

UBS Monograph Series, No. 12

Translating the Bible in Plain Language

The Story of the Dutch *Bijbel in Gewone Taal*

Matthijs J. de Jong

UBS Monograph Series



Miami, FL

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jong, Matthijs J. de, author

Title: Translating The Bible in plain language : the story of the Dutch
Bijbel in gewone taal / Matthijs J. de Jong.

Other titles: Hoe vertaal je de Bijbel in gewone taal? English

Description: Revised English version. | Miami, FL : United Bible Societies,
[2019] | Series: United Bible Societies monograph series ; no. 12 |

Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This book describes how the Dutch 'Bible in Plain language' (Bijbel in Gewone Taal) came to be published in 2014 by the Netherlands Bible Society. It is an in-depth account of the aims and methods needed to embark on this project - to produce a Bible in a language which can be understood by all"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019052043 | ISBN 9780826704610 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Dutch. Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap. 2014. |
Bible--Translating--Netherlands. | Bible--Language, style.

Classification: LCC BS225 .J66 2019 | DDC 220.5/3931--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052043>

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Isn't the light of the sun wonderful! Isn't life good! If you live a long time, just enjoy every day. Remember that there are still many dark days on the way. And that everything that is yet to come, passes quickly.

Eccl 11:7-8, BGT-E

Preface

Plain language has a special power. It expresses things strikingly and sharply, hitting the nail on the head. That is the power of simplicity. Once it appears in written form, the words seem so obvious, as if they had been there all the time.

This power of plain language kept on surprising us as translators. Our task was to offer a faithful translation of the biblical source text that would be understandable for everyone. We were to use plain words, formulate sentences simply, and make the text fully coherent in translation. Such stringency makes the translation process complicated. However, we discovered very early on that plain language was not really a limitation but rather a marvelous instrument for presenting the biblical texts in a fresh way.

The *Bijbel in Gewone Taal*—the Bible in Plain Language—is the clearest translation of the Bible ever made in Dutch. And at the same time it is a text that appeals to many readers in a special way: It intensifies their experience of reading the Bible.

This book seeks to provide a clear and complete account of how we set about translating the *Bijbel in Gewone Taal* (BGT) by detailing our basic principles, translation method and choices, and the difficulties we encountered. Originally this book was published in Dutch. It appeared in 2014 when BGT was released. During the following years, when we saw how much interest BGT was arousing internationally, we decided to prepare an English version of this book.¹ That turned out to be more difficult than expected. Texts from BGT that offered a good illustration in Dutch often did not work when translated into English. We then had to look for new examples in order to present relevant illustrations in English. The English translation examples from BGT, indicated by BGT-E, such as the quotation from Ecclesiastes above, were specially created for this publication. I am particularly grateful to my translator, Helen Richardson-Hewitt, for all her help and patience.

¹ There is no English translation of BGT itself. The biblical texts cited in this book are selections from BGT that were translated into English for the purposes of this book.

PREFACE

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to the board of experts from the world of Bible translation, Ernst Wendland, Lourens de Vries, Lénart de Regt, Marijke de Lang, and Robert Bascom for their stimulating suggestions and remarks on the chapters of this book in its revised English version. Their contribution has added substance and weight to its contents. I also thank Krijn van der Jagt for his valuable suggestions. Finally, I am particularly grateful to Sarah Lind for the great editorial care with which she has treated the manuscript on its way to publication.

The resulting text is a much improved version of the Dutch edition, suitable for introducing an international public to BGT and the translation method we used. I hope that the insights of how we approached BGT will be of value to many in the field of Bible translation and stimulate readers to consider the pros and cons of a translation that takes comprehensibility as its principal aim.

The goal of the BGT translators was to give present-day readers direct access to the biblical text. To that end BGT makes use of plain words and easy sentences. But it does not stop at that. As translators we have constantly asked ourselves what the text communicates to the target reader and how we could render that in a way that helps the present-day reader feel involved in this communication. Many elements that remain implicit in the biblical text but are essential for a good understanding of the text are made explicit in BGT. Biblical expressions, concepts, and images are translated in such a way that their implied meaning is revealed to the reader. In this way BGT provides clarity and comprehensibility for all who read it. And, even more important, it draws them closer to the Bible text. In many translations the language distances the reader from the text. These translations make use of all kinds of words, expressions, and turns of phrase that most readers would never think of using themselves in their daily communication. BGT offers the Bible in language that readers perceive as their own. This lets the text speak not only to their minds but also to their hearts.

Producing this translation was a huge task. We worked on it for seven years (2007–2013) with a group of twelve translators. We had to develop a suitable translation strategy for every biblical genre, and find the right tone for every biblical book. We approached every stage as a team and in the process we learned much from each other. Cooperation within the translation teams was always very close, with an exegete always paired with a Dutch-language specialist. The group as a whole devoted much time to discussing each other's work and formulating a joint approach. BGT has thus been shaped into a tightly woven unit.

I remember these years working on BGT as a wonderful and indeed blessed period. I am grateful for all I have learned from my colleagues and for the shared commitment and devotion to this project. I feel privileged for having been given the opportunity to tell our story.

PREFACE

Translation work in general requires a combination of different skills. For the work on BGT a further skill was needed: exegetical audacity. In order to achieve our goal, we had to make many seminal and far-reaching translation choices. We always based our choices on exegetical and linguistic research. We have made use of a great number of Bible commentaries, academic studies, and handbooks. Furthermore, in recognition of the interconfessional standard of the Netherlands Bible Society, we did not restrict ourselves to one particular theological position, but were driven by a deep respect for the text and its relevance to the reader of today.

Years ago, the Netherlands Bible Society decided to produce BGT because of the conviction that *everyone* should be able to read and understand the Bible in the language of their hearts. Today we see with great thankfulness that BGT has indeed touched the hearts of many readers and continues to do so.

We have already explained to the Dutch public how and why we made this translation. Now is the time to do the same for an interested audience worldwide. This book tells the story of our translation project. May it inspire others!