

Edgar J. Goodspeed and The “New World Translation”

An evaluation by Dr Trevor R Allin

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About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him the degree of Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resígaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain and England on the principal earliest Greek manuscripts of the Bible.

For more than fifteen years his website <https://livingwater-spain.com/> has provided information and careful textual analysis of key passages of the Greek text of the New Testament and the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament, with most articles being available in both English and Spanish.

Dr Allin has made audio recordings of the Koiné Greek text of all 260 chapters of the New Testament. These recordings are available free of charge on the internet, with links provided on his website, here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/NTGk00.htm>

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

The Jehovah’s Witness website, jw.org/en/, claims that their version of the Bible was supported by E. J. Goodspeed, an academic who was active at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

A visitor to this website wrote the following to me:

I recently came across the statement below on JW.org. It is from an article claiming non Witness, scholarly support for the NWT. Do you know if it is accurate, true? Is there a copy of the letter to see if Goodspeed is fully quoted?
Let me know if you can help.

Here is the quotation from JW.org:

"In a letter dated December 8, 1950, noted Bible translator and scholar Edgar J. Goodspeed wrote regarding the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*: 'I am interested in the mission work of your people, and its world wide scope, and much pleased with the free, frank and vigorous translation. It exhibits a vast array of sound serious learning, as I can testify.'"

The following is my reply.

Thank you for writing.

You ask absolutely the right questions:

- Is the quotation from Goodspeed accurate?
- Is there a copy of the letter to see if Goodspeed is fully quoted?

I will look at these questions below.

Edgar J Goodspeed was an American academic professionally active in the latter part of the 19th century and until the late 1930s or perhaps until just about 1940 in the 20th century.

He was so unhappy with the antiquated English of the Authorised Version English translation of 1611 that he himself had had a go at producing a translation of the New Testament in modern English.

New translations of the Bible

Many other similar attempts were being made in the same period, the first years of the 20th century. For instance, the translation produced by James Moffatt was far more widely sold, consulted and quoted than Goodspeed’s translation. Moffatt’s “New Translation of the New Testament” was first published in 1913, ten years before Goodspeed’s “American Translation”. Moffatt’s “New Translation of the Old Testament” was first published in 1924 and “The Complete Moffatt Bible” was first published in one volume in 1926.³

In 1923 Goodspeed’s translation of the New Testament, “The New Testament: an American Translation”, was published. In 1935 an apparently revised edition was published, “The Bible: An American Translation”, jointly translated with John Merlin Powis Smith. In the event, Goodspeed’s attempt did not achieve wide acceptance, compared with other translations into “modern English”.

It is not clear what the Jehovah’s Witnesses mean when they call Goodspeed a “*noted* Bible translator” (emphasis added). Are they implying that he was an especially famous Bible translator or his translation was especially important? He had translated the New Testament into American English and it had been published, although it did not have any particular impact and it could not be called a “noted” translation, nor therefore could he be called a “*noted* Bible translator”. It is clear that it is in the interests of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to augment or even to exaggerate his importance.

³ From the Frontispiece of “The Moffatt Translation of the Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments”, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964.

Goodspeed also translated the Apocrypha, and this was published in a revised edition of “The Bible: An American Translation” in 1939⁴, by which time it appears that he had retired.

This is the context in which Goodspeed was working. Having himself produced a translation of the New Testament in modern American in 1923, it is not surprising that in 1950, years after his retirement, he should welcome other new attempts at producing a New Testament in modern (American) English, and it is in this context that his comment on the NWT version of the New Testament must be viewed.

His comment on the New World Translation was apparently made in a private letter in 1950, shortly after the first publication of the New Testament-only version of the Jehovah’s Witness Bible, and we don’t know to whom this letter was addressed. As is usual with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, full bibliographical information is not given, but it appears that this letter may have been written to the Watchtower organisation, and was requesting information about its work. The small quotation from his letter that they cite indicates that he seems to have known very little about the organisation or its work, and was requesting more information. It is clear that the ideas and activities of the Watchtower organisation were not well known in the academic circles in which Goodspeed had moved, prior to his retirement. In that pre-internet age, it would not have been easy for Goodspeed to find out more about the organisation, so he balances his request with congratulations to them on producing the translation. What he says about the organisation is in fact clearly limited to a reference by him to claims made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses themselves about the “world wide scope” of their work.

