<Report>

A New Dutch Bible Translation in Plain Language

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The Bijbel in Gewone Taal (Bible in Plain Language) is a Dutch translation made by the Netherlands Bible Society, published in October 2014. It is a new translation from the biblical source texts, designed to make the Bible accessible to as wide a readership as possible. This article sets out the basic principles of this translation.[1]

1. Introduction

1.1. First impression

Any Dutch reader who opens the Bijbel in Gewone Taal (BGT) will be struck immediately by its use of well-known words and short sentences. When he or she starts reading, the easiness of reading and the directness of the language will be noticed.

The BGT is a faithful translation in which clarity and comprehensibility always come first. The aim of this new Dutch translation is to give the present-day reader a more direct access to the biblical text. In order to achieve clarity, elements that remain implicit in the biblical text, often have to be made explicit in the translation. At the same time, the text must retain its power of expression. It must have the potential to touch and inspire the reader. This requires translators to make clear decisions, making explicit the main points of

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1) This article is an updated and reworked version of an English brochure, "Bijbel in Gewone Taal / Bible in Plain Language", published by the Netherlands Bible Society in 2015 and written by the present author.

the text and leaving implicit elements of minor importance, so that the text retains its sharpness and power.

The BGT aims of offer the Dutch Bible reader a reliable, comprehensible and inspiring text.

1.2. Why this project

The Netherlands Bible Society began work on the BGT in 2006. The basic team consisted of a group of 12 translators, some fluent in Hebrew or Greek and others expert in the field of Dutch language. In a little over seven years, they translated the 66 books of the Protestant canon into very accessible Dutch. The aim of this translation was to produce a faithful rendering of the source text, which was understandable for everyone.[2]

Until now, there has not been a translation like the BGT in Dutch, that is, a translation without language barriers, making the Bible clear for a very wide readership. In the Dutch context there was a significant and increasing need for this kind of translation.[3]

1.3. Target users

When the project was set up, the target users of the BGT were defined. It was important that the end result of the translation work should serve the target users as defined and our translation method would be based on this. Two groups of target users were distinguished.

1.3.1. Readers encountering difficulties with existing Dutch translations.

The first and obvious target group for the BGT consisted of readers who could not cope well − some not at all − with the existing Bible translations. These were

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2) For an overview of the project and the translation method, see Matthijs J. de Jong, *Hoe vertaal je de Bijbel in gewone taal* (Heerenveen: Jongbloed, 2014). An updated English version of this monograph will appear in 2018.
3) This increasing need was the outcome of various reader surveys carried out in 1998 and 2005. The results are described and summarised by Clazien Verheul, "Een Bijbelvertaling in eenvoudig Nederlands" (A Bible translation in easy Dutch), *Met Andere Woorden* 27:1 (2008), 3-12.

people who were motivated to read the Bible, but were confronted with too many unknown words and over-complicated sentences. A translation they could understand, could make a real difference to them. It would not only enable them to read the Bible, as they wished, but also give them the feeling that they, finally, fully participated. The availability of such a new translation would have an emancipatory effect on these reader groups. This first target group includes readers with limited language skills, readers will little reading experience, those with problems of dyslexia or deafness, those with Dutch as a second language, those with little knowledge of the Bible, and others. The rough estimate was that those, motivated to read the Bible, who could greatly benefit from the *Bible in Plain Language*, numbered some 200,000 persons.

1.3.2. Readers for whom an understandable translation would be a welcome addition.

In addition to the first group, there was a much greater and very diverse group of readers who were likely to appreciate a translation opting for comprehensibility. The reason is not so much because they could not cope with other translations, but because a translation in plain language would strongly appeal to them. This prediction was based on several trends in our society:

- In today's culture, ease of reading plays a big role. Texts must be immediately accessible and not require too much effort, otherwise readers give up the attempt. This is a culture-wide trend, which also influences how people read the Bible. It is worthwhile to try to make a Bible translation as easily comprehensible as possible in order to accommodate the preferences of a large section of today's readership.
- Familiarity with the Bible is fast disappearing from Dutch society. In this situation, a Bible translation that can be understood without much prior knowledge of the Bible is helpful for all kinds of readers, for young people, those on the margins of the Christian church, and readers newly introduced to the Bible. These groups need a translation that requires as little inside information as possible.
- One of the most striking things about plain language is its directness and power of expression. Reading the Bible in this kind of language may be

a powerful experience even for highly educated readers. Although, cognitively speaking, they do not need this translation, it may nevertheless become the translation in which the text speaks to their hearts.

