



Bijbel in Gewone Taal

The Bible in Plain
Language

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*'In church I would rather
speak five words that everyone
understands, than a thousand that
nobody understands.'*

I CORINTHIANS 14:19, BIJBEL IN GEWONE TAAL (translation)

The Bible in Plain Language/*Bijbel in Gewone Taal*, a translation made by the Netherlands Bible Society, was 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 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Bible in Plain Language / Bijbel in Gewone Taal (BGT) is characterised, first of all, by its use of well-known words and short sentences. This new Dutch translation aims to give the present-day reader a new and more direct access to the biblical texts. It is a faithful and genuine Bible translation, in which clarity and comprehensibility always come first. 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 texts, in all their clarity, must retain their power of expression. They must have the potential to touch and inspire the reader.

This requires translators to make clear decisions, making explicit the main points of the text and leaving implicit elements of minor importance, so that the text retains its sharpness and power. The value of this approach rests in achieving the right balance between faithfulness, comprehensibility and expressiveness. This requires a familiarity with the biblical texts and their exegesis. Our translation has greatly profited from the many scholarly Bible commentaries and exegetical studies produced by the international community of biblical scholarship.

Aims and ambitions

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.

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. There were four significant factors here:

- Large groups of readers could not cope or cope well with the existing Bible translations. These contain too many unknown words and sentence constructions that are too complicated. These readers benefit from a translation which is easily understandable. This includes with limited language skills, new readers, dyslectic readers, people with Dutch as a second language, etc.
- In today's culture ease of reading plays a big part. Texts must be accessible and not require

too much effort, otherwise readers give up. The reaction of some theologians is: 'Then people should try harder'. Resistance to the spirit of the age however is not always the wisest reaction.

- Familiarity with the Bible is disappearing at a fast rate from our society. The BGT is suitable for people without much prior knowledge of the Bible and also for readers on the margins of the Christian church.
- Many experienced Bible readers have been positively surprised and impressed by the BGT. A translation that brings the Bible close to the reader is of genuine benefit.

The BGT is suitable for a very wide readership. Anyone who wants to read a clear version of the Bible will find it useful. This suggests the following possibilities:

- The BGT is suitable for anyone who wants to become acquainted with biblical stories.
- This translation is also useful for anyone who wants a deeper insight into the more difficult parts of the Bible. This also applies to experienced Bible readers.
- The BGT is a very inclusive translation. Everyone can appreciate its comprehensibility, everyone can read it, understand it, and talk about it, whatever their age, education or background. This brings together the different generations and readers from differing backgrounds and levels.
- The directness and familiarity of ordinary language can speak forcefully to everyone. One of the most common reactions is that the texts directly strike a chord.

Principles followed in the BGT

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. Faithfulness. The aim of clarity and comprehensibility should be achieved within a translation process, by 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 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.

Clarity and comprehensibility

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 attempted to answer that question, by establishing what was known from research about comprehensibility with regard to both language and texts.

With regard to language, comprehensibility relates to word frequency. Well-known words are those which are used often. For the Dutch language, there are frequency lists and specialist dictionaries available. Plain, ordinary language is 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 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.

What factors play a role in the comprehensibility of texts? We have made use of what was known from research in this field. Two of the most important factors are the way in which the information is presented, and the cohesion of the text. First, comprehensibility depends on the organisation of textual information. Information is best presented in a (chrono)logical order, step by step, and structured into clear sentences. To this end, textual elements in the BGT are often rearranged and verses sometimes amalgamated.

