

From Good News for Modern Man to Good News Bible: Origins and Early Issues

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with key personnel and archival material to offer insight into the translation of and publishing issues in the Good News Bible. The New Testament was published by the American Bible Society (ABS) in 1966 as *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English*. The success of the translation led to a decision to undertake the Old Testament. The ABS translation committee and board reviewed the OT drafts extensively, a process which often put them in conflict with the translators. The article will discuss key decisions taken by ABS. Some, for example the cover and artwork of the New Testament, were successful. Others, for example the marketing plan for the Old Testament, proved to be less so.

Keywords

Good News Bible, Today's English Version, *Good News for Modern Man*, Bible translation

The New Testament

It began with the Southern Baptists.¹ Sometime in 1961, The Reverend M. Wendell Belew, the Secretary of Special Ministries of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote the American

¹ Sources for this article include: (1) "Oral Memories of Robert Galveston Bratcher," a series of interviews conducted April 13, 1985 to March 14, 1986 by David Stricklin, papers held in the Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX, and made available to the author by Merry Lynn Bratcher and Priscilla Bratcher. (2) Bullard Papers in the archives of Barton College, Wilson, NC, provided by Roger Bullard. (3) Interview with Robert Bratcher conducted by the author on October 11, 2000. (4) Personal interviews with former ABS General Secretary Laton Holmgren in January through March, 2001.

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Bible Society (ABS) to ask what the best translation would be for someone who read English as a second language. The Translation Secretary for ABS, Eugene A. Nida, gathered several of the translation staff together to examine the various translations then available: Goodspeed, Phillips, the Revised Standard Version, and others. They paid special attention to a translation of some of the Gospels that had been prepared in Liberia by Annie Cressman, a missionary with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. This translation, whose version of the Gospel of John ABS had published that year, used an extremely limited English vocabulary. Nida pointed out places in the texts of each of the translations that simply would not make sense to people who spoke English as a second language. The other staff contributed examples as well. As a consequence of this consultation, in December of 1961 Nida wrote to Robert Bratcher, a member of the translation department of ABS, asking him if he would consider doing a translation of the New Testament for Southern Baptists. Bratcher responded that it would be a good thing for Southern Baptists to know their Bible, so he would try it.

Bratcher had grown up in Brazil where his parents were Southern Baptist missionaries. He spoke excellent Brazilian Portuguese, and after finishing his doctorate at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1949 he and his wife June had gone to Brazil as Southern Baptist missionaries, where Bratcher began teaching in a Baptist seminary. Because of his biblical training and fluency in Portuguese, in addition to teaching, he was a member of a committee to prepare a revision of the Almeida translation. In 1950, Nida of ABS and Wilfred Bradnock, Translation Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), had worked with this committee.

Bratcher ran afoul of the Baptists in Brazil when he wrote that the Bible seemed to allow for apostasy. The possibility of falling away into sin was contradictory to the very strongly held belief of the Baptists in Brazil in “once saved always saved.” The controversy was such that by late 1956 Bratcher realized he would not be able to return to Brazil from furlough in the United States. He wrote to Nida to say, “I know that you do a lot of traveling and you know Baptist seminaries and colleges. If you find a place you think you could recommend me to, where I would fit in, would you please remember me?”

Nida made a special trip to Louisville, Kentucky, to meet with the Brachers. “Bob,” he said, “we’ll keep on looking for a place for you to teach, but in the meanwhile, why don’t you join the Translations Department of the American Bible Society as the New Testament consultant?” As Bratcher remarked, “So that was 1957, and the meanwhile lasted until 1995.”

It was, in Bratcher's words, "a very happy meanwhile"—and a "very happy meanwhile" for the Bible Societies, too, as ABS turned to him with the request from Rev. Belew. As a matter of coincidence, Belew and Bratcher had been classmates both at Georgetown College in Kentucky and at Southern Seminary.

