

Ain't Done Gone in the Counsel of Wrongdoers – “Psalm 1” (NABT)

Description

Not A Bible Translation

of the poem now known
as “Psalm 1”

Why **Non-Standard Englishes** enable
more accurate translation of ancient
Hebrew texts

Cheers for the man who
ain't done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers,
and in the way of errorists ain't done stayed,
and in the residence of talkers ain't done resided.

Moral direction through perfective inflection

Trent Wilde Blog

We're continuing our examination of “Psalm 1” focused on its translation and its moral teachings. The previous posts are here ? [Not A Bible Translation of “Psalm 1”](#) and here ? [Cheers For The Man Who... – “Psalm 1” \(NABT\)](#).

Here are a few main points to keep in mind from the previous posts:

1. We're looking at a new translation of "Psalm 1" that's part of the Not A Bible Translation (NABT) project (which is my translation project).
2. Not A Bible Translation operates on principles different from Bible translations. Such as
 1. Any ancient Israel-related writing may, in theory, be included, without respect to whether or not it was eventually included in a bible.
 2. All its texts are treated as individual texts rather than as part of a collection (biblical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, psalters, etc.).
 3. The translation itself departs from the already established tradition of English Bible Translation. Unlike most Bible translations, NABT isn't a revision of previous translation work but is a fresh attempt to reflect ancient texts into English. It gives no prior preference to either traditional or untraditional translation choices but merely seeks to make the most precise reflection of the original.
 4. NABT aims for a much higher rate of consistency than is found in most translations. This serves to 1) maintain distinctions between words with similar yet distinct meanings, 2) preserve connections between words that share the same root, and thus 3) make the nuances that the original authors were communicating more apparent.
 5. The English into which NABT translates is not Standardized English. Instead, any feature of any variety of English that more accurately reflects the original is embraced and utilized. Likewise, English is freely innovated whenever doing so would be understandable and more accurately reflect the original as compared to alternatives.
3. The text now known as "Psalm 1" was originally *not* called "Psalm 1" – a fact that is somewhat obvious when considering that it had to be written before it was placed in a collection with other psalms. I call it *Cheers For The Man* since that's how it begins, and texts were often known by their opening words in the Ancient Near East. Thinking of it as *Cheers For The Man* rather than primarily as "Psalm 1" will help you to view it as the individual text it is rather than a "part of the Bible" (which would be to place it in a context centuries removed from the time of its composition).

Update to the Translation

In the last post, I mentioned that I may update the translation in light of several potential factors. Well... the day for the first update has already come! I'll quote the updated portion in a moment, but first, it's important that you understand the basic reason for the change. As you'll see, the updated translation is further removed from Standardized English as compared to the earlier version, and so it may come across to some as intentionally attempting to achieve a certain style or to be relatable to a particular community. There are certain Bible paraphrases that do that – like the Message Bible or the Street Bible. These paraphrases use more colloquial language specifically to appeal to certain audiences and in doing so, they play it *very* loose with the text. For example, here in the first verse of Psalm 1, the Message Bible talks about people who are "blind-as-bats," and the Street Bible mentions FM radio – neither of which have any basis in the actual Hebrew of Psalm 1.

The inclusion of more colloquial and non-standard language in this update to NABT is not in any degree an attempt to make it more relatable or to achieve a certain style in English. Instead, it is

purely about finding English words and grammatical structures that most closely match, and thus best reflect, the original Hebrew. It just so happens that, in this case, non-standard forms do a better job and, unlike most translation projects, I haven't pre-emptively excluded them. The wording I had in the previous version already departed a little from Standardized English because of certain misconceptions that can be created by using the Standardized English forms. For example, I had "Cheers for the man who not gone" rather than "Cheers for the man who has not gone," or "...had not gone," or "...is not gone." The "had/has/have/is" verb is not present in the Hebrew, and its inclusion here adds tense-related connotations that can create serious misunderstandings of the meaning of the poem – as will be explained below. So the translation "who not gone" avoids certain misconstruals that should be avoided. Yet, the result simply leaves certain nuances unspecified that I now understand to be specified in the Hebrew, and I now know how to specify them in English. Doing so requires employing features of non-standard varieties of English that aren't part of my own dialect, which is why they weren't apparent to me. But now I've gained a fuller understanding of certain aspects of Hebrew and of English, and this has enabled this update to the wording that more fully reflects the original. That said, here is the updated Not A Bible Translation of "Psalm 1:1"

Cheers for the man who
 ain't done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers,
 and in the way of errorists ain't done stayed,
 and in the residence of talkers ain't done resided.