Based on these considerations, the number of potential readers for this new translation could comprise up to several million.

With these two target groups defined, the NBS felt able to launch the project *Bijbel in Gewone Taal* (*The Bible in Plain Language*). The justification for making this new translation was the persistent and increasing demand for an easily accessible Bible, a demand stemming mostly from readers of Target Group 1, and from professionals working with them such as pastors and teachers. At the same time, the current cultural climate created the preconditions for making such a translation a success with a much wider audience. Therefore, the BGT from the outset was designed to become a translation *both* accessible to the readers who needed it most *and* acceptable and enjoyable for as wide a readership as possible.[4]

1.4. General principles

Three general principles have governed our work on this translation:

1. Clarity and comprehensibility. The aim of clarity and comprehensibility is the main guiding principle and keynote of this translation. The language has to be understandable for everyone, and the text has to be presented in manageable units.

2. Precision and Faithfulness. The aim of clarity and comprehensibility should be achieved within a translation process, by carefully making translational steps. The end result must be a reliable rendering of the source text. The BGT is neither a simplification of an existing translation nor a summarising, simplifying

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4) During the project, a number of rehearsal readings were carried out, where texts from the BGT were tested in religious education at secondary schools, in the prison ministry, in the ministry to the deaf, with readers of Dutch as a second language, and in several mixed study groups in churches. In these rehearsal readings, many 'weak readers' were involved. By letting them read the texts aloud, discussing the texts and asking questions about them, it was possible to assess whether the texts indeed had reached the target level anticipated.

rendering of the biblical texts. It was undertaken as a genuine and reliable translation of the biblical source texts.

3. Expressiveness. Comprehensibility should not stand in the way of expressiveness, but should serve it in the best way possible. Our goal was to produce a text that gives enjoyment and stimulates the imagination of the reader. The translation has to retain the emotional force of the biblical texts and *speak* to the reader.

The aim of clarity and comprehensibility functioned as the overall guiding principle of the translation project. What do clarity and comprehensibility mean, with regard to language and with regard to the texts? Before we began our translation work, we established a translation method based on research into comprehensibility. We defined our method by asking two questions:

1. What is comprehensible language?
2. What factors are of decisive importance for understanding a text?

The answer to these questions became the basis for our translation approach.[5]

1.4.1. Comprehensive language

Much research has been done into how words are understood.[6] Clear advice coming from recent studies is: use well-known words. Texts that have to be understood by as great a readership as possible should contain well-known words. Well-known words are those which are used often. Comprehensibility relates to word frequency. For the Dutch language, there are frequency lists and specialist dictionaries available. Plain, ordinary language is thus not something highly subjective. It is possible to establish quantifiably and objectively the basic vocabulary used and this basic vocabulary became the starting-point for

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5) Studies   in   these   two   fields   have   been   brought   together   on   the   website www.kennisbank-begrijpelijketaal.nl/en (Knowledge Base Comprehensible Text). This knowledge base contains hundreds of (mostly English) scholarly articles as well as review articles relating to language and text comprehension.

6) On the subjects of word difficulty in general, word frequency, word length, word concreteness, word familiarity, ambiguity, etc., see www.kennisbank-begrijpelijketaal.nl/en.

our lexicon.

In the end, just under 4000 different words were used in the BGT, apart from biblical proper names. By comparison, the classical and more literary translation, the New Bible Translation (NBV) of 2004, uses nearly 12,000 words. In addition to the limited vocabulary, particular attention has been paid to the sentence structure. In the BGT, sentences are in general short and always have a clear structure.[7]

1.4.2. Comprehensive texts

What factors play a role in the comprehensibility of texts? Recent research shows that the structure of a text and its cohesion play a decisive role in determining whether or not a text is understandable.[8] The following factors are to be considered:

Structure: First of all, the structure of the text should be clear. This relates to the 'skeleton' of the text, i.e. its division into sections and paragraphs, the use of blank lines and other separation markers. But it also relates to the organic construction of the text, i.e. its sentences must form a logical and coherent whole.

Headings: The use of informative headings increases the accessibility of a text.

Organisation of information: Sentences must not be overloaded with information. Information has to be balanced and neatly divided among the sentences. Furthermore, in order to serve the coherence of the text, information must be presented in a (chrono)logical, natural order.