Bratcher said he could not explain why, but as a sample for the ABS staff, he chose to translate Ephesians. Shortly after, he went to New York to meet with Nida, William Smalley, and William Wonderly, other staff members. The group faulted his draft so severely that he left the conference convinced he could not do the job. As he said, "And so with that good start, when you know you can't do it, you can do it."

Bratcher knew that the United States Information Agency reduced many novels and other materials into various simple levels of language. (USIA was an independent agency of the US Foreign Service with responsibility for cultural and information affairs. It was later absorbed into the Department of State.) He wrote asking for their vocabulary lists, and decided that their list of 3,000 words was about right for the New Testament he was preparing.

In addition to using limited vocabulary, Bratcher followed the approach to translation that Nida eventually named "dynamic equivalence." The goal was to convey the meaning accurately but in language that would be easily understood. That approach called for the closest natural equivalent, that is, the translation had to be as close as possible in meaning to the source language and it had to be expressed as naturally as possible in the translation, and in popular, not technical, language.

Bratcher's academic specialty was New Testament Greek, so he translated directly from the Greek text. He worked on the translation steadily between 1962 and 1965, even though during part of that time he was living in France studying French. An appointed review committee of five colleagues assisted him. Harold Moulton of BFBS proved to be the most helpful. This was significant because when the translation was finally published, BFBS decided not to distribute it. Howard Clark Kee, a member of the ABS Translation Subcommittee, was asked by that committee to review Bratcher's drafts. The two men had one meeting when Kee brought up some questions he had, but they were able to agree quickly on all the points. It is worth noting that this was the first time ABS had embarked on preparing a translation in English. Up to that time, all their publications were materials prepared by other individuals or organizations.

Nida traveled so extensively that he and his supervisor Laton Holmgren had few opportunities to consult in the New York offices of ABS. They met whenever their travel schedules afforded them the opportunity. In 1965, they spent a day together in London, and Nida brought up several matters

relating to the new translation. He requested that every effort be made to publish the material in 1966 to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the American Bible Society. Nida had initiated the Versión Popular in Spanish before the English because he thought that a “radical” new translation in a language other than English would meet less opposition from the ABS Board. This Spanish translation was ready in early 1966, so Nida wanted to publish the English translation later in the same year.

Nida also recommended that the first edition of the new translation be paperback and that it be sold at a very low price. The two men also discussed what the new translation would be called. They felt it should have some resonance with the familiar translations such as the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version. Nida suggested the new translation be called Today’s English Version, and that the book itself be titled *Good News for Modern Man*.²

ABS accepted these recommendations. Later, Holmgren commissioned an artist to design an appropriate cover. However, nothing the artist presented seemed to capture what Holmgren had envisioned. Then one evening, as he was preparing for bed and watching the news on TV, he had a flash of inspiration. “This is good news, it’s current news, it’s great news!” he thought. He got dressed and went to Times Square to an all-night newsstand and bought a copy of all the foreign newspapers he could find. At home he cut out the mastheads and arranged them in a pattern that became the cover for the first edition (see Figure 1).

At some point in the early 1960s, Nida had seen some illustrations covering the life of Jesus prepared by a Swiss Artist, Annie Vallotton. Impressed, he asked to meet with her to discuss preparing illustrations for a possible children’s Bible. They met for ten minutes at the Stuttgart airport, and Nida gave her the task of preparing 500 illustrations for the new English translation. As she worked, she discussed many of her drafts with Bratcher, who was in France at the time. Her distinctive style used simple lines to convey emotion and character, and were certainly one of the major reasons for the success of the new publication (see Figures 2 and 3).

The first print run was 150,000, and the 25-cent sale price did not actually cover the cost. However, ABS did not expect to sell very many. When the initial run and subsequent reprint sold out, ABS realized they had to raise the price to 50 cents or continue to suffer a loss.

² Bible Society custom has been to speak of the translation text itself as Today’s English Version (TEV), but to refer to Bible editions of the same as the Good News Bible (GNB). Since 2001, it has become common practice among all the Bible Societies to reference this translation as the Good News Translation (GNT), even though the abbreviation has caused confusion because it is identical to the commonly used abbreviation for the Greek New Testament. *The Bible Translator* continues to use “GNB.”