In this post, I'll explain why it is that "who ain't done gone" is a better translation as compared to something like "who hasn't gone" or even "who not gone." This obviously applies to "ain't done stayed" and "ain't done resided" as well. After that, we'll cover the rest of the 2nd line since it's the line of focus for this post. So, there will be plenty of grammar for the first part of this post. As you'll see, it has a lot of bearing on the meaning of the poem and impacts how we understand its moral teachings and lessons. Let's start with the word:

Done

What is this "done," and why am I using it in this translation? I'll start by explaining it, and then we'll connect it to the Hebrew. This "done" is a grammatical feature used in some dialects of English (like African American English and Southern American English) and is known by several names such as "perfective done," "completive done," or "preverbal done." It *isn't* the same as the word *done* in the sentence, "I'll be *done* with the drill in a minute." Instead, this *done* immediately precedes a verb and changes some of the nuances of the verb. In the phrase "I done walked," *done* relates to *walked* in a similar way to how the word *have* relates to *walked* in the phrase "I have walked." I say "similar," but it isn't exactly the same. Linguists debate the precise nuances of this *done*, but it's generally agreed that [its meaning and uses include both "perfective" and "perfect" connotations](#). But, as these things tend to be, it gets complicated by the fact that linguists also have different (and sometimes conflicting) theories of the notions "perfective" and "perfect." But for our purposes, there's no need to get into that. I'll explain how I'm using the terms and describe them insofar as it's relevant for the task at hand, and then, if you're interested in nerding out on the topic, you can read the works of linguists.

Perfective

Speakers of Standardized English tend to think of verbs in terms of tense, which has to do with relating events to other events in time. But not all verb systems or forms in all languages function to indicate tense. There's something else called "aspect" that isn't about relating events to each other in time, but is instead about how an event's temporal characteristics are being described. There are two main types of aspect: perfective and imperfective. Perfective aspect conceptualizes an event as a whole – a single temporal unit – without paying attention to its internal dynamics. Imperfect aspect, on the other hand, conceptualizes an event as a dynamic process.

Now, it's important to realize that just because a particular verbal form encodes aspect, it doesn't mean that the person using it can't also think of the event in terms of its temporal relations to other events (tense) – it just means that that isn't what is specified by the verb.

Standardized English doesn't have forms that specifically encode aspect, but some non-standard varieties of English do – like the perfective *done*.

Perfect

"Perfect" is a linguistic concept that has to do with the relevance of an earlier action for a later moment. Standardized English actually uses "perfect" constructions, like the *present perfect*, as in "I have walked." This describes a past action as being particularly relevant for the present. If someone asks you if you're hungry you might reply by saying, "I have eaten." This implies the answer to their question (you are not hungry) by explaining the reason for your lack of hunger. Again, it is a past action that is described as relevant for the present. There's also the *past perfect*, which portrays an action as relevant for a moment future from the action yet past from the time of speaking. For example, "he had eaten when he got on the plane" portrays both the eating and the getting on the plane as in the past, but the eating is further in the past than getting on the plane and is portrayed as relevant at the time he got on the plane.

In African American English, the "preverbal done" can be used in all the places where speakers of Standardized English would use the "preverbal have," showing that it can be used to indicate *perfect* connotations. Yet, it can also be used in contexts where preverbal *have*, *had*, and *has*, **can't** be used, but where it retains its perfective meaning.

Now, what about Hebrew?

Qatal

Qatal is one of the most commonly used verbal conjugations in Hebrew. And the verb translated "gone" in the first verse of *Cheers For The Man* is in the Qatal conjugation. So the question is, What is the meaning of Qatal, and what is the best way to translate it? In English Bible translations, you can find many places where Qatal verbs are translated as simple past tense verbs and plenty of cases where it is translated as a present perfect or past perfect. Yet, scholars of ancient Hebrew generally agree that Qatal has perfective meaning. Interestingly, there are a number of similarities between the scholarly discussion about the "preverbal done" and the separate scholarly discussion about Qatal. In both cases, some scholars think the perfect

connotation is primary while the perfective is secondary, while other scholars think the perfective connotation is primary. In both cases, some scholars see historical development where one connotation develops into the other. For our purposes, it's sufficient to know that for both of the forms, there is general agreement that both perfective and perfect connotations are relevant. This alone makes the "preverbal done" a good option for translating Qatal since it has more similarity in meaning than any other English form (at least that I'm aware of). Most specifically, perfectivity is lacking with other English forms. Perfectivity is an important aspect (if not the fundamental aspect) of Qatal, but Standardized English just doesn't have perfective forms. For that, we have to go to non-standard Englishes where we find the "preverbal done."