References: All intra-textual references should be clear and unambiguous for the reader. Alternatively, the reference has to be made more explicit.

Connectives: The connections between the sentences must be clear.

These factors which have a positive influence on how well a text is understood consistently played a seminal role in the work on the BGT. Much more than in any other Dutch Bible translation, information is rearranged in

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7) See Marja Verburg and Clazien Verheul, "Gewone woorden in een bijzonder boek: het lexicon van de *Bijbel in Gewone Taal*" (Plain words in a special book: the lexicon of the *Bible in Plain Language*), *Met Andere Woorden* 33:3 (2014), 27-41.

8) For the articles and surveys, see http://www.kennisbank-begrijpelijketaal.nl/en/advanced-search.

order to give the textual unit more cohesion and a clear focus, and information which is presumed in the source text, is often made explicit. In the BGT, the text is divided into manageable units, pericopes, consisting of a few paragraphs (of an average size of five verses). A heading is placed above every periscope, briefly stating its main point.

These insights functioned as the solid rock on which we founded our translation method.9)

2. Illustrations of the translation approach

2.1. Some examples

Four examples are presented here illustrate the style of the BGT.10)

Psalm 46:1-3

ESV	BGT-E
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.	With God we are safe. He helps us when we are in trouble. We do not need to be afraid, even though the earth trembles, even though the mountains fall into the sea. Let the seas roar, let the mountains tremble, we are not afraid.

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9) On a practical level, the translators were assisted by specialists of the Dutch Foundation for Easy Reading (Stiching Makkelijk Lezen). This foundation specialises in 'Easy-reading literature', and their experts scrutinised all of the texts in progress for comprehensibility and ease of reading.

10) For the reader's convenience, in this article, I quote the BGT in an English translation. Working together with Helen Richardson-Jewett, an experienced English translator, we have taken particular care for the English translations to express both the wording, the content and the spirit of the BGT. For the Dutch original, consult the BGT, freely available on www.debijbel.nl.

Isaiah 40:1-2a

NIV	BGT-E
Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed,	God says: 'Go comfort my people, yes, go and comfort them. Go tell the people of Jerusalem that they must not give up. Tell them that they will no longer be oppressed.'

Matthew 5:3

NIV	BGT-E
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	True happiness is for people who know that they need God. For God's new world is for them.

Romans 3:23-24

ESV	BGT-E
For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,	For all people do wrong. So no one lives close to God. But God wants to save the people, simply and freely. He forgives the sins of everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. For God wants to be good to us.

These examples show that the BGT does more than just reformulating the texts into plain words and short sentences. It also offers explicit renderings, a rearrangement of information, a clear and explicit rendering of biblical concepts, etc. Needless to say, this kind of translation also raises questions. The translation choices for the BGT were always based on in-depth analysis of the source text and profound exegesis, and we considered it of great importance to illustrate and explain our translation method to the Dutch public even before this new translation appeared. During the years of our work on the BGT we published more than 40 articles with specimen of our work in progress to stimulate familiarity with this new translation and the translation method adopted.[11]

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11) Some 30 of these articles were published in the quarterly magazine *Met Andere Woorden*, published by the Netherlands Bible Society between 2007 and 2014. In the year before the BGT appeared, we published articles in many Dutch Christian magazines, periodicals and journals.

2.2. Translational steps

By way of in-depth illustration we consider 2 Corinthians 8:3-4 and the translational steps taken by the BGT.

First, I present both the Greek text and a very literal rendering, which apart from showing the difficulties in this passage, is meaningless:

ὅτι κατὰ δύναμιν, μαρτυρῶ, καὶ παρὰ δύναμιν, αὐθαίρετοι μετὰ πολλῆς παρακλήσεως δεόμενοι ἡμῶν τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους,

For according to power, I testify, and beyond power, they were willing of themselves, with much urge begging us the grace and the fellowship of the ministry to the saints.

