect, “Now Isaiah had said,” in order to situate Isaiah’s directive before Hezekiah’s recovery.

4. Combined verses and layout

Languages have their own word orders and sentence structures. When translating from one language to another, often there is a need to rearrange the various components of the sentences. Sometimes for the sake of clarity, natural use of language, or more logical narrative flow, the rearrangement may involve two or more verses. In such a situation, the verses are combined. For instance, the Hebrew text of Ruth 1.1 describes a famine and a family from Judah that went to live in Moab. Their names are given in v. 2. GNB mentions the famine, the names of the family members, and their move to Moab. GNB changed the relative order of the components and combined vv. 1 and 2, which makes for good reading in English. GNB used this technique of combining verses to good effect when needed.

Translators need to understand the rationale for combining verses. When translating from Hebrew or Greek into English, certain verses may need to be combined for more effective communication, but whether the same thing needs to be done in another language is a separate issue. Sometimes translators find the order of the Hebrew or Greek text suits their culture better than the rearrangement in GNB. In such instances, there is no need to combine the verses. In other places, translators feel the need to combine verses, though GNB makes perfect sense by using sequential verse numbering.

Whether there is a need to combine verses is language specific. When used judiciously, this technique can enhance the beauty and readability of the narrative. Translators also need to be aware that the technique of combining verses makes reference to a specific verse difficult.

In dealing with information that could be presented in lists or tables, GNB combines numerous verses together. This technique is used in various parts of Numbers, 1 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah (e.g., Num 1.5-16, 20-46). It is a useful way of summarizing information, with good visual effect. Unfortunately, this can be challenging for public reading, especially if readers are not familiar with this type of layout. For some communities, their translation modeled on GNB is the only Bible version available. It serves a variety of purposes, including public reading. It could be a challenge for a person reading from the pulpit to convey this tabulated information to the audience, especially if most of them are illiterate. Presenting the information in tables also makes it impossible to refer to any specific verse located within the range of the combined verses. Some communities feel that presenting the information in tables is not helpful for them. As a result,

some translation teams have decided to present the information verse by verse rather than in tabulated format. Translation teams need to examine their contexts and use features that best suit their needs. Translation consultants may also need to alert teams about these issues.

5. Inconsistencies in the usage of terms

The expression “from Dan to Beersheba” occurs seven times in the Bible (Judg 20.1; 1 Sam 3.20; 2 Sam 3.10; 17.11; 24.2, 15; 1 Kgs 4.25 [MT 5.5]) and “from Beersheba to Dan” twice (1 Chr 21.2; 2 Chr 30.5). It is a reference to the entire territory of ancient Israel. To help readers understand the meaning of this expression, most of the time GNB translates this expression as “from one end of the country to the other” (1 Sam 3.20; 2 Sam 3.10; 17.11; 24.2, 15; 1 Chr 21.2). In Judg 20.1 and 2 Chr 30.5, GNB uses the expression “from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south.” In 1 Kgs 4.25 (MT 5.5), a literal rendering of the verse reads, “Judah and Israel lived in safety . . . from Dan to Beersheba.” The translators of GNB felt that the mention of “Judah and Israel” captured the meaning and therefore omitted the expression “from Dan to Beersheba.”

The difference is minor and in no way affects the meaning of the verses. It could be a deliberate decision in GNB to mention Dan and Beersheba in its first occurrence in the Bible, namely in Judg 20.1, but thereafter skip mentioning these cities. It could also have crept in if different people were translating different books or it could simply be due to different times when these verses were translated. Some translation teams feel that the same expression fits in well in all its occurrences and decide to use the same expression throughout.

Concluding remarks

In using GNB as a model text, translators need to bear in mind that the *skopos* or purpose of their translation may be somewhat different from that of GNB. There are multiple English Bible versions readily available, and readers can choose versions that best suit their needs. When they attend church services, they may use a formal version, but when they are sharing the good news with others, they may prefer to use a functional equivalence translation. GNB has a specific purpose and audience in mind, and these influence the translation strategies adopted. In major languages like Chinese, German, French, Spanish, and Indonesian, the contexts may be somewhat similar to that of the English-speaking world in that there are multiple Bible versions available in those languages, but this should not be regarded as the norm. In fact, having multiple Bible versions in a language is a luxury that many cultures do not have. In some cultures, a translation modeled on GNB is the

only Bible version and will be for decades to come. This Bible will serve a variety of purposes—as the pulpit Bible, for personal reading, for Bible study, etc. It is important for translation consultants and translators to be aware of differences in contexts and needs, as well as differences in *skopos*, and encourage teams to adopt features that are most useful for their audience instead of following GNB in all its details. In the end, translators may come up with a kind of hybrid translation—one that, though predominantly influenced by GNB, also incorporates features that may be found in other Bible versions or that are unique to the language of the translation. As long as such adaptation fulfils the purpose and serves the needs of the intended audience, it should be encouraged. In this regard, the input from translation consultants is important, especially in guiding teams in the adaptation process. It also points to the need for the continual training of translators so that they can be better equipped to carry out the work effectively.

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Abbreviations

BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
GNB	Good News Bible, 2nd edition (1996)
MT	Masoretic Text
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society version (<i>Tanakh</i> , 1985)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
TBI	Terjemahan Baru Indonesia (1974, 1994)
TMV	Today’s Malay Version (1987)