Beyond the meaning of these forms when considered on their own, there's also the practical consideration of which English form actually works best when translating Qatal across its various occurrences in ancient Hebrew texts. So far as I have been able to determine, all the instances in which people usually translate Qatal as a simple past tense or as a perfect can be translated using the preverbal done (and with even better reflection of its meaning due to the perfective aspect). Moreover, there are at least a couple categories of usage where neither the English simple past nor the perfect works to convey the nuances of the Hebrew. But even in these cases, the preverbal done passes the test. Here's what I'm talking about

Performative Qatal

A "performative" expression is one in which the action of the verb takes place by means of pronouncing the expression. Classic examples include vows ("I now pronounce you man and wife"), oaths ("I swear..."), and oral transfer of ownership ("I give you...") – notice: all present tense in English. In ancient Hebrew, performative speech was accomplished by Qatal. This wouldn't make sense if it were in its essence a simple past or perfect conjugation since performative speech is tied to actions accomplished at the time of speech (the present relative to the speech time). Since this use of Qatal clearly doesn't match the simple past or perfect forms in English, translators tend to translate performative uses of Qatal in the present tense (e.g. Gen. 23:11). This reveals that simple past and perfect forms are inadequate translations of Qatal. The preverbal *done*, on the other hand, actually is used for performative speech; for example, in expressions like "I done swear..." and "I done give...." This usage doesn't make sense if one takes preverbal done to be, in its essence, a past or perfect conjugation. But it does make sense due to the perfective nature of preverbal *done*. The idea is that when the person states a performative expression using a perfective form, they are indicating that they aren't merely *beginning* to perform the action; their speech accomplishes the entire act – the act is treated as a whole and is fully carried out by means of the utterance. The fact that Qatal was used for this function in Ancient Hebrew serves to confirm its perfective nature and shows that it isn't fundamentally a past tense form, even though many of its uses refer to past actions. When it comes to performative speech, preverbal *done* succeeds in reflecting the meaning of Qatal when the alternatives do not ("I gave," "I have given," and "I had given" simply are not performative utterances – "I done give" is).

Stative Verbs

Qatal frequently refers to the present when it is used for stative verbs (verbs where the action stays within the actor – like "know," "hope," "think," etc.) For example, the Hebrew word for "know"

shows up in the Qatal form many times, not with the meaning “knew” or “has/have known” or “had known,” but with the meaning “know” – the then-present reality of knowing (e.g. Gen. 31:6). This is not a past or perfect usage, but perfective – viewing the action as a whole rather than as a dynamic process (which might imply changing knowledge and thus incomplete or uncertain knowledge). Here again, the preverbal *done* works very well since it is used with stative verbs in present contexts, as in “I done know,” “I done hope,” etc., with a meaning much the same as the Qatal usage.

All considered, the preverbal *done* used in certain non-standard varieties of English matches the meaning and use of Qatal better than any other English construction I’m aware of. So, unless and until evidence and argument favor another form as a closer match, I intend to use it when translating Qatal.

A Lesson About Language Bias

There’s an important lesson here related to language that we really shouldn’t miss. Very often, people who speak mainstream varieties of English tend to have a negative evaluation of non-mainstream varieties of English – viewing them as inferior, improper, unsophisticated, inaccurate, ungrammatical, etc. In school, we’re taught that “have sent” is correct, but “done sent” is incorrect. This isn’t an evaluation based on an understanding of the principles of language but rather a social bias in favor of one variety of English over another. The way “Standard English” became standardized is that those who spoke that variety (or really, its predecessor since even standard English has changed over time) gained power in society and ended up asserting that their dialect of English is the correct and proper one, while all the others are aberrations. But look, here we have an instance where mainstream English is unable to adequately reflect the verbs of Psalm 1:1 while a verbal feature used in non-standard varieties of English reflects it very well. And this is “The Psalms” we’re talking about here – which are generally regarded as quite high-quality literature. Take-home message for speakers of mainstream English: Don’t look down on non-standard varieties of English. They are just as legit and have some good qualities that Standardized English lacks.

For those of you who speak non-standard varieties of English, I hope this helps you realize (if you haven’t already) that your variety is a perfectly legitimate way of speaking. Non-standard varieties are just as grammatically principled and have features that are very useful and valuable. If you happen to speak a variety that uses preverbal *done*, you have the privilege of more intuitively understanding the nuances of the ancient Hebrew Qatal form (at least when it is translated using the preverbal *done*!).