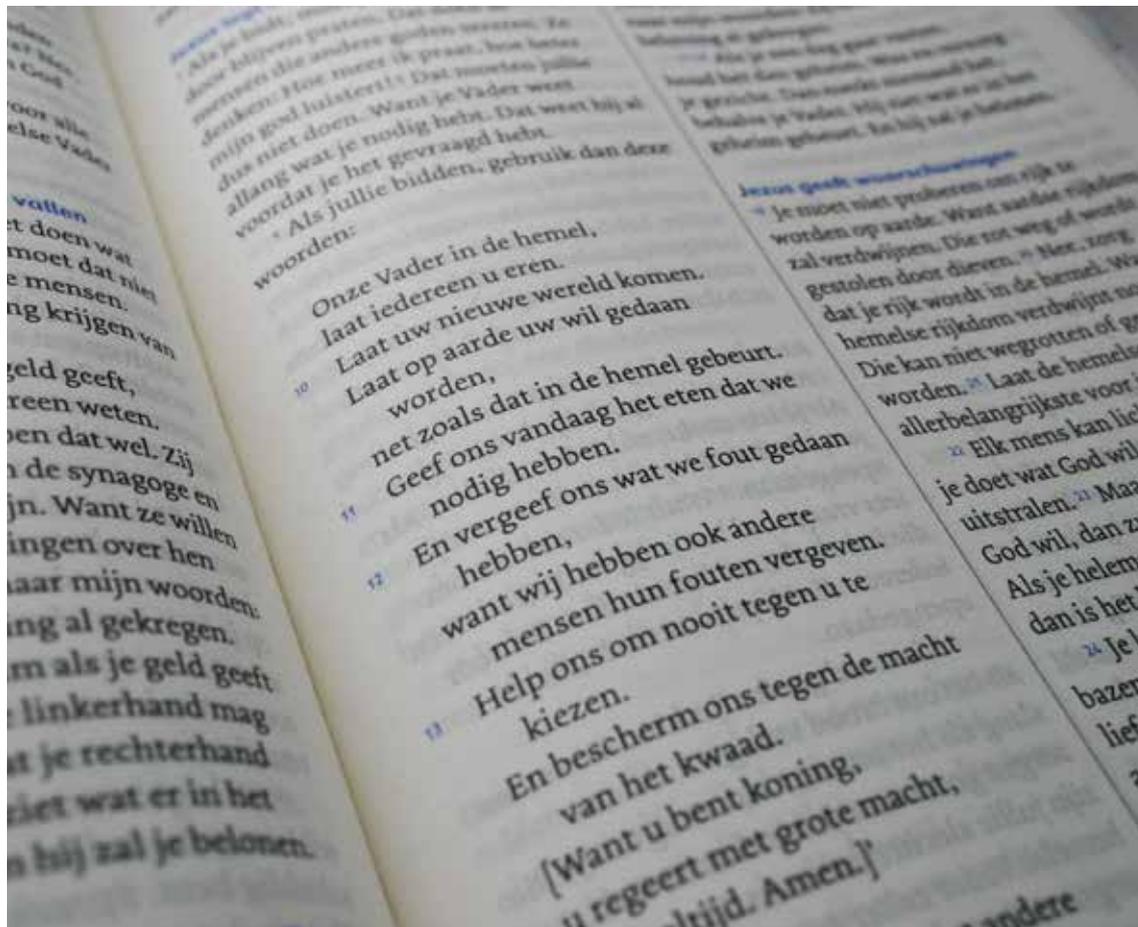
Second, comprehensibility depends on the cohesion of a text. The connection between the sentences has to be clear; conjunctions and adverbs (such as: but, therefore, for, and, if, etc.) play an important role here. Furthermore, pronouns and reference words such as he, she, the one who, there, etc., should not raise any questions. If their antecedent is not clear to the average reader, it must be made explicit.

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 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.

Finally, various factors that help the reader to get to grips with the text and contribute to its readability, have been implemented:

- 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.
- The lay-out, type face, spacing, and font all serve the convenience of the reader as much as possible.



Examples

Four examples are presented here to illustrate the style of the BGT:

Psalm 46:1-3

ESV

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.

BGT (back translation)

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.

BGT:

*Bij God zijn wij veilig.
Hij helpt ons als we in nood zijn.
We hoeven niet bang te zijn,
ook al beeft de aarde,
ook al vallen de bergen in zee.
Laat de zeeën maar bulderen,
laat de bergen maar beven,
wij zijn niet bang.*

Isaiah 40:1-2a

NIV

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,

BGT (back translation)

God says: 'Go and comfort my people, go
and comfort them. Speak to the people of
Jerusalem that they must not give up. Tell
them that they will no longer be oppressed.'

BGT:

God zegt: 'Ga mijn volk troosten, ga het troosten. Zeg tegen de inwoners van Jeruzalem dat ze de moed niet mogen opgeven. Vertel hun dat ze niet langer onderdrukt worden.'