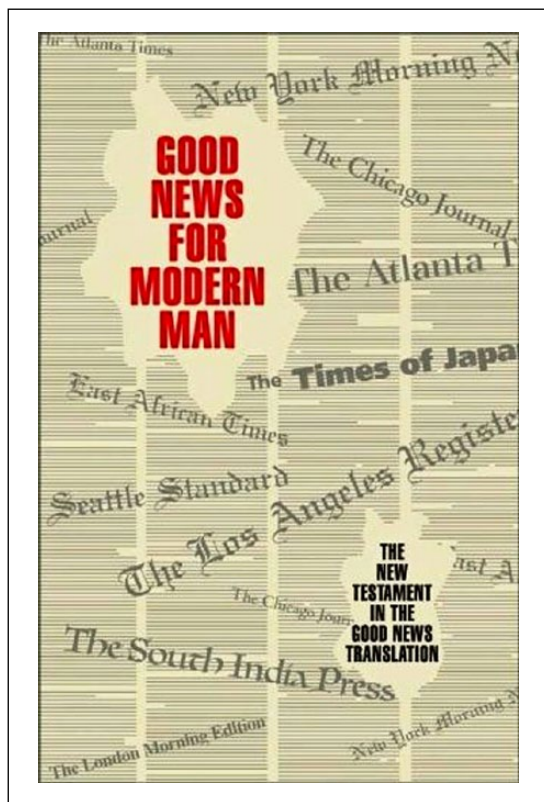


Figure 1. The 1966 cover of the paperback New Testament.

Despite the generally very favorable reaction to the translation, there were also criticisms. Some people simply were not comfortable with a translation that was in contemporary language. Others felt that by removing some of the figurative language—idioms and metaphors, for example—the translation lost much of the beauty and power of the text. ABS received more than 1,000 letters of complaint, and Bratcher answered each one of them personally.

By far the most severe criticism came from those who felt Bratcher had taken the blood out of the Bible. An example is Col 1.20, “having made peace through the blood of his cross” in KJV was rendered “God made peace through his son’s death on the cross.” Bratcher understood *haima* here not merely to refer to the vital physical liquid blood, but rather to point, metonymically, to Jesus’ violent death. He noted that too many people took “blood” literally, almost worshipping it, thereby losing the wider meaning.



Figure 2. “The comfort you give is only torment.” (Job 16.1)

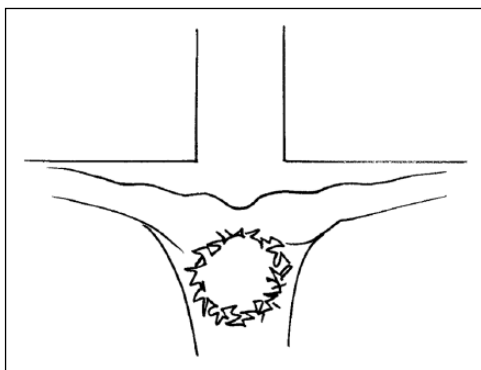


Figure 3. “Father! In your hands I place my spirit!” (Luke 23.46)

Illustrations by Swiss artist and storyteller Annie Vallotton, as taken from the Good News Translation © 1976, 1992, 2015 American Bible Society.

He was also aware that many English speakers were squeamish about blood, whereas Middle Easterners were less likely to be offended by it. So in six places, he replaced “blood” with “death.” One pastor in Concord, NC buried a copy of the TEV with the epitaph “Died for lack of blood.”

There were other issues, but the main point is that the criticism was almost entirely from more conservative Christians, a group that increasingly, ABS understood, provided a major part of their support. “Liberals,” Bratcher said, “were more tolerant of such issues.”