Paul is writing in this chapter about a support campaign undertaken by Christians in the Greek world for the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had money collected to support the Christians in Jerusalem, to show solidarity with them. He wanted the Christians in Corinth to take part in it as well. To encourage them, he mentions the example of the Christians in Macedonia. The passage quoted describes the positive example of the Macedonian Christians.[12]

What steps were taken then to translate this? First of all, in the first part of the sentence the finite form of the verb remains implicit. It can be filled in on the basis of the immediate context. In verse 5, it is expressed explicitly: 'they gave' (ἔδωκαν). With this, the first part can be understood: 'For they (i.e., the Macedonian Christians) gave as much as they were able, yes, I can testify, even

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12) For this issue, we used the commentaries of Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, volume 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Erich Gräßer, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther. Kapitel 8,1-13,14*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 8:2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2005). In addition, we consulted the electronic exegetical translation notes made for the New Bible Translation (i.e., the Standard Dutch Bible Translation published in 2004 by the NBS), the Translator's Handbook, and scholarly studies in international journals, such as by Julien M. Ogereau, "The Jerusalem Collection as Κοινωνία: Paul's Global Politics of Socio-Economic Equality and Solidarity", *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012), 360-378.

more than they were able. And they did this voluntarily.'

Secondly, in the last part of this sentence, Paul uses four general terms – χάρις (grace), κοινωνία (fellowship), διακονία (ministry), ἅγιοι (saints) – each with a very specific meaning dictated by the context. The first two terms, τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν, are closely linked. Either κοινωνία further explains χάρις, i.e., 'the favour that consists of the fellowship of participation' (with καὶ being given an epexegetical meaning), or τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν forms a so-called hendiadys: 'the favour of participation'. Either way, the meaning of this sequence is the favour of participation: to be allowed to join in with others. The Macedonians Christians begged for the favour of participating. In plain language: They asked 'May we join in?'

The word διακονία is often formally rendered as 'ministry'. This term can cover a broad range of activities. In this particular context it refers to a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. A modern equivalent would be a 'campaign for supporting' the Christians in Jerusalem.

Finally, the ἅγιοι, 'the saints', are mentioned; Paul uses the plural form ἅγιοι frequently as a term for 'the Christians', and he can apply it to Christians everywhere. In this case, the campaign is not for Christians in general, but for Christians in a particular place, i.e. in Jerusalem. Although Paul does not refer to their locality explicitly in this text, he refers to the journey he is planning so that he can bring the money that has been collected to a particular place. Evidently, Paul knew that the Christians in Corinth knew for whom this support was meant. There is a shared implied knowledge between Paul and his addressees. Exegetes have access to this information, but common readers do not. Therefore, the BGT makes explicit that the 'holy ones' here are the Christians in Jerusalem. There is a difference between what Paul states ('the holy ones', i.e. the Christians) and what he communicates to his addressees ('the Christians in Jerusalem'). The BGT often chooses to render the message communicated.

After these preliminary steps were taken, the information was then presented in a logical order. For a Dutch readership the text can be understood best if it is said first what the Macedonian Christians intended to do and then to say what they actually did. This is then is the result in the BGT-E:

> They asked me: 'May we join the campaign to help the Christians in Jerusalem?' They were very eager to do that. They gave all they could

spare─I must say, more that they could spare! And they did that of their own accord.

This example shows that rearranging and restructuring a text can be done as translational steps: all meaningful elements from the source text have been re-worked into the translation. Furthermore, this example shows that in order to establish the referential meaning of this Greek sentence, one must know the context of the issue being discussed, what relation the sender had to the receiver, and what the communicative situation was. The Christians in Corinth only needed a hint, just like us in our everyday communication. But to give the modern reader access to the communication between Paul and the Corinthians, elements that remain implicit in the source text have to be made explicit in the translation.

3. Clarification by making the text more explicit

3.1. Introduction

Language utterances always contain implicit elements. A language utterance always communicates more than the meaning of the explicit words alone.[13] A translation should not deal only with the actual words written, but also with the message these words communicate. This also applies to the Bible. The ordinary modern-day reader stands outside the communicative range presumed by the biblical texts. The average twenty-first century reader does not have the background knowledge, the reference frameworks and cultural sensitivity of those for whom the text was originally written. The reader is an outsider. The BGT seeks to offer the reader a new, direct access to the text. Making information explicit which the text presupposes, contributes to this. The elucidation which the BGT offers aims to fill in the deficit for the reader.

3.2. Names and reference words

In the BGT there are many cases where geographical, topographical and

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13) See for this the magnificent work by Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances. The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

ethnographical names are made more explicit.

Source text	BGT-E
Dothan	The city of Dothan
Gilead	The region of Gilead
Zebulun	The tribe of Zebulun
Moab	The land of Moab

A second type of explanation which occurs often is the clarification of whom and what the text concerns. Here is an example:

Mark 1:35

NRS	BGT-E
In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up ···	Early in the morning, when it was still dark, Jesus got up ···.

