

# Review of 1 Corinthians in *The Passion Translation*

**The Passion Translation: The New Testament, with Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Madison, CT: BroadStreet, 2018)**

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I am inherently attracted to paraphrases of the Bible. During my first year as a Christian, at age 15, I was introduced to the brand new *Living Bible Paraphrased* (LBP; 1971), which was wildly popular in the Campus Life/Youth for Christ club that had brought me to Jesus. I devoured it because it made the Bible come alive in ways that other existing Bible translations at that time didn't. While I never got into Eugene Peterson's *The Message* to the same extent, it was primarily because it appeared later in my adult life (in segments from 1993-2002) when I didn't have the same felt need for a paraphrase. But I have appreciated the immense amount of thought and work that went into it and recognize why many Christians love it. I also appreciate the fact that Peterson valued theological orthodoxy enough to have a collection of evangelical biblical scholars examine it for any possible gaffes, which he corrected before publication.

I was, therefore, intrigued when I was invited to review a new paraphrase called *The Passion Translation* (TPT), which first appeared in 2017. Despite the title, it is not a translation by any standard usage of that term, even though the author did work with the original languages. The difference between a translation and a paraphrase, of course, is not a hard and fast one, but a matter of gradation. But in general, whenever a rendering of Scripture adds entire phrases and clauses to the text that are not necessary just to complete the meaning of any sentence, and especially when they do so on a regular basis, it is properly referred to as a paraphrase. To be sure, adding material that does not correspond to anything in the original Greek of the New Testament, for example, can make the Scriptures come alive. If it is true to the context and meaning of what was originally written, it can be very helpful for modern readers, especially believers who are young in their faith or new to the process of Bible reading. But those who produce the work should not confuse readers by claiming it to be an actual translation of the Bible. That is why the LBP was meticulously revised by a team of 90 scholars to create the *New Living Translation* (NLT), first published in 1996. Revisers were instructed to reword anything of Ken Taylor's original wording that could not be considered a bona fide translation of the ancient languages, while retaining as much of the freshness of his original wording as possible.

My remit in this study is to assess only 1 Corinthians in TPT. Other scholars will tackle other parts of this new version produced by Brian Simmons, former missionary and Bible translator with New Tribes Mission. But I have read enough of the rest of the New Testament, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs in the second, 2018 edition to recognize that 1 Corinthians is reasonably representative of the patterns of paraphrase found consistently throughout the volume. To be sure, Simmons does claim that, whenever he inserts something that doesn't correspond to the ancient Greek (or Hebrew), he puts the English in italics. Unfortunately, he doesn't follow through on this pledge with any consistency. On numerous occasions, such insertions are not italicized at all. It is one thing, as with the LBP or *The Message*, to acknowledge producing a paraphrase all in the same font, so that readers know they have to consult a real translation to find out what the original said. It is much more misleading,

however, to claim to be distinguishing translation from paraphrase but then to do so very inconsistently.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 1, the first italicized segments appear in verse 11, which reads, “My dear brothers and sisters, *I have a serious concern I need to bring up with you*, for I have been informed by those of Chloe’s *house church* that you have been destructively arguing among yourselves.” The first italicized clause is indeed an insertion, but a natural one for a paraphrase, and it fits the immediate context well. The expression “house church” is inserted because the Greek has just “those of Chloe.” But even the most formally equivalent translations have something like “some of Chloe’s people” or “household,” simply to make sense in English. This kind of addition need not even have been flagged, because it was necessary to create a meaningful English sentence, although it was certainly fine to have italicized it. On the other hand, verse 4 has already referred to Paul thanking God for giving the Corinthians “such free and open access to his grace” when nothing in the Greek at all corresponds to “such free and open access.” Theologically, the phrase is an accurate descriptor of God’s grace, but it should have been italicized. In verse 12, we read, “And I need to bring this up because each of you is claiming loyalty to different preachers. Some are saying, ‘I am a disciple of Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ . . .” Again, as contextually appropriate as the clause, “each of you is claiming loyalty to different preachers,” may be, it translates nothing from the Greek, which moves directly from what might simply be rendered, “I say this,” to “because some are saying . . .” By Simmons’ own criteria, the clause needs to be italicized.