ABS offered the translation to BFBS for distribution in Britain. Despite the fact that Harold Moulton had been a valuable reviewer, BFBS replied that they would order five copies, presumably for their library. This may have been one of their worst mistakes ever. But at that time, BFBS did not accept the idea of dynamic equivalence translation, and this had been a point of contention between them and ABS. Laton Holmgren went to England and negotiated UK publishing rights with what is now HarperCollins. Once the translation was released, sales there skyrocketed, so much so that BFBS requested an edition using British English and spelling. (Of course, they had to negotiate distribution rights with HarperCollins.)

The Old Testament

Soon, positive public reaction and millions of sales worldwide of the New Testament prompted ABS to continue the project and translation of the Old Testament. Bratcher agreed to chair a translation committee even though he felt he was not a very good Hebrew scholar. Roger Bullard, one of the committee members, reported that the eventual success of the committee must be attributed to Bratcher's "careful and wise direction." "Bratcher," he reported later to ABS, "was able to convert a position of leadership into one of first among equals."

In addition to Bratcher, other members named were Heber Peacock and Barclay Newman, both United Bible Societies (UBS) translation consultants, Roger Bullard, Herbert G. Grether, and John "Jack" Thompson. Thompson was needed on the committee for his expertise in Semitic languages, but he also drafted Obadiah and Joel. Keith R. Crim joined the committee when the work was quite far along. Also attending many of the working sessions was Brynmor Price from BFBS, whose role was to ensure that the translation did not contain too many Americanisms that would not be understood by a British audience.

The committee members prepared drafts of different books which they shared and then met to revise. These meetings, initially never more than a week long, for the first years were held in New York at ABS. But working in New York City proved tiring to the team. From 1970 through 1974 they normally met at Blue Ridge Assembly, a YMCA camp located in the North Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains. The translators' families would come with them and enjoy some vacation time at the camp. Other meetings were held in Wisconsin, New Jersey, Virginia, and Wilson, North Carolina.

The textual base for the translation was the Masoretic Hebrew as published in Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*, but the Rahlfs *Septuaginta* and the Weber edition of the Vulgate were also referenced.

One issue that was becoming increasingly recognized at the time of this translation was gender sensitivity (see David Burke's article in this issue). The translators began to deal with this about halfway through their work, and made allowances where the text permitted. For example, "Happy is the man" of Ps 1.1 reads "Happy are those" in TEV. The impact this issue has had on this and other contemporary translations is generally well known. But the point here is that it was one of the critiques that conservative members of the ABS Translation Subcommittee made of the drafts.

ABS believed that they needed support for and approval of the translation from the more conservative evangelical churches among their constituents. The "blood" issue of the New Testament had brought this home to them. Consequently, they relied on representatives of the Assemblies of God, Nazarene Theological Seminary, and the Evangelical Free Church of America to give the Subcommittee their comments and criticisms, and indeed, their approval. This had the result of putting the translators in conflict with the ABS Translation Subcommittee. Some of the problems were straightforward disagreements about the meaning of the Hebrew. Others involved a principle that the Bible Societies had long espoused, namely that the Old Testament must not be translated in light of the New Testament. Other problems centered on theological interpretation. Let me list just a few key examples:

- **Genesis 1.1**—The translators believed the best way to render the Hebrew was, "When God began to create the universe." This of course would deny the *creatio ex nihilo* position held in many traditions. Rather than God creating the chaos, the chaos was there when God began to create.
- **Genesis 1.2**—The translators proposed "chaos and disorder were everywhere" instead of "the earth was formless and void." Did God create the chaos? They believed the Hebrew ruled that out.
- **Genesis 1.2**—*Ruah* was a really tough problem. The translators proposed "an awesome wind," believing that using "spirit of God" with either upper or lower case for "spirit" was introducing New Testament and later church theology.
- **Isaiah 11.2** and elsewhere—The same problem: the translators wanted "power of the Lord" rather than "Spirit of the Lord."
- **Genesis 3.15**—The proposed rendering was, "human beings and snakes will always be enemies. Men will try to crush your head, and you will try to bite their heels." This use of plural rather than the singular "he" ruled out the perceived reference to Christ.