Ain’t

Why “ain’t”? Answer: It’s the negative particle for preverbal *done* in present contexts. This leads to the need to consider the time to which the poem refers. In doing so, we’ll learn some important lessons about what the first verse is and is not saying – which is essential for understanding its moral teachings.

The “General Present” Timing of Cheers For The Man

Let's briefly go through the poem, and I'll point out a few things that show that, overall, it's mostly talking about the general present – which means it applies at any time, at least in the current age.

Cheers for the man who
 ain't done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers,
 and in the way of errorists ain't done stayed,
 and in the residence of talkers ain't done resided.
But only in the direction of He Who Does His Thing his delight,
 and in his direction he patters by day and night.

So notice that after mentioning what the man avoids, it contrasts this with what he does (what he engages in). The verb translated “patters” is in a different conjugation known as Yiqtol, which expresses a range of modal connotations (we'll come back to this in future posts). In this case, it's being used to refer to a habitual action – something generally or normally done by the person – he patters in the direction of He Who Does His Thing. In Standardized English, it's common to use the simple present tense form to refer to habitual behavior. For example, if I say “she works out,” this is different from saying “she is working out” precisely in that “she is working out” refers to an action she is doing contemporaneously with the moment this sentence is expressed while “she works out” doesn't mean she is necessarily doing it right now – only that it is something she regularly does.

The fact that what the man avoids is directly contrasted with what he engages in by saying, “he doesn't do A, B, C; **but only** X,” shows that the avoidance and the engagement co-occur. If they didn't co-occur, you would expect the transition to either express a time shift or to not place them in direct contrast. It wouldn't make sense to say, “They haven't lived in Spain; on the contrary, they live in Germany,” since there is nothing contradictory about formerly having lived in Spain and then moving to Germany. But it does make sense to say, “They don't live in Spain; on the contrary, they live in Germany,” since one cannot do both simultaneously. In the first two verses of “Psalm 1,” there would be nothing contradictory in the person having done wrong and then later doing right. But there is something contradictory in the person simultaneously being a wrongdoer and a rightdoer. So, the timeframe is the general present, and it is relating what the person avoids and what the person does.

That this is the timeframe is further confirmed by something interesting in the next verse:

And he does his thing as a tree transplanted upon streams of waters,
 who puts forth his fruit in his time,
 and his upgrowth doesn't wither,
 and all that he works he advances.

Here again, it uses mostly Yiqtol forms to describe the regular activity of the person. But even more significant for the present point is the fact that the word here translated “transplanted” really does mean something like “transplanted” – it *isn't* the normal word for “planting.” This is important because it quite overtly implies that prior to the tree being transplanted by streams of waters, it was growing somewhere else – somewhere **not** by the streams of waters. As we'll discuss in a future episode, the streams here are being used as a metaphor for the direction of He Who Does His Thing. This means that the poem is portraying the man as having a former state in which he

wasn't nourished by those directions and thus wasn't operating as a rightdoer. This makes it plain that the intention of the author is not to convey the idea that the man had never gone in the wrong way. This shows that interpreting and translating the first verse as saying, "Cheers for the man who has not gone in the counsel of wrongdoers" (as though the man's past didn't include following the counsel of wrongdoers) would be contrary to the idea of the author. Plus, as we've already seen, the verb form used in that expression isn't conveying past tense anyway.

There's more I could say to show that the poem is primarily focused on the "general present," but this is sufficient for now. To repeat the main point: what this shows us is that the author wasn't trying to say that the man to be cheered is only one who has a spotless past. Instead, the idea is that the man "ain't done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers." In other words, the author is viewing the action of being gone in the counsel of wrongdoers as a whole and is saying that the man isn't gone in that path. Even if he went in the counsel of wrongdoers at some point in the past, he didn't do so completely and thus permanently. What it would mean to refer to a man "who done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers" is that he went in their counsel completely and stayed in it permanently. This is what the poem denies is the case for the man being cheered. It doesn't say he never went in the counsel of wrongdoers, but it is denying that he remained in that path. The same is true for staying in the way of errorists and residing in the residence of talkers. Even if he did those things in the past, he changed – he was transplanted.

Nothing in what this poem says should cause someone to look at their past experience and conclude the "cheers" can never be for them. Instead, it serves to urge those who have gone, or who are going, in the counsel of wrongdoers to make sure they go in it no longer lest they remain and they be described as one "who done gone" in the wrong way. The poem urges us to become transplanted trees who no longer take our nourishment from contaminating surroundings but who take it from the One who knows the way of rightdoers.