Matthew 5:3

NIV

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

BGT (back translation)

True happiness is for people who know that
they need God. For God's new world is for
them.

BGT:

Het echte geluk is voor mensen die weten dat ze God nodig hebben. Want voor hen is Gods nieuwe wereld.

Romans 3:23-24

ESV

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,

BGT (back translation)

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.

BGT:

Want alle mensen doen verkeerde dingen. Daardoor leeft niemand dicht bij God. Maar God wil de mensen redden, zomaar, voor niets. Hij vergeeft de zonden van iedereen die gelooft in Jezus Christus. Zo goed wil God voor ons zijn.

Translational steps

By way of illustration, we take a passage from the letters of Paul showing all the steps one has to take to arrive at a comprehensible text in plain language. In 2 Corinthians 8:3-4, Paul states:

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

Paul is writing about a support campaign held by Christians in the Greek world for the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had money collected to support the Christians in Jerusalem, to show solidarity. 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.

What steps are to be taken for the translation? 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 direct context. In verse 5 it is given explicitly: 'they gave' (ἔδωκαν). Secondly, in the last part of this sentence Paul uses four general terms - χάρις (grace), κοινωνία (fellowship), διακονία (service), ἅγιοι (saints) - but in a very specific meaning dictated by the context. Here τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν means 'the favour of participation'. Begging for the favour of participating in plain and direct language is to ask 'May we join in?' The 'ministry' or 'service' to the 'saints' refers to the campaign for supporting the Christians in Jerusalem.

Finally, the information is to be presented in a logical order to aid comprehensibility. It is easier first to say what the Macedonian Christians wanted to do and then to say what they did.

This is then is the result in the BGT:

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 have to say: more than they could spare! And they did that of their own accord.

Ze vroegen aan mij: 'Mogen wij meedoen met de actie om de christenen in Jeruzalem te helpen?' Dat wilden ze heel graag. Ze gaven alles wat ze konden missen. Ik kan wel zeggen: meer dan ze konden missen! En dat deden ze uit zichzelf.

To establish the referential meaning of this Greek sentence, one must know the context of the issue being discussed. One must know 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. The BGT seeks to give the reader access to the communication between Paul and the Corinthians.

To achieve that goal, intensive use is made of commentaries and recent exegetical studies, not with the intention of adding commentary to the translation, but so that the translators can establish what resonates implicitly in the source text, in order then to decide what they must make explicit. In this way the meaning of the text can be conveyed to present-day readers.

2. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BGT

In the second part of this article, we present the main characteristics of the translational approach of the BGT:

- Clarification by making the text more explicit
- Metaphorical imagery made more transparent
- Biblical terms and concepts elucidated
- Plain language to produce an incisive and direct effect

Clarification by making the text more explicit

Language utterances always also contain implicit elements. A language utterance will therefore always communicate more than the meaning of the explicit words alone. 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.

Names and reference words

In the BGT there are many cases where geographical, topographical and ethnographical names are made more explicit.

Source text	BGT (back translation)
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

NRSV

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up ...

BGT (back translation)

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.

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

Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.

BGT (back translation)

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.

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 (2 Kings 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. (2 Kings 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 us, 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.' (2 Kings 5:17, BGT back translation)

Toen zei Naäman: 'Ik zie dat u echt niets wilt hebben. Maar als u het goedvindt, wil ik graag wat aarde meenemen uit dit land, zo veel als twee ezels kunnen dragen. Op die aarde wil ik een altaar bouwen om offers te brengen aan de Heer. Ik zal nooit meer offeren aan andere goden.

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.

Imagery

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.

The first strategy is to make explicit how the image is intended:

Philippians 2:15

<p>NIV ..., 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.</p>	<p>BGT (back translation) 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.</p>
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BGT:

Dan zullen jullie volmaakte kinderen van God zijn, zuiver en zonder fouten. Dan vallen jullie op tussen alle slechte en oneerlijke mensen, als sterren die schitteren in de nacht.

The use of the verb 'to stand out' stresses the main point of the comparison.