Goodspeed’s comments on the NWT

As regards what Goodspeed actually wrote about their version of the Bible, this is limited to just three adjectives: “free, frank and vigorous”. By “free” he can only mean that their version is not what has been called a “Word-for-Word” or “Formal Equivalence” translation. The other broad category used to describe translations in recent years has been termed “Thought-for-Thought” or “Dynamic Equivalence”. These terms indicate opposite extremes of translation principles, and the debate as to which is preferable has not been resolved. Goodspeed clearly indicates that the NWT version does not adhere closely to the Greek text. This is by no means the high praise that the Jehovah’s Witnesses imply, but clearly the best that they could find in his letter.

Goodspeed apparently also wrote, “It exhibits a vast array of sound serious learning”. It is well known (and stated by the Watchtower organisation) that for decades they had used the Authorised (“King James”) version, and then the American Standard Version, which had been published in 1901, which they apparently favoured because of its use of the word “Jehovah” in the Old Testament. In their publications, the Jehovah’s Witnesses regularly reveal the results of scouring centuries of translations, no matter how obscure, in order to quote isolated phrases that they claim support their rendering of certain phrases in their version. Given their lack of access to experts in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, they clearly consulted many other translations into English when preparing their version of the Bible. Perhaps this is the “serious learning” to which Goodspeed was referring.

It is unfortunate that the Watchtower organisation has never released a photographic copy of the letter, nor even the full text of it.

What is undisputed is that Goodspeed never published a commendation of the “New World” version of the Bible.

Use of quotations by the Watchtower organisation

We know from the use by the Watchtower organisation of quotations from other writers that the snippets used by them often do not fairly represent what the writer said, when the whole context is seen. Examples of this repeated mis-use of quotations can be seen in the article “The Experts quoted by the Jehovah’s Witnesses” on this website, here:

<https://livingwater-spain.com/experts.pdf>

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_J._Goodspeed

Other similar cases are cited by other reviewers who have gone back to the original sources, a difficult task, as the Watchtower organisation puts the maximum number of obstacles in the way of readers and researchers, by giving no bibliographical data for the quotations that they use: no name of the book supposedly cited, no date or place of publication, no name of publisher and no page number, all of this being information that is a standard requirement when quoting from other writers.

One may be forgiven for wondering if at the beginning of December 1950 when Goodspeed wrote, he had not yet read the whole of the New World version of the New Testament, “The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures”, which had been published just four months earlier, on 1st August 1950⁵, as in many details it deviates from his understanding of the Greek text, as expressed in his translation and in some of his other published writings.

For instance, in his book “The Story of the New Testament”⁶, page 117, Goodspeed states: “Jesus is the full revelation of God in human life. This doctrine, which we call the Incarnation, is fundamental in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was GodAnd the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.... I am come that they may have life and that they may have it abundantly.”” This statement was reportedly repeated by Goodspeed, unchanged, in a subsequent book by him, “The Story of the Bible”.⁷

Why the delay?

It is reported⁸ that the Jehovah’s Witnesses first published their quotation from Goodspeed’s letter in the October 15, 1999 issue of their “Watchtower” magazine, nearly four decades after the death of Goodspeed in January of 1962, at the age of 90, so it was never possible for anyone to ask him to explain further his impressions of the original Jehovah’s Witness version of the New Testament or to ask him to share a copy of the whole of his letter.

As regards whether their quotation from Goodspeed is accurate, my article on the use by Jehovah’s Witnesses of quotations from experts referred to above shows that in some cases, by missing out the context and sometimes even omitting key words within the very sentence that they quote, they can make their sources seem to say the *opposite* of what they actually wrote. We have also documented in that article that even when the original writer challenges them, they refuse to concede, and continue publishing their misleading, edited “quotation”, to reap the benefit of using the name of a famous person who they claim supports their ideas or their version of the Bible.