Such explanations occur very frequently in the BGT. They give the reader some grasp of the text without altering the textual meaning.

3.3. Giving a more explicit background to dialogue

Sometimes the context of the dialogue is made explicit, as the following example shows:

Deuteronomy 4:1

NIV	BGT-E
Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.	Moses said to the Israelites: 'Listen carefully to the laws and rules of the Lord, which I will teach you.

Here the context of the dialogue, identifying who is speaking to whom, remains implicit in the source text but is now made explicit. In Deuteronomy 4 a new textual unit begins. As it begins the BGT specifies who is speaking to

whom.

3.4. Making the situation more explicit

All sorts of circumstances are implicit in Bible texts because they were at one time self-explanatory. This however can form a barrier for the present-day reader. The text is not clear or gives the reader the wrong impression. In such cases the BGT tries to elucidate. Here is an example from the story of Naaman the Syrian (2Ki 5). Naaman the Syrian was cured of his skin disease; he wanted to reward the prophet Elisha for this, but the latter refused every present.

> "If you will not," said Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord." (2Ki 5:17, NIV)

Naaman's request is remarkable. He wanted to load up two asses, and transport a few hundred kilos of earth from Israel to Syria. Why? This is a riddle for the modern reader, but to the reader of the time the answer was in the text. Naaman wanted only to make sacrifices to the God of Israel. Therefore he needs an altar on Israelite soil. That is what his words imply. Readers at the time would have understood this. The BGT makes the vital link explicit:

> Then Naaman said: 'I see that you really want nothing from me. But if you approve, I would like to take some earth from this country, as much as two asses can carry. On this earth I will build an altar in order to bring sacrifices to the Lord. I shall never again make offerings to other gods.' (2Ki 5:17, BGT-E)

Readers can now understand the text, precisely as the original readers could. The source text was not intended to confront readers with difficulties, but yet, the average modern reader experiences some sort of difficulty in most translations. In the BGT this is solved, by making explicit what remains implicit in the source text. In this way, today's reader can catch up with his

ancient counterpart.[14)]

4. Imagery

4.1. Imagery retained

Imagery is of great importance in the Bible. It determines the literary quality of the texts. Furthermore, a figurative way of speaking is characteristic of many of the biblical texts. A Bible without imagery is not possible. The BGT preserves the use of imagery, within the bounds of clarity. Imagery in plain language can be very effective:

> Wicked people hear the voice of evil deep in their hearts. (Psalm 36:2)
> Your hand holds on to me. (Psalm 139:5)
> The people that live in darkness, shall see a shining light. (Isaiah 9:1)

All kinds of basic imagery are to be found in the BGT. The difficulty is not the phenomenon of imagery in itself, but the fact that biblical texts come from another time and culture, and that often the biblical images demand knowledge of a world which is alien to us. This can make texts inaccessible to modern readers. The BGT gives priority to clarity, and employs various strategies in order to achieve this.

4.2. Explicit rendering of the image

The first strategy is to make explicit how the image is intended. The use of the verb 'to stand out' stresses the main point of the comparison.

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14) It is true that this information necessary for the understanding of the text can also be given in a footnote, as is recommended for 2Ki 5:17 by Roger Omanson and John Ellington, *A Handbook on 1-2 Kings. Volume 2*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2008), 814. For two reasons this was not an option for the BGT. First, footnotes do not work for a substantial part of the target readers of this translation. And second, even if readers have the ability of taking in the information provided in the note and combining it correctly with the corresponding text, they still miss the sensation of understanding the biblical text by reading it. This is what the BGT aims to provide.

Philippians 2:15

NIV	BGT-E
⋯, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.	Then you will be perfect children of God, pure and without fault. Then <u>you will stand out</u> among all the evil and dishonest people, like stars, which shine in the night.

4.3. Use of a more familiar image

A further strategy for clarification is to choose a new image, close to the biblical image.

Deuteronomy 10:16

NRS	NIV	BGT-E
Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.	Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.	Do not therefore be disobedient any longer, but open up your heart before God.

The BGT turns around the order within the verse, to produce a better text at the end of the pericope (10:12-16). The image of circumcising the heart is replaced by a connected, but more familiar image: opening up the heart.