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

Deuteronomy 10:16

<p>NRSV Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.</p>	<p>NIV Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.</p>	<p>BGT (back translation) Do not therefore be disobedient any longer, but open up your heart before God.</p>
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BGT:

Wees daarom niet langer ongehoorzaam, maar open je hart voor 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.

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. 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.

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:

BGT (back translation)

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,
there too your hand holds me fast.

BGT:

Ik kan naar de plaats gaan waar de zon opkomt.

Ik kan naar de plaats gaan waar de zon ondergaat.

Maar ook daar zal uw hand mij leiden,

ook daar houdt uw hand mij vast.

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.

Traditional biblical terms

For traditional biblical terms one can think of Dutch words such as 'rechtvaardigheid' (righteousness), 'genade' (grace), 'verlossing' (redemption), 'verzoening' (reconciliation), etc. The

Dutch equivalents of the biblical terms are the legacy from the oldest Dutch Bible translations. Generally these words are not part of plain Dutch and do not fulfil the criteria of clarity that the BGT seeks to offer. Instead, they cast a veil over the texts. For this reason we have tried to come up with new wording.

By way of example we will discuss the use of the word 'gerechtigheid' (righteousness). All Dutch translations use the word 'gerechtigheid', except the BGT. In the Dutch language, 'gerechtigheid' is not used often outside biblical and theological discourse. It is to a great extent a biblical term. In Dutch Bible translations, 'gerechtigheid' does not function as the exact equivalent of 'righteousness' in the English translations. The examples below includes one cases where some of the Dutch translations have 'gerechtigheid', but none of the English translations have 'righteousness'.

'Gerechtigheid' renders the Hebrew קִדְּוָה and הַקְּדוּשָׁה and the Greek δικαιοσύνη. The semantic range of these biblical terms however is not covered by gerechtigheid/righteousness. The choice of new, plain wording not only helps the reader to understand what the texts seek to say, but may also do more justice to the meaning of the biblical terms than a – rather mechanical – rendering using 'gerechtigheid' does.

Deuteronomy 16:20

HSV (back translation)	BGT (back translation)
<u>Righteousness, righteousness</u> is what you must pursue	It is important that <u>justice</u> is always handed down fairly!
<i>Gerechtigheid, gerechtigheid moet u najagen</i>	<i>Het is belangrijk dat er steeds eerlijk rechtgesproken wordt!</i>

Deuteronomy 16 prescribes the way in which Israel's society has to be ordered and the official functions which are involved. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 deals with the role of judges. As the context makes clear, the theme is the honest administration of justice. The word קִדְּוָה here means justice, and 'to pursue justice' means to dedicate oneself to justice. The word 'justice' is found in almost all English translations. Various Dutch translations however use the word 'gerechtigheid'. (Statenvertaling, Vertaling NBG-1951, Naardense Bijbel, Herziene Statenvertaling = HSV, above). The BGT chooses for a clear translation that fits the context.

Job 27:6

NRSV

I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go

BGT (back translation)

I keep on maintaining that I have done nothing wrong.

Ik blijf volhouden dat ik niets verkeerd gedaan heb.

The word **יָדָתִי** ('righteousness') here means good, blameless and virtuous behaviour. The BGT expresses the thought in clear, plain language. 'I have done nothing wrong'. This is how people today may express themselves. That brings the biblical Job closer to the reader.

Matthew 3:15

NRSV

for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

BGT (back translation)

For we must do everything that God asks of us.

Want wij moeten alles doen wat God van ons vraagt.

Jesus is speaking to John the Baptist about 'fulfilling all righteousness' (**πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην**). Fulfilling has the sense of 'accomplishing', or to put it more simply, 'doing'. The phrase 'doing righteousness' occurs occasionally in Bible translations – although again Dutch translations more often have 'gerechtigheid doen' than the English translations have 'doing righteousness'. Righteousness, in this expression, means right behaviour before God. In plain language: doing everything that God asks of us.

Romans 1:17

NRSV

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed

BGT (back translation)

The salvation which God wants to give, (...)

De redding die God wil geven, (...)