Gone

The verb here translated "gone" is *halakh*. Usually, people say it means "walk," but really, the verb has nothing to say about the *method* of motion. It simply refers to going from one point to another. We know this because it is used to refer to rivers going through countries (Gen. 2:14), snakes going on their bellies (Gen. 3:14), boats going on water (Gen. 7:18), and it's even used in expressions like "I'm going to die" (Gen. 25:32). And this is just a small sample. Looking across all its uses, it's clear that it is a general word meaning "to go." The expression "gone in the counsel of wrongdoers" is a metaphor for conforming one's actions to that counsel – to obey it. It's a similar metaphor to the common English expression "to *follow* advice."

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Counsel

The word translated here as "counsel" is a straightforward term that means pretty much the same thing as the basic meaning of the words "counsel" and "advice" in English. I'm translating it as "counsel" since one of the variations of the verb that shares the same root needs to be translated "consult" and there's no variation of "advise" that means "consult." As a result, in order to translate all the words that share the Hebrew root in a way that maintains root consistency, "counsel" is the

way to go.

Wrongdoers

The traditional translation of this word is “the wicked.” There are several problems with that translation. On the technical side, the Hebrew word is in some instances definite and in others indefinite, and in some places, it is singular and in others plural. Translating it as “the wicked” fails to convey these distinctions. Translating it as “wrongdoer,” on the other hand, allows for both “a wrongdoer” and “the wrongdoer” as well as definite and indefinite plural “wrongdoers.”

There is, however, a more serious problem. The word “wicked” has a lot of theological baggage tied to it, and when people read these texts with the word “wicked,” they often bring that theology to the text and read it into the text when it isn’t there. To explain this more fully, Christians often understand “the righteous” and “the wicked” in the following way: “The righteous” are those who have been “justified” or “declared righteous” by God. “The wicked” are understood to be those who are under God’s condemnation (which is often understood to be everyone who hasn’t been “justified”). The way one is able to be declared righteous is by having faith in Jesus – by accepting his death as a substitute for the punishment due to sinners. God’s declaration of the individual as “righteous” means that they are no longer under condemnation – even if they sin along the way (and it is expected that they will sin) – Jesus’ perfect life stands in place of their sinful life in the eyes of God. According to this theology,

“the righteous” = true believers
while

“the wicked” = all who aren’t true believers

“the righteous” = those declared “just” before God
while

“the wicked” = those who stand condemned before God

“the righteous” = those bound for heaven
while

“the wicked” = those bound for hell

Thus, it’s common for Christians to understand “the righteous” and “the wicked” not primarily as ethical/behavioral categories but as theological categories. Most Christians reading the term “the wicked” wouldn’t count themselves in that class, even though they would admit they occasionally (or even frequently) do things that are wrong.

The fact of the matter is that the Hebrew term doesn’t refer to the Christian theological category of “the wicked.” It is instead an ethical/behavioral term. Anyone who does wrong is a wrongdoer. Likewise, anyone who does right is a rightdoer. These are the straightforward meanings of the Hebrew terms, and it is how they are used throughout ancient Hebrew writings. This is also apparent right here in *Cheers For The Man*. The “wrongdoers” are placed in synonymous parallelism with “errorists” (those characterized by engaging in error) and “talkers” (we’ll get into that in a future episode). They don’t delight in the direction of He Who Does His Thing (who is depicted as One from whom rightdoing can be learned), and they don’t produce works that stem

from His direction. Since their ways are based on *error* they are not *right*, but instead *wrong* and are thus *wrongdoers*. These are very simple and practical moral categories.

One who “ain’t done gone in the counsel of wrongdoers” is one who doesn’t engage in the behavior that wrongdoers engage in and encourage. The person being cheered here doesn’t carry out directions to do wrong, but only the directions to do right since he delights in the direction of He Who Does His Thing, who at the end of the poem is called “a knower of the way of rightdoers.” He knows the way of rightdoers like a local knows the way to the nearest gas station. In other words, it’s not calling He Who Does His Thing “a knower of the way of rightdoers” in order to comment on what he knows vs. what he doesn’t – or to make a point about the content of his knowledge for the sake of satisfying curiosity about what goes on in the mind of God. No – it’s referring to Him as “a knower of the way of rightdoers” in order to point to him as the source of knowledge for all who want to learn to do what is right. This is why those who avoid wrongdoing delight in his direction – because it leads them to do what is right.

All this goes to show that the poem is interested in highlighting practical moral character and behavior. It urges its readers and hearers to forsake all wrongdoing and to embrace consistent rightdoing. And it points to the means by which one can do just that.