The word 'to circumcise' is reasonably well known, and of course the practice of circumcision is found in the BGT. But if readers are not familiar with the practice of circumcision, the metaphorical use of the term means little to them. The shift to 'open up your heart before God' brings the metaphor to life again. In this way the text gains in expressiveness.

4.4. Explicit rendering of the meaning

The third strategy is to set out the meaning of the image.

Psalm 139:9-10, NIV
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

Very few readers will know what is meant by 'rising on the wings of the dawn'. However, this text was not intended to evoke an elusive image. On the contrary, 'the wings of the dawn' conjured up for the earliest readers the well-known image of the sun, imagined as a winged disk, an image widely known in the ancient Near East.

Many seal impressions from biblical times depict the winged sun disk, the symbol of the rising sun.[15] To the ancient reader, the 'wings of dawn' directly suggested the sunrise in the east. The 'far side of the sea' in the second line was the extreme west from the point of view of Israel. So the extreme east and the extreme west are here directly opposite each other, precisely as in the previous verse ascending to heaven and sinking to the realm of death (Sheol) are mentioned.[16]

The message that verse 9 seeks to communicate can easily be lost on the modern reader, so the BGT states clearly what the images are meant to indicate:

Psalm 139:9-10, BGT-E
I can go to the place where the sun rises.
I can go the place where the sun sets.
But there too your hand shall lead me,

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15) The seal impressions presented here are taken from Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen*, 6.Aufl. (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2010), 293, figures 258b and 258c.
16) See L. Sutton, "The Rising of Dawn – An Investigation of the Spatial and Religious Background of "Dawn" in Psalm 139:7-12", *Journal for Semitics* 20:2 (2011), 546-561.

there too your hand holds me fast.

This helps readers to follow what the text seeks to convey, and makes it easier to discover the essence of the passage. At the same time, clarity is not the only principle that counts. The most simple rendering would be: 'I can go to the far east. I can go to the far west.' Although cognitively adequate, this would have ruined the poetic expressiveness. Instead, the BGT chooses imagery of an elementary kind. The imagery of sunrise and sunset fits the biblical world-view and is at the same time commonly understandable.

Furthermore, the text still expresses an impossibility: no human can go to the place where the sun rises. In this way too, it remains a poetic utterance, expressing strikingly the thought behind this Psalm.

The translational choices in the BGT are governed by the guiding principles of clarity and comprehensibility. Yet, at the same time, the translators have tried hard to preserve the poetic quality and expressiveness of the texts. Certainly, some of the poetic and metaphorical richness is lost in translation. But one should consider that many biblical images are much more remote for the present-day reader than they were for the original audience. For many ordinary Bible readers, these images do not 'work' at all. The BGT has chosen to take this approach in order to give the reader a more direct experience of the text.

5. Traditional biblical terms

Most traditional biblical terms are not part of the basic vocabulary that forms the basis for the BGT-lexicon. Furthermore, the specific biblical meaning of these terms is often unknown to readers. In such cases, we have tried to come up with new wording as an alternative to the traditional terms.

By way of example, we will discuss the Dutch word *gerechtigheid* (English: righteousness).[17] All Dutch translations use the word *gerechtigheid*, except the BGT. In nowadays Dutch, this term is not used often outside the biblical and theological discourse.[18] *Gerechtigheid* renders the Hebrew צֶדֶק and צְדָקָה and

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17) Note however that 'gerechtigheid' in the Dutch Bible translations does not function as the exact equivalent of 'righteousness' in the English translations.
18) It's use is restricted to the concept of 'sociale gerechtigheid' ('social justice') and the

the Greek δικαιοσύνη. As we will see, the choice of plain wording not only helps the reader to understand what the texts seek to say, but perhaps also does more justice to the meaning of the biblical terms than a fixed rendering with *gerechtigheid*.

Deuteronomy 16:20

HSV-E[19)]	BGT-E
Righteousness, righteousness is what you must pursue.	It is important that justice is always handed down fairly!

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 deals with the role of judges, the theme is the honest administration of justice. The word צֶדֶק here means justice, and 'to pursue justice' means to dedicate oneself to justice. Whereas almost all English translations have 'justice', traditional Dutch translations have 'righteousness'.

Job 27:6

NRS	BGT-E
I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go	I keep on maintaining that I have done nothing wrong.

The word צְדָקָה ('righteousness') here means blameless and virtuous behaviour. The BGT expresses this in clear language, which brings the figure of Job closer to the reader.

