

Review: DB130

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

THE MESSAGE

a book review of
The Message
by Eugene Peterson
(NavPress, 1993)

This review first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 17, number 1 (1994). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

As of 1992 the Bible had been translated into 329 languages, the New Testament into an additional 758 tongues. In English alone, there are more than 60 Bible versions and New Testament translations in print—not counting thousands of different formats and bindings. Yet new versions continue to appear every year, the latest being Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (NavPress), which already has sold more than 110,000 copies. Its wide distribution and extravagant endorsements identify it as a version to reckon with, and to examine carefully.

APPROACHES TO BIBLE TRANSLATION

Before commenting on the specifics of *The Message*, it would be helpful to survey various approaches to the style and substance of Bible translation as seen in the best-selling modern versions. More detailed discussion and critiques of English versions are available in *So Many Versions?* by Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht (Zondervan, 1983) and *The English Bible from KJV to NIV* by Jack P. Lewis (Baker, 1991).

As to style, some feel a Bible should be translated word for word, as is attempted in the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Others believe no accuracy is lost in a less rigid, more idiomatic translation such as the New International Version (NIV). (The King James Version [KJV] and New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] stand somewhere between the NASB and NIV.) Still others think translation remains faithful in a free and idiomatic rendering such as Today's English Version (TEV) or J. B. Phillips's *New Testament in Modern English*. *The Message* definitely falls in this latter category, but is freer and more expansive than either Phillips or the TEV.

Word-for-word translation is a practical impossibility. This is because no two languages use words and grammar in exactly the same way. Even the simple sentence "God is love" from 1 John 4:16, identical in most English versions, is not a word-for-word rendering: the Greek reads, "The God love is." That may be good Greek, but it is not good English. Recognizing this reality, the NRSV translators followed the maxim, "As literal as possible, as free as necessary." The working maxim of *The Message* appears to be "As free as possible; literal only when necessary."

As to substance, most of the best-selling Bibles use a traditional, ecclesiastical vocabulary in addition to generic English terms. Some simple-English versions, such as the International Children's Bible (ICB), use traditional terms like "blasphemy," "gospel," and "tabernacle," but have a dictionary to introduce readers to these technical and theological terms. Other basic translations attempt to avoid words that are not in

everyday English, using footnotes to explain concepts like "righteousness" and "repentance," as is the case with the Contemporary English Version (CEV). Still other versions build their explanations and interpretations into the text itself, as do The Living Bible (LB) and *The Message*. This latter approach is popularly called "paraphrase," although the expansive comments of these versions often go way beyond the requirements of simple restatement.

Of course, all translation involves interpretation. Even when translating word for word, one must decide what a word means in a specific context. The English word "trunk," for example, can be the front end of an elephant, the back end of a car, the bottom of a tree, the middle of a person, or the entirety of a suitcase. Recognizing that words can have a wide range of meaning, translators must take great care not to overload a word or passage, especially with theological interpretation. The most criticized word choice in the NIV is the rendering of the Greek word *sarx* as "sinful nature" (25 times, including Romans 7:5, 18, 25), a rendering incompatible with several denominational perspectives. Many wish the NIV had stuck with the traditional and theologically neutral "flesh," and offered "sinful nature" in its footnotes instead of the other way around.

Interpretation often adds to the text. The KJV renders John 1:17, "For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." By inserting the word "but," which is not in the Greek, the translators force the reader to see a contrast between law and grace and between Moses and Jesus, whereas John may have intended to show a continuity. Nowhere is this assumed contrast more evident than in the expansive paraphrase of the LB, "For Moses gave us *only* the Law *with its rigid demands and merciless justice*, while Jesus Christ brought us loving forgiveness as well." The italicized words come not from the Greek but from the theology of the paraphraser, Kenneth N. Taylor.

The major problem with this kind of paraphrase, which also characterizes *The Message*, is that the reader does not know where the text ends and the commentary begins. The LB does note in its preface, "There are dangers in paraphrases...a possibility that the translator, however honest, may be giving the English reader something that the original writer did not mean to say." No such cautions are offered in the introduction to or advertisements for *The Message*. Nor in the work itself is it ever called a paraphrase. Rather, the translator's ability in Greek is lauded as "a second mother tongue" and his translation applauded as "accurate" and "authentic" to the degree that one widely used commendation states, "If the New Testament were written today, this is what it would sound like."

SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF *THE MESSAGE*

Translation Style. As already noted, *The Message* is a very free rendering of the Greek. The text has chapter numbers, but no verses. This is not explained, but verse numbers are probably omitted to make the text look more like normal English literature, and because the translation often combines and transposes verses in a way that would be difficult or impossible to represent (as in 1 Cor. 11:1-16, pp. 354-55).

Sometimes the translation is straightforward in its simplicity. Nothing is added to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. The institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:17-20 is clear and concise. Narrative texts in the Gospels and Acts tend to be conservatively rendered.

Some paraphrastic renderings help to clarify words and grammar in a way many would agree reflects well the intention of the original. Take, for example, the classic John 3:16 (KJV): "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *The Message* reads (p. 190): "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." While some scholars would prefer "This is *the way* God loved the world," or might ask for a stronger result statement than "whole and lasting life," this is a good paraphrase in contemporary English.

Peterson himself characterizes the language of *The Message* as "current and fresh and understandable in the same language in which we do our shopping, talk with our friends, worry about world affairs, and

teach our children their table manners" (p. 7). But it is often self-consciously literary and idiosyncratic. For example, after explaining the significance of the verb "fulfill" in the introduction to Matthew's gospel (p. 8), Peterson chooses not to use "fulfill" to translate the word's first occurrence in Matthew 1:22 (p. 10). Instead, he renders the text, "This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term." Such is hardly "the language of the street." Many traditional and theological words, such as "repent(ance)" and "righteous(ness)," are avoided, while similar terms like "baptize," "blasphemy," and "covenant" are retained. In the place of some traditional terms are the author's own coined vocabulary, often hyphenated composite terms such as "God-Expression," "God-news," "God-pointing," "good-hearts," "Life-Light," and "Priest-Friend." I am not certain that such terms are any more contemporary or require less explanation than the traditional vocabulary they replace.

Expansive Paraphrase. *The Message* regularly adds significantly to the text. Joseph is characterized as a "righteous" or "just" man in most English versions of Matthew 1:19. *The Message* has him "chagrined but noble" (p. 10), half of which is presumed by the translator rather than stated in the text. In Luke 3:7 (p. 122), the crowds are said to be coming for baptism "because it was the popular thing to do" (compare Matt. 3:7, p. 13). "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13, NRSV) becomes "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth" (p. 16). Paul's simple question in Acts 19:2 (NIV), "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" is expanded to "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside you?" (p. 280). Again, readers have no clue when the text ends and the commentary begins.

Anachronisms and Transcultural Renderings. *The Message* sometimes retains terminology that reflects ancient biblical culture, while at other times it uses terms that reflect modern culture. The Prodigal Son wears "sandals" (Luke 15:22, p. 159), but Peter wears "shoes" (Acts 12:8, p. 263). Jesus reads the "scroll" of Isaiah (Luke 4:17, p. 125), but Paul reads "books" (2 Tim. 4:13, p. 450). Upon seeing "loan sharks" and people selling cattle in the temple, Jesus exclaims, "Stop turning my Father's house into a shopping mall!" (John 2:16, p. 188). The parable of the mustard seed becomes the parable of the "pine nut" (Luke 13:19, p. 154), but faith needs to be the size of a "poppy seed" (Luke 17:6, p. 162). A servant must wait to eat until his master finishes his "coffee" (Luke 17:8, p. 162). In Luke 20:46 (p. 171), Jesus warns against "religion scholars" who wear "academic gowns" and "sit at the head table at every church function" – renderings that cross both cultural and religious lines.

Interpretive Patterns. It is the translator's duty to resist the temptation to overload the text with theological interpretation or to make vague what is concrete in the text. *The Original New Testament*, translated by Jewish scholar Hugh Schonfield, has extreme examples of such tendencies. He obscures the concept of the Virgin Birth by referring to Mary as a "maiden" in Luke 1:27 and as "unwed" in 1:34, and he totally omits it from Matthew by failing to translate 1:22-23!

Thankfully, *The Message* is not so extreme. Peterson enjoys an impeccable reputation as an orthodox evangelical. He believes he has not imposed himself upon the text. In an interview with *Publisher's Weekly* (February 14, 1994, pp. 49-50), Peterson says "the work wasn't really mine...I felt as if I was a servant to the text for two years, and I was compelled to obey." It should be noted, however, that not all of his paraphrase follows the mainstream of biblical interpretation.

