

English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Revelation 21: 1-8

Textual analysis of a passage from two versions of the Bible

Text A is the *King James Bible* translation of Revelation 21:1-8. The *King James Bible (KJB)* was first translated in 1611 but was revised in 1769. This is the version in general use today.

Text B is the *Good News Bible* translation of the same text. The *Good News Bible* is a modern dynamic equivalent of the Bible first published in 1976.

The analysis seeks to demonstrate the way in which language has changed over time.

Audience

The original audience of the Revelation passage was first century Christians in the Roman Empire who were facing persecution for their refusal to comply with the cult of Emperor worship. Revelation is attributed to the writings of one of Jesus' apostles, John, who was himself exiled to a Roman penal colony.

The *KJB* audience was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition. It was used in church but increasingly families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. The lexical choices in the *KJB* were intended to suit a wide audience and most of the population would either read or hear the text.

The readers of the modern day *Good News* passage are wide ranging. Christians might be seeking reassurance about the nature of life after death and the paradise to come. The *GNB* version is deliberately more straightforward than more traditional translations, thereby widening its potential audience. As the translation of the *GNB* was

undertaken by American scholars and aimed at an American audience, there is evidence of US spelling in the word 'practice' (verb).

Purpose

This text affects audiences in several ways. Its primary purpose is to inspire and strengthen faith in its audience. It relates a vision of the New Jerusalem and provides information about God's actions toward faithful Christians as he initiates a new order which replaces the current one. Related closely to this is the writer's intention to persuade the audience to hold fast to their moral code in order to avoid the lake of fire. The passage contains the assurance that 'these words are true and faithful', and that they come from the most reputable source – John was one of Jesus' closest disciples. As the text validates itself, it also seeks to encourage believers about the truth of their faith in the face of persecution. The appearance of the New Jerusalem (v 2) is a very reassuring aspect of the text, promising that Christian hopes will be fulfilled.

The text could also be described as visionary and thus inspiring, with dramatic elements of speech from mysterious sources, spectacular extreme transformations ('there was no more sea') and the satisfying demise of the wicked.

Content / genre

This is a sacred text, specifically from the New Testament of the Bible.

The text appears as part of the last book of the Bible and can be categorised as apocalyptic literature, in which a speaker recounts details of an experience which reveals the end of this world and the beginning of the next. The details in this genre are often highly symbolic, set on a cosmic scale, and can involve angelic messengers. In this text, both God and another voice speak to the visionary (he names himself as John in the text) and

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the subject matter is the reward of the virtuous and punishment of the sinful. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/big-ideas-bible/Apocalypse,-Revelation,-the-End-Times,-the-Second-Coming>.)

This text has a first person narrator with use of the first person pronoun 'I', and the *KJB* version includes the name of the narrator as 'John'. This detail is removed in the *GNB* passage although it is retained elsewhere in the Book of Revelation (chapter 1, for example). In both versions, there is a very strong sense of personal experience which testifies to the authenticity of the text and lends an authoritative tone: 'I saw', 'I heard' and 'he said unto me'. The narrator is also the mouthpiece of the 'voice' (a messenger from heaven) and of God and, in these roles, passes on information, instruction, moral judgements and warnings. In *GNB*, there is a sense of the energy with which these speeches are made, conveyed by the repeated use of an exclamation mark, 'It is done!'.

Discourse

The discourse structure is a linear account, but has a cumulative effect, as the words of the 'voice' are augmented by the words of God which follow. The theme of renewal is the main focus, but there is some revisiting of things which will disappear (the first heaven and earth, the sea, death, grief, old things, and finally the list of those who will experience the 'second death'). This might suggest that, in some respects, the new is defined in terms of the old.

On a smaller scale, there are numerous instances of parallelism and repetition in the text, for example, 'I will be his God, and he shall be my son', the antithetical 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end', and the repeated 'passed away' (or *GNB* 'disappeared'). The Book of Revelation is an extremely complex and highly patterned text so these

rhetorical features exist within a bigger scheme.

Graphology

The *KJB* is divided into chapters and verses with a new line for each verse. There is a typical use of initial capitals for 'God', and speech is identified by using a capital in the middle of the sentence. In the *Good News Bible (GNB)* the text is set out in paragraphs, more like a modern text, although the verse numbers are still marked, and speech is shown by inverted commas.

Grammar

The text in both versions is quite formal, using some long sentences and some challenging constructions. In particular, the final sentence in the *KJB* passage has a compound subject (the long list of sinners) followed by the verb phrase 'shall have their part in...'. The *GNB* breaks this sentence up, listing the sinners then using a dash and starting a new clause 'the place for them is...'. This is similar to the technique of apposition, and is more like speech, requiring less attention for the audience to comprehend. For other long sentences, colons and semi colons are used to divide the text into smaller parts.

The inflection 'eth' and some of the grammatical constructions in the *KJB* text are now archaic, e.g. the use of the auxiliary in 'were passed away' ('disappeared' in *GNB*) and the negative 'no... neither... nor' construction of v 4 (simplified to 'no... no... or... or...' in *GNB*). The phrase 'give... of' (verse 6) is also now archaic and is just 'give' in the *GNB*.

Lexis

Elsewhere in the *KJB*, the lexis is concrete and familiar, but here the concepts are more abstract. As a result, there is technical lexis ('tabernacle'), some quite mystical phrases ('the water of life') and an attempt to render abstractions more concrete by the use of simile: 'as a bride adorned for her husband'.