Sometimes, more is at stake than just what is or isn’t in italics. In 6:7, the text is greatly expanded to read, “Don’t you realize that when you drag another believer into court you’re providing the evidence that you are already defeated? Wouldn’t it be better to accept the fact that someone is trying to cheat and take advantage of you, and simply *choose the high road? At times it is better* to just accept injustice and even to let someone take advantage of you, *rather than to expose our conflicts publicly before unbelievers.*” A woodenly literal translation might read, “Already it is an entire defeat for you to have lawsuits among you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” Thus, in reality, almost

all of TPT's first question should be in italics. Just a few verses earlier, wording that is not italicized does not only not correspond to anything in the original text; it adds ideas that are probably not at all what Paul intended. In 6:4, we read, "Don't you realize that you are bringing your issues before civil judges appointed by people who have no standing within the church?" Not only does nothing in the Greek correspond to "appointed by people," but this addition in fact changes what "who have no standing within the church" modifies. Now, it is not the judges who have no standing within the church (what Paul wrote), but the people who appointed them, when in fact nothing in the context suggests Paul cares anything about who appointed them. Immediately after this, verse 5 continues with, "What a shame that there is not one within the church who has *the spirit* of wisdom who could arbitrate these disputes and reconcile the offended parties!" What a shame that "and reconcile the offended parties" isn't in Paul's text! Sometimes in a fallen world, even Christians don't reconcile or don't reconcile right away. That is an extra step beyond arbitrating disputes that Paul doesn't say anything about at this point.

When it comes to Paul's famous gender role passages, special care is needed. But here *TPT* seems particularly lacking. In 11:4, 5, and 6, the paraphrase inserts language that limits the men and women being discussed to leaders—a limitation that is patently not in either the text or its context. Thus, Simmons writes, "Any man *who leads public worship*, and prays or prophesies. . ." (v. 4), "And if any woman *in a place of leadership* prays or prophesies. . ." (v. 5), and "If a woman 'who wants to be in leadership' will not conform to the customs of what is proper for women. . ." (v. 6). But 12:11 shows that the Holy Spirit chooses who gets what gifts, while 14:26 makes it clear that all people in the church can exercise their gifts in worship. Prophecy is not a gift limited to leaders or even necessarily associated with them. And why are the added clauses in vv. 4 and 5 italicized, but the comparable one added to v. 6 is not? Worse still in 14:34, "the women should be respectfully silent *during the evaluation of prophecy in the meetings*. They are not allowed to interrupt, but are to be in a support role. . .," while in v. 35b, "a woman embarrasses herself when she constantly interrupts the church meeting." It is true that one influential complementarian

interpretation has seen contextual support for the interpretation put in italics, but there are so many other well-supported explanations of this verse that it is irresponsible for a “translator” to foreclose all the other options by picking just one and calling it a translation. Even the “embarrasses herself” goes well beyond what Paul writes. He does not explain who thinks it is a disgrace for women to speak in church. Most likely it is someone other than the female speaker, who may feel no embarrassment at all. To top off the confusion, in 11:3, Simmons uses an egalitarian translation of “head” to say that Christ is “the source of every human alive, and Adam was the source of Eve, and God is the source of the Messiah.” So is he a complementarian or an egalitarian? Arguably, a translation should not tip the scales of the interpretation of any passage in either direction.

What, then, is the attraction of TPT? Indeed, why is the word *Passion* in its title? Clearly, Simmons is a passionate man, with a passionate love for God and his word, and he wants others to fall in love passionately with God through this version. The most common way he tries to accomplish this is by adding single-word adjectives and adverbs to the text (almost never in italics) to turn fairly common and even ordinary words into exciting concepts. Paul’s standard greeting of “grace and peace be to you” in 1:3 becomes “May joyous grace and endless peace be yours continually.” Clearly, that is more passionate, but it’s not what Paul said. Even “continually” (or synonyms), which Simmons regularly inserts for present tense verbs (whether or not the context warrants them), is completely gratuitous here, because the Greek lacks the verb altogether. It is appropriate to supply “be,” but nothing more.

Still, if one is thinking theologically, many of the insertions are delightful and hardly unorthodox. Had the version admitted to being a paraphrase, everything would have been fine. Thus, to quote an array of terms with added modifiers, we discover that we have been made “extravagantly rich” (1:5), that God is “forever faithful” (1:9), that the rulers of this world crucified “the Lord of shining glory” (2:8), that God has revealed to us “his inmost heart” and “deepest mysteries” (2:10), that Judgment Day will be revealed by “blazing fire” (3:13), that Paul’s spirit is present with Christ’s “infinite power” (5:4), that believers should continue to live “the wonderful lives” to which they have been called (7:17), and that Paul “*joyfully*

makes himself a servant” of Jesus. But why only in this last case is the modifier put in italics?