Some texts exclude or demand specific theological orientation. "Grow up" for the traditional "Be perfect" in Matthew 5:48 (p. 19) excludes the holiness/perfectionist perspective. Acts 22:16 is translated in such a way as would please baptismal regenerationists (p. 289), but not so in 1 Peter 3:21 (pp. 491-92). The subhead "Prayer Language" for 1 Corinthians 14 and the consistent reference to "praying in a private 'prayer language'" throughout the chapter reflects modern charismatic theology and practice. The office(s) of bishop/elder/overseer are usually generalized to "leader," as in 1 Timothy 3:1-2, 5:17, 19 (pp. 441, 443), and Titus 1:5-6 (p. 451); deacon is often rendered "servant" as in 1 Timothy 3:8 (p. 441). These renderings would not fit all perspectives on church government. The Arminian understanding of loss of salvation could not easily be seen in James 5:19-20 (p. 485) or 1 John 5:16 (p. 508).

The Greek word *kurios* is usually rendered "Lord" in English versions; it reflects both the proper name of God *Yahweh* (LORD) and the positional title *Adonay* (Lord) from the Old Testament. Some biblical scholars avoid "Lord" as a male-oriented, sexist term. *The Message* rarely uses "Lord," preferring to call Jesus "the Master" (John 20:20) and to translate OT references to *Yahweh* as "God" (Matt. 3:3, p. 13; but note Matt. 4:7, 10, p. 14). This limits the interpretation of passages that might refer to Jesus as both *Yahweh* and *Adonay* — as God and as Sovereign — such as Romans 10:9-13 (p. 323, compare Joel 2:32) and Philippians 2:11 (p. 414, compare Isaiah 45:18-25).

The Message also fails to consistently handle role relations between men and women. Some passages that address husband-wife role relations use the word "submit," such as Ephesians 5:22-24 (p. 409) and Colossians 3:18 (p. 426) (although they seem to qualify submission to certain situations). Other texts have been rendered in such a way that the traditional, hierarchical interpretation is no longer possible, especially 1 Peter 3:1-7 (p. 490), where women are simply admonished to "be good wives." The first paragraph on page 355 (1 Corinthians 11) begins, "Don't, by the way, read too much into the differences here between men and women," a statement which has no clear textual base. These may be defensible interpretations, but they disallow other understandings.

Texts traditionally understood as condemning homosexual conduct — 1 Corinthians 6:9 (p. 345) and 1 Timothy 1:10 (p. 439) — are generalized to "sex abuse" (see CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, Winter 1993, pp. 8-15). Romans 1:27, rendered "Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another, women with women, men with men — all lust, no love" (p. 305), leaves room for the allowance of *loving* homosexual relationships.

MEASURING THE MESSAGE

So how are we to view *The Message*? It is an expansive paraphrase that is not so labeled, as is *The Living Bible*. Beset with inconsistencies, its idiom is not always "street language"; its terminology is often idiosyncratic to its author. Compared by noted literary figures to the groundbreaking translation of J. B. Phillips, I believe *The Message* often lacks Phillips's creativity and conciseness.

In the introduction, Eugene Peterson compares his pastoral ministry to his work as a translator: "I stood at the border between two languages, biblical Greek and everyday English, acting as a translator, providing the right phrases, getting the right words so that the men and women to whom I was pastor could find their way around and get along in this world" (p. 7). Much of *The Message* reads like a sermon: text plus interpretation and application. Unlike a sermon, however, the reader does not know where the text ends and the sermon begins.

Because of its interpretive and idiosyncratic nature, *The Message* should not be used for study. If read for enlightenment or entertainment, the reader should follow the advice of Saint Augustine, as quoted in the original preface to the KJV, "Variety of translations is profitable for finding out the sense of the Scriptures." Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for evaluating Paul's teaching with the Old Testament Scriptures. In the same spirit, *The Message* needs to be evaluated against more consistent and traditional translations, especially when its renderings evoke a response such as, "I didn't know the Bible said that!" or, "Now I understand what it means."

In sum: while the phrase "the Message" is Eugene Peterson's translation of "the Gospel," not everything in *The Message* should be treated as gospel.

— reviewed by John R. Kohlenberger III