The representative from the Evangelical Free Church wrote, "It would be a tragedy if we should go to all this effort and have people abandon the translation after reading the first few verses of Genesis."

One important principle that Eugene Nida had always taught was that ultimately the translators should have the final decision. Bratcher, Newman, and Peacock had all been recruited and trained by Nida and had promoted this with teams in other languages. Although the TEV translation team compromised on a large number of queries passed on to them from the ABS Translation Subcommittee, in the end the list of issues where they felt they could not concede runs to nearly four pages. I think it is fair to add that despite what Nida had taught in workshops, essentially he was correct in telling the team that publishers usually reserve the final word for themselves.

Nida presented the translators with the list of changes the ABS Translation Subcommittee required. (The examples listed above are just a few of these sticking points.) As the translators conferred among themselves, Peacock articulated their position clearly. There was no way, he wrote on June 20, 1974, "to compromise without agreeing to what we consider a perversion of the clear meaning of the text." He felt they were dealing with the integrity of the Scriptures themselves. "Is it any less of a perversion of Scripture to force Genesis to say what the New Testament or some segment of the church says? Is the American Bible Society really willing to twist the Scriptures, so that they will say what some people want to hear? Don't we any longer have a responsibility to the truth, a responsibility to 'let the Word speak'?"

He went on to state, "The demand for change is being presented to us as a necessary condescension to one segment of the church which is particularly vocal about these matters." He continued, saying that to accept those "wrong translations into our text, that part of the church which knows better will not make use of what they will brand as a 'fundamentalist' translation." "And after all," he added, "we still provide the King James Version for the traditionalists."

Bratcher was particularly distressed by the statement of one of the ABS people who told them, "It's not gonna do a bit of good if this Bible sells only ten copies." Equally disturbing for the translators, of course, was that the ABS Translation Subcommittee was asking for a violation of the principle of dynamic equivalence that Nida had developed and taught around the world. Dynamic equivalence called for translations that reflected accurately the meaning of the source text using a form that was as close as possible to the source text form, but that was also a natural expression in the receptor language. Renderings that were not exegetically sound, therefore, could not be described as meeting the dynamic equivalence requirements.

Nida's ultimatum on the required changes was not acceptable to the translation team. After a unanimous vote among themselves, on November 6, 1975, Bratcher wrote ABS, "Recognizing that these actions deprive us of any meaningful participation in determining the final form of the text, the TEV Old Testament Committee has voted to renounce all further involvement in and responsibility for the TEV Old Testament translation." They refused to have their names associated with the translation, and I suppose I've violated that by listing them. This was a difficult decision, especially so since, as Bullard reports, they would all "probably agree that working on the TEV was the high point of their careers." The work was hard, but they enjoyed it. Bullard wrote, "We have a satisfying feeling of having done our work, if not well, at least as well as we with our abilities and limitations were able to do."

Nida then led the process of revising the version the translators had put forward so that it met the requirements of the conservative ABS Translation Subcommittee members. He and ABS did not do terrible damage to the text, but the translators still felt their professional and scholarly integrity had been challenged and doubted.

The Bible was published in 1976. As with the New Testament, some readers criticized the level of language. It wasn't high enough for a Bible. Further, the whole notion of a translation that focused on expressing the meaning clearly rather than retaining formal equivalence seemed to some readers to dilute the Scriptures. This was especially true of those who continued to prefer the King James Version.

Some decried the loss of much of the more colorful figurative language as well as poetic features such as parallelism in the poetry. Much of the parallelism had been compressed into one line if the translators believed the two or three lines meant the same thing. (Obviously they were working before Kugel and Alter expanded our understanding of parallelism.) Gender-inclusive language bothered people who clung to the need for a more formal or literal translation. On the other hand, some plain language, for example rendering *yada* "know" as "having sex" offended the sensibilities of a few readers. What most of these critics failed to realize was that the intended audience of the translation was people for whom English was a second language.

