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A Cautionary Word on the Passion Translation of the Bible - Part 1

By Tal Davis

I do not consider myself as either a Greek or Hebrew (or Aramaic) scholar. I took two years of Greek and one year of Hebrew in seminary. That being said, I have studied the Bible and Bible translations for decades. I have in my library more than a dozen English language versions. The fact is, not all Bible translations are equal. In fact, not all versions are actually translations at all. Many are actually paraphrases. One well-known and popular paraphrase is *The Living Bible* by Kenneth N. Taylor, first published in 1971. Another is *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, published in segments from 1993 to 2002.

Paraphrases, as their authors usually affirm, may take liberties with the text so, they assert, to better clarify its practical meaning and to make it more relevant for modern readers. Those are commendable aims. I recall that as a very young Christian convert, the first portion of Scripture I read was *The Living Bible* version of the book of Acts. I could not put it down, it was so exciting to read about the exploits of the early Apostles.

Granted, paraphrases can aid in learning Bible stories and about the life of Jesus. However, the serious student of Scripture should be very careful when utilizing a paraphrase for any in-depth biblical study. More rigorous translations by committees of recognized scholars of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic are definitely preferred. The currently most popular translations among Evangelical Christians are the traditional King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the *New American Standard Bible*

(NASB), the *New International Version* (NIV), and the *Christian Standard Bible* (CSB) (a revision of the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*). Other widely used English versions include the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV), the *New King James Version* (NKJV), and the *New American Version* (Revised Edition) (NAVER - a Roman Catholic translation). The very worst translation is *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (NWT) – the official Bible of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). That version was revised in 2013 with a few changes. Nonetheless, it remains the most biased rendition ever, especially regarding the deity of Christ (go to <http://www.marketfaith.org/2015/08/the-2013-revised-jehovahs-witnesses-bible> for more information on the NWT – The 2013 Revised Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible)

Recently, we were asked if we had heard about a new Bible translation that someone had received. The new translation is called *The Passion Translation* (TPT) by Brian Simmons. These people were wondering if we recommended it or not. We had to confess that we were not actually familiar with that version of the English Bible. Consequently I purchased a copy of the TPT and began to research what others have written about it. In this two part article, I will summarize some of our findings and give our evaluation as to whether or not Christians should use it.

The translator, Brian Simmons, is a former missionary in Panama with New Tribes Mission, now called Ethnos360, headquartered in Sanford, Florida. That group has as one of its main goals to create Bible translations in languages where none had been done before. Apparently, Simmons was a part of that effort.

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Regarding their translation work, the TPT, in its introduction on Bible Gateway, makes the following statement:

There is no such thing as a truly literal translation of the Bible, for there is not an equivalent language that perfectly conveys the meaning of the biblical text. It must be understood in its original cultural and linguistic settings. This problem is best addressed when we seek to transfer meaning, not merely words, from the original text to the receptor language.

*The purpose of **The Passion Translation** is to reintroduce the passion and fire of the Bible to the English reader. It doesn't merely convey the literal meaning of words. It expresses God's passion for people and his world by translating the original, life-changing message of God's Word for modern readers.* (<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/The-Passion-Translation-TPT-Bible>)

It seems that Simmons desired to utilize some of the skills he used in translating Scripture into new languages to make a new, easy to read English version. That sounds good, but there is a subtle danger when an individual, or even an unqualified or biased committee (eg.: the NWT), proceed to create a free-language colloquial version. The problem is that the author inevitably lets his or her theological bias slip into the translation of the text. This has been true in past published paraphrases (For example, *The Living Bible*, the work initially only of Kenneth N. Taylor, was completely revised, with Taylor's blessing, by a scholars committee in 1996 as the *New Living Translation*. They found a number of minor problems with how Taylor had rendered some verses.)

For instance, consider Colossians 2:11 in the 1971 *Living Bible*: *When you came to Christ, he set you free from your evil desires, not by a bodily*

operation of circumcision but by a spiritual operation, the baptism of your souls.

Now look at the same verse from the *New Living Translation*: *When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature.*

This is clearly a bigger problem with *The Passion Translation*. Brian Simmons is a major figure in a charismatic Christian movement called the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). That movement was started in the early 1990s by noted missiologist C. Peter Wagner (1930-2016) and other charismatic leaders. The premise of that loosely organized movement is that God continues in the current era to raise up specially gifted men (such as Wagner himself) to serve in the offices of apostles and prophets. Those men would exercise spiritual authority over others in the movement. The movement advocates the classic charismatic doctrines of speaking in tongues and baptism of the Holy Spirit. It also promotes seeking "signs and wonders" and "power evangelism" utilizing miraculous healings and phenomena. These phenomena are seen as evidences that we are in the last days before Christ's return. I will not address the numerous issues associated with those concepts here, but it is fair to say they are biblically questionable at best.

The TPT in numerous places demonstrates a bias that favors the views of the NAR. English blogger Andrew Wilson lists several issues he considers crucial. I will summarize a few of them. (to see Wilson's critique go to: https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/whats_wrong_with_the_passion_translation)

1. Though Simmons calls his version a translation, it is not really a translation at all, it is a paraphrase. Wilson states: "The Passion Translation" inserts all

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kinds of concepts, words and ideas of which the original gives no hint whatsoever (despite the occasional footnotes which say "implied by the context").

2. It is translated by only one man. We discussed the problems related to a single individual translation of Scripture. An individual's own biases are bound to creep in to the text. Simmons' version has numerous examples of this fallacy.

3. Simmons uses a controversial methodology for finding the real meanings of some passages. In some places he uses Aramaic translations of Greek texts in an attempt to find the root meanings of the sayings of Jesus and others. The assumption is that, since Jesus spoke Aramaic, utilizing phrases and words from that language to translate to English will enhance the meanings of the words. He even implies that some of the Bible books were originally written in Aramaic. This is a serious fallacy for Bible translation. Translators should utilize texts that closely reflect the original autographs of the authors in the language in which they wrote. Those languages were Hebrew, Koine Greek, and in only in a very few instances, Aramaic.

4. Simmons seeks to uncover the "emotion of the text," that is often missing in standard translations. This is apparently why he calls it the "passion" translation. Certainly Bible teach-

ers and preachers desire to convey the Word of God passionately, but claiming that by altering certain passages can better produce such emotion is a hazardous practice. Accurately interpreting the Word of God requires careful exegesis of the real meaning of the text.

These facts lead us to an inevitable deduction: we do not recommend *The Passion Translation* for any serious student of the Bible. In the next installment of this two part article, we will further explain the reasons for our conclusions. We will examine some of the key verses from Scripture where TPT takes significant liberties with the text in ways that may distort their actual meanings.

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