Some of Simmons’ turns of phrase are striking and downright delightful, even if they are pure paraphrase. The end of 1:10 becomes, “Form a consistent choreography among yourselves, having a common perspective with shared values.” The end of 1:17 tacks on, “For I trust in the all-sufficient cross of Christ alone.” The incestuous man in 5:1 is living in “gross sexual immorality. . .that’s so revolting it’s not even tolerated by the social norms of unbelievers.” In 5:8, “we can celebrate our continual feast, not with the old ‘leaven,’ the yeast of wickedness or bitterness, but we will feast on the freshly baked bread of innocence and holiness.” In 9:22, Paul has “adapted to the culture of every place” he has gone. The examples of the Israelites’ idolatry in the wilderness should teach us “not to fail in the same way by callously craving worthless things” (10:6). Why not? “For we live in a time when the purpose of all the ages past is now completing its goal within us” (10:11b).

Sometimes, however, the paraphrases prove more misleading. There is much more specificity in Simmons’ version of 10:13 than can be justified from the original text: “[God] will screen and filter the severity, nature, and timing of every test or trial you face.” The word order reverses Paul’s and thus reverses his emphasis. Instead of God providing a way of escape so that we can bear up under trials, thus showing us that there is no promise here to take the trials away, *TPT* puts the clause, “so that you can bear it” immediately after “every test or trial you face.” Then at the end, the climactic promise features “the way of escape that will bring you out of it victoriously,” exactly what Paul does not promise here. For a different example, *TPT* perpetuates the long-standing misinterpretation of what it means to eat and drink the Lord’s Supper unworthily (11:27-29), by speaking twice of partaking with “the/a wrong spirit” and once of a person evaluating “his own attitude.” Yet the context makes it clear that it is not someone’s attitude, but their behavior, that must be scrutinized—are they overindulging at the expense of the poor in their midst (v. 21)?

Instead of the Spirit distributing his gifts to believers as he sees fit (12:7), *TPT* insists that “each believer is given continuous rev-

elation. . .” Even if this expression is taken more along the lines of spiritual illumination, it still does not provide a promise of anything constant, while many gifts of the Spirit (e.g., giving, helping, administration, faith) really don’t have anything to do with revelation at all. Finally, in the discussion of Christ as the second Adam in 15:47b, TPT follows a textual variant supported among recent translations only by the NKJV, and announces that “the second Man is the Lord Jehovah, from the realm of heaven” (rather than just “the second Man is from the realm of heaven”). If it read just “the Lord,” at least the theology could be orthodox, because “Lord” is ambiguous in its denotation. But “Lord Jehovah” can mean only God the Father. Yet God the Son is not the same as God the Father without blurring the distinction between two of the three persons of the Trinity.

There are some stock renderings throughout the letter. Apparently, whenever “Christ” is deemed to be titular, it is translated as “Anointed One” (e.g., 1:1, 2, 7, 9, 17, etc.). When Peter is called “Cephas,” “Peter the Rock” is inserted (1:12, 3:22, 9:5, 15:5). The temple is usually transformed into something even more poignant—“the inner sanctuary” (3:16, 17 [2X]) or “the sacred temple” (6:19; cf. 9:13). Most of TPT uses gender-inclusive language for human beings, but occasionally, TPT reverts to a generic “he” or “his” for no obvious reason. Sometimes, one is surprised that a mysterious phrase is not paraphrased (e.g., “flesh and blood” in 15:50). On at least one occasion, an entire clause appears to be missing: in 10:25, there is nothing corresponding to “that is sold in the marketplace” after the permission to eat anything. There is one flat-out grammatical error of the kind one does not expect to see in a “Bible,” when the bulk of 7:9 declares, “The urgency of our times *mean* that from now on, those who have wives should live as those without them” (italics mine). But the correct wording should have been, “The urgency of our times *means* that. . .” (italics mine). In 7:20, we might chalk up “everyone should continue to live *faithful* in the situation of life in which they were called to follow Jesus,” to a colloquialism, but it really ought to be “live *faithfully* in the situation.”