The evidence available from their other “quotations” of endorsements indicates that it is highly probable that they are behaving in exactly the same way, when “quoting” from something that they claim that Goodspeed wrote, nearly 50 years earlier. In this case, they are confident that he cannot challenge them and that his personal copies of private correspondence are unlikely to have survived so many decades after his death, or to be available for consultation or research. This is of course the height of publishing dishonesty, a reason why many academics refuse to engage with them.

One must therefore ask what motivated them to wait until nearly forty years after Goodspeed’s death before using this snippet of something that he had written nearly fifty years earlier. Having under their control two magazines that they published every week, why did they not publish this quotation, which they now say is so important, while Goodspeed was still alive?

One must also bear in mind that the Jehovah’s Witnesses published a revised version of their Bible in 2013, so the edition about which Goodspeed apparently made a comment sixty-three years earlier than that is not the current version.

⁵ <https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/global/New-World-Translation-of-the-Christian-Greek-Scriptures-First-Released-75-Years-Ago/>

⁶ Originally published in 1916 by the University of Chicago Press in Chicago, USA, p. 117.

⁷ See <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/jehovahs-witnesses/goodspeed-and-the-deity-of-christ/>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Translation

The Jehovah's Witnesses also quote on their website from Jason BeDuhn, who they claim is a non-JW academic who has praised the New World Translation. We note that they do not quote any of the criticisms of the NWT that Dr BeDuhn made in the same book. For more information, I would refer readers to my review of BeDuhn's book, here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>.

We are therefore justified in concluding that the Jehovah's Witnesses are treating the letter from Goodspeed in the same way that we know that they treat the book by BeDuhn: they quote a small phrase that makes them look good and miss out the parts that point out that in many places their translation is wrong. This is of course not an isolated case; it is exactly what they always do when quoting from experts, as demonstrated in the article referred to above, as well as by other writers who have examined their claims.

Thus we cannot have confidence that the quotation from Goodspeed still used by the Jehovah's Witnesses 76 years later (up to the present day) accurately reflects the full content of what he said.

We also observe that the short quotation made by the Jehovah's Witnesses from Goodspeed's letter avoids any reference to the insertion by them of the word "Jehovah" 237 times into their version of the New Testament, even though not one occurrence of the word can be found in a single one of the more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

In fact, this is one of the major criticisms that BeDuhn makes of the "New World Translation" in his book (even though, as a Jehovah's Witness writer himself, he does his best to bury the criticism in an appendix of his book). For details, see the review of his book to which a link is given above. When the Jehovah's Witnesses publicise favourable comments by him about the "New World Translation", they edit out his critical comments.

So one would be justified in asking if they have done the same with Goodspeed's letter. Perhaps as a courtesy and to be diplomatic, Goodspeed made generalised encouraging comments at the beginning of his letter, before going on to point out the major flaws of the translation, especially with regard to the addition of the word "Jehovah".

We note that in his translation of the New Testament, Goodspeed had rigorously followed the Greek text at this point, using the translations "God" and "Lord", in accordance with the Greek text, and never the word "Jehovah". It is therefore quite probable that he may have written a favourable phrase to the Watchtower Society, before going on to suggest a revision of the text where they had introduced the word "Jehovah".

As the Jehovah's Witnesses have never revealed a copy of the whole letter, we cannot know if in his letter Goodspeed referred to this serious error by the NWT, or if indeed he had at the time of writing not even read enough of the NWT text to notice the problem. The Jehovah's Witnesses could easily resolve this issue by publishing a photographic copy of the whole of his letter.

We can therefore have no confidence that the quotation so frequently used by the Jehovah's Witnesses fairly represents the considered and complete opinion of Edgar J Goodspeed.

We could also quote from other academics – the overwhelming majority worldwide – who are critical of the Jehovah's Witness version of the Bible, but this would be to play the JW game, which they have already lost, even though by misusing edited quotations from other writers they manage to continue persuading some of their own members and a few non-members that their version of the Bible is good, which it clearly is not.

For a detailed analysis of many of their most unjustified and even outrageous perversions of the clear meaning of the original Biblical text, I refer to many of the articles on this website, here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/>. In their turn, many of those articles (which do of course give accurate context and clear bibliographical details) provide pointers to what other academics have written, thus helping the reader who desires to do further, independent research.