Matthew 3:15

NRS	BGT-E
for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.	For we must do everything that God asks of us.

Jesus is speaking to John the Baptist about 'fulfilling all righteousness'

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expression 'eindelijk gerechtigheid' ('finally justice has been done').

19) Here I quote an English rendering of the Dutch HSV (=Herziene Statenvertaling, a 2010 revision of the traditional Dutch Statenvertaling of 1637), for lack of an English translation using 'righteousness' here (all English translations have: justice).

(πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην). Fulfilling has the sense of 'accomplishing', or more simply, 'doing'. Righteousness, in this expression, means right behaviour before God. In plain language: doing everything that God asks of us.[20]

Romans 1:17

NRS	BGT-E
For in it <u>the righteousness of God</u> is revealed (⋯)	<u>The salvation which God wants to give</u>, (⋯) can now been seen on earth (⋯)

The phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ 'God's righteousness' functions as a particular concept in Paul's letters.[21] Paul's use of this phrase is based on the Old Testament concept of God's צְדָקָה, which is found parallel with the 'salvation' and 'deliverance' (יְשׁוּעָה and similar terms) God is about to bring for his people, e.g. Psalm 98:2, Isaiah 51:6, 8; 56:1. In the Old Testament text too 'God's righteousness' (צְדָקָה, LXX: δικαιοσύνη) is 'revealed' (ἀποκαλύπτειν), that is: becoming manifest, made visible to the world. God is about to rescue his people and the whole world will witness it. This concept is adopted by Paul and for him indicates the salvation which God wants to give thanks to Jesus Christ. Romans 1:17 does not so much focus on justification through faith (though this is in view in the second part of the verse), but on the groundbreaking decision of God to bring salvation to the people. Romans 1:16-17 displays Paul's conviction that the era of salvation for the nations has begun and that this is manifest in the spread of the faith among the peoples.[22]

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20) E.g. Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. Teilband 1: Mt 1-7*, EKK (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 212-213, 283-284.

21) I have discussed this text more fully in my article "'Rechtvaardiging' in gewone taal" ('Justification' in plain language), *Met Andere Woorden* 33:3 (2014), 53-68.

22) For this background of Rom 1:17, see in particular Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1-8*, EKK (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014), 119-125; Robert Jewett, *Romans. A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 141-145; Denny Burk, "The Righteousness of God (*Dikaiosunē Theou*) and Verbal Genitives: A Grammatical Clarification", *JSNT* 34:4 (2012), 346-360; Douglas A. Campbell, "The Meaning of *dikaiosunê Theou* in Romans: An Intertextual Suggestion", Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Stanley, eds., *As It Is Written. Studying Paul's Use of Scripture* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 189-212; Richard B. Hays, "Psalm 143 as Testimony to the Righteousness of God", Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination. Paul as*

Romans 10:10

KJV	BGT-E
For with the heart man believeth unto <u>righteousness</u>	For if we believe with all our heart, <u>God sees us as good people</u>.

KJV using 'righteousness' is an exception among English translations, but many Dutch translations use here 'gerechtigheid'. Here δικαιοσύνη is connected with Paul's teaching on justification through faith. If you believe, God regards you as a righteous person. In plain language: he sees you as a good person.

These five passages illustrate the semantic range and the modes of application of the biblical terms צֶדֶק and צְדָקָה and δικαιοσύνη. The Dutch translations that prefer using *gerechtigheid* as a fixed rendering in all of this variety of usage, have their value. The fixed rendering shows the reader the breadth of the biblical terms behind it. However, what such a term actually means in a particular context often remains unclear. Instead, the BGT aims to illuminate the actual meaning of the term in every particular context.

6. The effect of plain language

Plain language is very direct. It has the ability of making a strong and powerful impression on the reader. This can be exemplified by an extract from one of the laments of Job.

> *Job 6:8-13*
> Let what I ask for, happen,
> let God do what I want!
> Let Him destroy me,
> let Him make an end to my life!
> That would console me.
> Then I would be happy, despite all the pain.

Interpreter of Israel's Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 50-60; Peter Leithart, "Justification as Verdict and Deliverance", *Pro Ecclesia* 16 (2007), 56-72; Roger L. Omanson, "'Righteousness of God' in Paul's Letters", *The Bible Translator* 55:3 (2004), 339-348.

> Have I not always been faithful to Him?
> I have surely always done what He asked me?
>
> I can no longer wait for death,
> I have no more patience.
> I feel weak and tired.
> Nothing can help me now,
> things will never come right for me again.