As for theological issues, the version that ABS eventually approved and published had removed most of the issues that bothered the conservative members of ABS. Genesis 1.1-2 reads "In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit [upper case] of God was moving over the water." The preferences of the translators

are listed in footnotes as third options! But to the credit of ABS, *almah* in Isaiah 7.14 is translated “young woman,” and present tense “who is pregnant” is in the text, not “shall conceive.” On the basis of the New Testament, many other translations have had “a virgin shall conceive” which does not reflect the Hebrew text.

In the end, the TEV Bible did not capture the evangelical market the way ABS had hoped, but this was more related to a poor marketing decision than to the translation issues. Charlie Bass, one of the ABS General Secretaries, the Chief Financial Officer, argued that the huge success of the New Testament would carry over automatically to sales of the whole Bible, and that therefore it was unnecessary to spend a lot of money on publicity, either pre-publication or later. And so very little was done. Unfortunately for the TEV, the New International Version was due to appear just two years later, and already in 1976 the International Bible Society and Zondervan were spending large sums promoting it. Most of this was aimed at the evangelical market. Essentially, among evangelicals the NIV blew the TEV/GNB out of the water.³

Study Bible

At that time, the national Bible society members of the United Bible Societies were promoting study Bibles in many major languages. However, ABS decided not to undertake such a project with the Good News Bible out of fear that many notes would be offensive to conservative evangelicals. Nida made this clear to those of us who were at the 1984 Triennial Translation Workshop⁴ in Stuttgart. This essentially killed a proposed project. BFBS, however, by now one of the publishers of the translation in the UK, saw the crucial need for a good study Bible, and initiated the project with Bratcher as one of four team members.

Conclusion

Years later, Bratcher reflected on what he saw as changes in ABS. He believed that by the late 1980s, ABS was so beholden to fundamentalists that they would not dare publish a TEV or GNB. Interestingly, when ABS did undertake another translation at that time, the Contemporary English Version (CEV), many of the same theological issues came up, and a quick comparison of that translation with what the TEV team proposed shows

³ For the publication of the deuterocanonical books (1979), see David Burke's Addendum to his article in this issue of *The Bible Translator*.

⁴ The Triennial Translation Workshop involved all UBS and national Bible Society staff who served as translation consultants or advisors.

that although the language of CEV took oral/aural issues into account much more than the Good News Bible—it sounds good—theologically it went back to traditional interpretations in the Genesis passages and elsewhere. “Virgin” is back in Isa 7.14, for example. I mention this not to criticize ABS, but rather because the TEV translation, and later the CEV, were at once flashpoints and also reflections of what was happening internally at ABS. Their story cannot be understood without this background.

As English was understood or used to some degree in many parts of the world, and as the translation had always been aimed at non-native speakers of English, the Good News Bible gained almost instant popularity worldwide. Native and non-native speakers alike, in regions such as Anglophone Africa, South Asia, Australia, the Philippines, and New Zealand, as well as many churches in the United States, embraced the new translation. In Britain, rapidly increasing sales led BFBS to request that an edition be prepared using British English and spelling. Australia followed suit.

However, the TEV had its greatest impact on translators working in hundreds of languages around the world. It provided a concrete example of what a translation that was meant to be easily understood could look like. The translation was in language that everyone could understand and exhibited sound exegesis. Translators were cautioned not to translate the TEV, but it did help them understand the biblical texts, and they could use it as a model of how to express the meaning clearly.

But still, it is hard to estimate the impact of this translation on the church. Nor can we be certain of sales numbers. I know that when I left UBS in 1998 we could count worldwide distribution of at least 225 million. Who knows what it is now?⁵

Abbreviations

ABS	American Bible Society
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
CEV	Contemporary English Version
GNB	Good News Bible (TEV, GNT)
GNT	Good News Translation
KJV	King James Version
NIV	New International Version
TEV	Today's English Version
UBS	United Bible Societies

⁵ This article is a revised form of a paper presented at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, in a session organized by the ABS Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship to celebrate the first fifty years of GNB.