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The list of sinners uses more familiar lexis: 'murderers... whoremongers... sorcerers... liars'. We might assume that these words were immediately understandable to the audience of the *KJB*. Some elements of this list are vague, e.g. 'the abominable' and this is changed to 'perverts' in *GNB*. This perhaps recognises that the word 'abominable' has broadened in its meaning and is now more likely to be interpreted as 'bad people', whereas it seems to have had a more specific meaning indicating a sexual context. The pejorative 'perverts' might also convey a more modern anxiety about sexuality.

Some of the lexis in the *KJB* is now archaic or obsolete: 'unto' and 'athirst' are replaced in the *GNB* with 'to' and 'thirsty', while 'Behold' is changed to 'Now'.

Semantics

The word 'brimstone' is altered to 'sulfur' (an American spelling of sulphur) in *GNB*, reflecting the increased scientific knowledge of more recent years and the obsolescence of the word 'brimstone'. However, the phrase 'fire and brimstone' is still used pejoratively to denote a vengeful attitude towards sinners, and it may be that the *GNB* writers preferred to avoid the negative associations of this word.

Some of the lexis in the *GNB* might reflect concerns about the semantic value of certain words, e.g. 'sorrow' in *KJB* has perhaps weakened so that *GNB* writers preferred to use 'grief'. The word 'faithful' in *KJB* becomes 'can be trusted' in *GNB*, which may be intended to avoid any confusion with the specific religious meaning of the phrase 'the faithful'.

Where the lexis of the *KJB* version has become difficult to understand, the *GNB* makes changes, so 'tabernacle'

becomes 'home' (perhaps losing its strong Jewish connotations), the Greek terms 'Alpha and Omega' are translated to become 'the first and the last' (probably because Greek is no longer widely taught). An interesting substitution is made for the word 'freely' in *KJB*, as it becomes 'without paying for it' in *GNB*. Such a commercial choice must either reflect the concerns of the *GNB* writers or the perceived interests of the audience, although the sense of 'unreservedly' seems more appropriate in this context.

The new Jerusalem is imagined using a simile, 'as a bride adorned for her husband' which the audience would have recognised as a familiar image in Christian texts where the Church is represented as the bride of Christ. The *GNB* version retains this image, assuming prior knowledge of this reference in their modern audience, and because the iconography of a bride dressed in white is very familiar in the western tradition.

Concepts

A number of sentences begin with 'And', which was considered acceptable in the time of the *KJB* where today it is seen as a mark of informality. This is as a result of the rules that came in with the eighteenth century grammarians like Bishop Lowth. Significantly, the *GNB* version reduces the number of sentences beginning with 'And', sometimes using the temporal adverb 'Then...'.

There is a clear contrast in the levels of formality of the two texts, with the more modern text showing the effects of informalisation, as this is thought to aid clarity. For example the less formal *GNB* replaces the *KJB* 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men,' with, 'Now God's home is with people!', thereby avoiding technical lexis and shortening the possessive form with an apostrophe. The exclamation mark conveys joyful surprise more than the imperative 'Behold'.

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Context

In the *KJB* there are references to 'men' and 'him' as the general term for 'humans' in several parts of the passage. It has been common practice to use the word 'man' as a generic term including both men and women; this is still in use today, although there is often pressure to use gender neutral terminology. As the Bible is an historical and culturally important text, it is often considered appropriate that the traditional term should be used. However, there are some modern translations which have moved towards gender neutrality, among them the *GNB*. This has 'people' and the plural 'those', 'they' and 'their' (avoiding the problem of English having no gender-neutral singular pronoun). 'Son' is also rendered as 'children' in *GNB*, achieving a more inclusive text, and responding to the developments in modern society (a conceptual issue).

Finally, where much of the Bible makes references to an agricultural society, this text is quite different. For some audiences, this vision of a new world is

unsettling and alien, leading critics to attack its incoherence. The text relies most on a knowledge of existing symbolism (the water of life, a lake of fire) and a willingness to engage with the challenges of non-literal language, which was certainly part of the culture when *KJB* was produced, and which is perhaps waning in more modern times.

A strong assumption lying behind this text is that the audience will be prepared to accept the authority of the writer as a witness. This is addressed obliquely in the self-referential account of God commanding John to 'Write' and the reported assurance that 'these words are true and faithful'.

Another ideological position which the text expects its audience to share is that all Christians would want the reward of being God's 'son' or 'children', and dwelling with God. The text expects its audience to wait patiently and without losing faith for an inevitable and certain future. It assumes the ideological position that God is in charge of time and will bring it to its conclusion.

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Text A

Revelation 21: 1-8 KJB

¹And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

²And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

⁴And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

⁵And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

⁶And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

⁷He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

⁸But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

Text B

Revelation 21: 1-8 GNB

The New Heaven and the New Earth

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. ²And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. ³I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: 'Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. ⁴He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared.'

⁵Then the one who sits on the throne said, 'And now I make all things new!' He also said to me, 'Write this, because these words are true and can be trusted.' ⁶And he said, 'It is done! I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end. To anyone who is thirsty I will give the right to drink from the spring of the water of life without paying for it. ⁷Those who win the victory will receive this from me: I will be their God, and they will be my children. ⁸But cowards, traitors, perverts, murderers, the immoral, those who practice magic, those who worship idols, and all liars—the place for them is the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.