This passage consists of very plain words, and yet it has great impact on the reader. This is clearly because of the quality of the text and the emotional force of Job's complaint. But at the same time, it is the plain language with its directness, purity and expressiveness, that functions here as the instrument. The use of plain language and the elucidative rendering of imagery and stylistic devices give the reader a more direct access to the text in its full vehemence.

In our translation work, we have tried to enhance the expressiveness of the text in two main ways. Firstly, we have attempted to deploy our plain language resources in a controlled, elegant and stylish manner. Secondly, we have dared to leave certain aspects and notions unmentioned in the translation. If we had represented explicitly all aspects of the texts, all the nuances and connotations, then the translation would have been unreadable and not enjoyable. The reader would not have been able to follow the arguments in the prophetic books or the New Testament letters, and the poetic parts of the Bible would have been robbed of their power. We have therefore chosen a different approach: the BGT always offers a clear rendering, but also always seeks a focus. The central point is illuminated, essential links are exposed whilst less important aspects and notions are made implicit or rendered more generically. Only in this way can a clear and explicit translation come across as a powerful and arresting text.

7. Reception

The BGT has been received remarkably well in the Netherlands. Within two years time, it has become a popular and much-used translation in the Dutch context. Its purpose was to make the Bible accessible and comprehensible to as

wide a readership as possible, and it is generally acknowledged that this goal has been fulfilled.[23] The BGT is appreciated for its comprehensibility, but also for its expressiveness.

As soon as we started our translation work, we were impressed by the expressiveness of plain language. Its directness and purity gives it an unexpected potency. After the release of the BGT in October 2014, this experience was confirmed by many readers from different age groups, backgrounds and educational levels. Many readers – often to their own surprise! – tell us that they have been touched by this.

The key to the success of the BGT is that comprehensibility and a strong reader's experience go hand in hand. The more accessible the text, the more directly it speaks to the reader. In most Bible translations, readers have to focus on difficult words, make an effort to see through complex sentences, and guess the meaning of unknown imagery and unusual terms. If the language is clear and the text comprehensible, readers can focus on what the text communicates and explore its relevance.

Seen from a perspective of gains and losses, it is evident that comprehensibility comes with a price. Biblical terms and imagery are frequently rephrased and the translation is often more explicit than the source text. The great gain of the BGT however is that the meaning of the text becomes transparent, which notably stimulates readers to keep on reading and enhances their feeling of being involved in the text.

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23) Even those that harshly criticise the BGT for making the Bible 'too simple', agree that the BGT provides a text is completely understandable.

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<Abstract>

A New Dutch Bible Translation in Plain Language

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The *Bijbel in Gewone Taal* (Bible in Plain Language), published in October 2014 is a Dutch translation made by the Netherlands Bible Society. It is a translation from the biblical source texts, and is designed to make the Bible accessible to as wide a readership as possible.

The translation method is based on scholarly research into the comprehensibility of language and texts. Comprehensibility of *language* is facilitated by the choice of a very limited vocabulary and a strong preference for using well-known words. Furthermore, it requires the use of relatively short and clearly structured sentences. The comprehensibility of *texts* relates to factors such as the coherence and structure of the text, the organization of the information, and the connection between sentences. All these relevant factors were integrated into our translation method.

The BGT is characterized by its explicit rendering of the source text. Aspects that remain implicit in the source text that are essential for understanding the text are rendered in an explicit way in the BGT. Furthermore, biblical imagery is also made comprehensible for today's readers. Whereas well-known images are retained, others are clarified, generalized, or presented more directly using their implied meaning. Instead of the traditional biblical terms such as 'righteousness', the BGT often uses a variety of plain terms and phrases dependent on the contextual meaning of the biblical term. This sheds light on the actual meaning of such biblical terms.

The BGT as a translation aims to clarify the biblical text and make it accessible to present-day readers. The target audience explicitly includes those readers who have difficulty in reading and understanding other Dutch translations. But at the same time, the BGT is designed to be useful for *any* Bible reader who appreciates a clear text. Its general acceptance in the Dutch context shows that it indeed functions in this way.

Whereas clarity and comprehensibility always come first, great care has been

taken to retain the expressiveness of the text. Thanks to the power and directness of plain language, reading the BGT can be an overwhelming experience for readers of all backgrounds, age groups, and educational levels.