There are many more things one would like to note. Helpful and eye-catching paraphrases appear in 2:2 (“I was determined to be consumed with one topic—Jesus, the crucified Messiah”), 3:20 (“The

Lord sees right through the clever reasonings of the wise and knows that it's all a sham"), 10:23 ("You say, 'Under grace there are no rules and we're free to do anything we please'"), 13:5a ("Love does not traffic in shame and disrespect, nor selfishly seek its own honor"), and 14:36 ("Do you actually think that you were the starting point for the Word of God going forth? Were you the only ones it was sent to? *I don't think so!*") In addition, the explanation in 7:12 ("To the rest I say, which is not a saying of the Lord. . .") is very helpful to counteract the common misinterpretation that Paul is no longer claiming inspiration at this point. Rather, it is that he can't quote the words of the historical Jesus.

On the other hand, other renderings are quite unfortunate. The end of 2:9 sounds too sexually charged with, "these are the many things God has in store for all his lovers" (though it is not nearly as bad as calling Jacob, Simmons' name for James, in Jas. 1:1 God's "love-slave"! ). The rendering of 7:18 ("it would be futile to try to undo the circumcision") makes it sound like Simmons is unaware of the Roman surgical procedure known as epispasm, which through skin grafts did indeed reverse circumcision. "Even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of the opportunity," in 7:21b, sounds like a reversion to the older, now debunked translation that Christian slaves should not try to gain their freedom, even if they have the chance. The rendering of 7:36 is particularly confused, making Paul's example to be about a man committed to celibacy who changes his mind ("if a man has decided to serve God as a single person, yet changes his mind and finds himself in love with a woman, although he never intended to marry"), while in verse 38, the man already has a fiancée. And, of course, finding oneself in love is a very anachronistic modern concept and reason for marriage. More examples of both good and bad paraphrases could be offered.

This edition of TPT contains numerous study notes beneath the text, presumably also written by Simmons, which in some instances fill up to half of the page. One should normally not evaluate such notes with the same level of scrutiny as one assesses the rendering of the sacred word of God itself. Besides, that would require a review at least twice as long as this one. But one glaring, recurring error simply has to be mentioned. Consistently throughout the entire "translation" of the New Testament, Simmons refers to what the

Aramaic says and how it would be translated, despite the fact that *there are no ancient Aramaic versions of the New Testament*. Every book of the New Testament was written originally in Greek and in no other language. Within a couple of centuries, the New Testament books were being translated into many other languages, including Latin, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syriac, old Slavonic, Georgian, Armenian, and so on. Church fathers occasionally refer to a copy of Matthew in Hebrew, though none has ever been found. It makes sense for other books to have been translated into Hebrew also, but we don't even have claims that they were. No Aramaic copy of even the smallest fragment of any New Testament book from the earliest centuries of its existence has ever been found. What on earth is Simmons talking about?

The most likely answer is that the ancient Syriac translations from the Greek occasionally took some liberties from the text in places where the Syriac also looks like a very woodenly literal translation from a more fluent Aramaic predecessor. The two languages were closely related, even though they had quite different scripts. Over the years, a handful of scholars have toyed with the idea that maybe at those places, the Syriac was actually translated from an Aramaic version of a New Testament book. But the majority of scholars have never been convinced and, even if they were, it is still irresponsible to speak about what a nonexistent Aramaic version says. If that is what Simmons is doing, he should at least be honest enough to say, "The Syriac here says. . ." But of course, that wouldn't carry the same mystique that attaches to suggesting that something was written in the very language that Jesus himself spoke.

For this reason alone, if anyone is going to use the study notes in TPT, they must recognize and overlook this error, which appears on almost every page, and not give any credence to the more distinctive wordings of these portions of Simmons' text that he credits to "the Aramaic." For the seasoned Christian familiar with real translations of the New Testament, the text of TPT can prove very fresh and enjoyable. It *can* inspire more passion for Jesus and God's word, so long as people recognize that the most passionate parts are Simmons' additions rather than actual translations. But for someone who isn't already familiar enough with Scripture to sort the original from the overlay, this version will prove too misleading for it

to be recommended. If a literal translation of TPT were provided to an unreached people group who had not previously had a Bible in their language, it would certainly be adequate to teach them everything necessary for salvation and much that is appropriate for sanctification. But with the plethora of English-language translations and paraphrases already available, it is hard to see why TPT was even necessary. Despite some of the wonderful passion and turns of phrase, there are also enough problems with it that it probably should have had a surgeon general's warning on it about its potential hazards.