Paul uses the term δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in a specific way. His use of this term is based on the Old Testament concept of God's יְשׁוּעָה meaning 'salvation' or 'deliverance'. In several Old Testament texts, God's יְשׁוּעָה, 'righteousness', stands parallel to his יְשׁוּעָה, 'salvation' (Psalm 98:2, Isaiah 51:6, 8; 56:1). It denotes God's deliverance of his people. Paul uses this expression to indicate the salvation which God wants to give, thanks to Jesus Christ.

Romans 10:10

KJV	BGT (back translation)
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>

Want als we geloven met heel ons hart, ziet God ons als goede mensen.

Whereas the KJV with the rendering 'righteousness' is an exception among English translations, various Dutch translations use here 'gerechtigheid' (NBG-vertaling 1951, Willibrordvertaling, Naardense Bijbel, Herziene Statenvertaling). Here δικαιοσύνη is connected with Paul's teaching on justification. If you believe, then God regards you as a righteous person. In plain language, he sees you as a good person.

The choices made for the BGT are always based on exegetical study. As illustrated above, a world of meaning lies behind a term such as 'righteousness'. The BGT aims to illuminate the actual meaning of the term in every particular context. The word 'gerechtigheid' and many other biblical terms are rendered in a new way, to show what the texts communicate. The BGT aims to throw light on the meaning behind the biblical terms.

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.
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.

*Laat toch gebeuren wat ik vraag,
laat God toch doen wat ik wil!
Laat hij me vernietigen,
laat hij een eind aan mijn leven maken!
Dat zou me troosten.
Dan zou ik blij zijn, ondanks alle pijn.
Ik ben hem toch altijd trouw geweest?
Ik heb toch steeds gedaan wat hij van me vroeg?*

*Ik kan niet langer wachten op de dood,
ik heb geen geduld meer.
Ik voel me zwak en moe.
Niets kan me nog helpen,
het komt nooit meer goed met mij.*

These are just plain words and at the same time they make an impact on the reader. This is, first of all, because of the quality of the text and the insistence of Job's complaints. But still, it is the plain language with its directness, purity and expressiveness, that functions as the instrument. The use here of plain language and the elucidative rendering of imagery and stylistic devices give the ordinary reader a more direct access to the text in its full vehemence.

The purpose of the BGT was to make the Bible accessible and comprehensible to as wide a readership as possible. The greatest attraction of this translation, however, may be its expressiveness. As soon as we started our translation work, we were surprised by the potential 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 hundreds of 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.

There is no secret recipe for a successful translation. But the key to the success of the BGT may be the fact that comprehensibility and experience go hand in hand. The more accessible the text, the more direct the reader experience. 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.

As translators we have tried to enhance the expressiveness of our translation in two main ways. Firstly we have attempted to deploy the plain language resources in a controlled, elegant and stylish manner. Secondly we have dared to leave certain aspects and elements 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 an explicit rendering, but in the process also always seeks a focus. The central point is illuminated, essential links are exposed whilst less important aspects are made implicit or rendered more generically. Only in this way can a clear and explicit translation maintain its sharpness, and come across as powerful and arresting.

Conclusion

The BGT offers ordinary readers a new and more direct access to the biblical texts. The Bible is from another age and culture. The average present-day reader does not have the background knowledge, reference frameworks or the cultural sensitivity of the readers for whom these texts were written. The reader is therefore often prevented from understanding the text. The present-day reader is an outsider. The BGT seeks to give outsiders to the Bible the chance to understand it from the inside, to experience what the texts seek to convey. The reader is invited to enter into the text.

The great amount of publicity afforded it, the good sales figures, the positive reactions all point to the fact that this new translation is valued and fits in with the present-day literary climate of the Netherlands. The secret of making this translation successful is striking the right balance in fulfilling the three criteria we set ourselves: reliability, comprehensibility and expressiveness.

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The English translation of this article is made by Helen Richardson-Hewitt.

The translators of the BGT have given access to their work in a number of publications. In the period 2008-2015 around thirty articles were published about the translation work in *Met Andere Woorden*, the quarterly magazine about Bible translation, published by the Netherlands Bible Society. In addition there is the book by Matthijs de Jong, *Hoe vertaal je de Bijbel in gewone taal? Uitgangspunten, keuzes, dilemma's* [Translating the Bible in plain language. Principles, choices, dilemmas] (Heerenveen 2014). An English version of this book is in preparation.

