

# A Brief Evaluation of *The Passion Translation* of Romans

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## **Introduction**

*The Passion Translation* is “a new, heart-level translation, using Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic manuscripts, that expresses God’s fiery heart of love to this generation, merging the emotion and life-changing truth of God’s Word” (from *The Passion Translation’s* website). Dr. Brian Simmons, the translator, is a linguist who has worked in Bible translation in Panama. He claims that “respected scholars and editors” have reviewed the translation, although – as far I could see – they are never named. The philosophy of translation is “meaning-based,” prioritizing the transfer of meaning from the original texts to English over the attempt to transfer the form of words.

I applaud the obvious deep concern expressed in this translation and its explanatory documents to bring the Word of God alive to a new generation. However, I find it has several problems that, together, mean it is an unreliable guide to the meaning of Scripture.

## 1 Confusing Translation Philosophy

I have no quarrel with a “meaning-based” translation philosophy. Yet if such a translation is to authentically transfer the meaning of the original, the exact form of the original text must be seriously dealt with. That is, we have no access to the *meaning* of the original except through the *words* of the original. I suspect Dr. Simmons understands this. Yet his explanation of *The Passion Translation’s* philosophy of translation gives one pause. The claim is made, for instance, that the translation aims to balance “the Word’s literal meaning” and “original message.” One worries that “original message” might open the door to bring into the translation ideas that the translator has, but which are not clear from “the literal meaning” of Scripture. This concern appears to have some substance, when one sees the many places where ideas with no basis in the original text are brought into the translation. Some of these additions, to be sure, are relatively innocuous, stressing certain ideas that one might argue are present “behind the scenes.” In Romans 3:24, for instance, the translation reads, “His gift of love and favor now cascades over us.” “Grace” is found here in the original, but there is no reference to “love” in this context. These kinds of additions are found everywhere. More problematic additions, however, are those that may shift the meaning of the text. In Romans 8:14, for instance, the translation has, “The mature children of God are those who are moved by the impulses of the Holy Spirit.” “Mature” has no basis in the Greek text, and by adding this qualifier, the verse is turned from a promise to all believers (which it is in context) to a promise limited to certain kinds of believers.

## 2 Inconsistencies

The “meaning-based” translation philosophy is not carried out very consistently. For instance, the Gk. word *sarx* is translated “flesh” in Romans 8:4-13. Now, to be sure, this word is really hard to carry over into English. But “flesh,” a kind of default rendering one finds in all the “functional equivalent” versions, does not communicate well to a modern audience. One would have expected an attempt

to find a contemporary equivalent.

### 3 Textual Basis

Ever since the Reformation, Protestants have insisted that the inspired Word of God is to be found in Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts (for the OT) and Greek manuscripts (for the NT). Yet *The Passion Translation* frequently bases NT translations on Aramaic manuscripts (as is pointed out in footnotes on the verses). The translation of Romans 5:18, for instance, reads “In other words, just as condemnation came upon all people through one transgression, so through one righteous act of *Jesus’ sacrifice*, the perfect righteousness that makes us right with God and leads us to a victorious life is now available to all.” “Victorious life,” as the footnote indicates, is based on the Aramaic. The Greek has nothing about “victorious.” In explanation of this practice, the website notes scholarly interest in Aramaic, as the language Jesus probably spoke most of the time. It is possible also, as the website notes, that some of the Greek manuscripts of our gospels might derive from Aramaic originals. However, it is quite another thing to use Aramaic manuscripts as the basis of a translation into English. In effect, what is happening here is that a text that no significant part of the church has ever viewed as inspired is being used to communicate the Word of God in English. This alone, in my view, renders this translation unusable by those who want to access God’s Word.

### 4 False Appeal to Etymology

While not always affecting the translation, it should be noted that explanatory footnotes sometimes provide misleading or simply wrong information. In several notes, I saw, for instance, etymology is appealed to for a certain understanding of the text. However, while etymology – that is the “form,” or makeup of a word – can occasionally be helpful in defining very rare words, it is generally, as modern linguists all recognize, not a good guide to a word’s meaning. Consider, for instance, the English word “butterfly”: it is doubtful that

knowing what butter is and what a fly is will help much in defining the word. Yet we find such appeals scattered in the footnotes. See, for instance, the comment on the Greek word usually translated “appointed” or “declared” in Rom. 1:4: “The Greek word for ‘set apart’ comes from *horizo*, meaning ‘the horizon.’” While there is an obvious similarity between the sound of this Greek verb and the English word “horizon,” there is no evidence that the verb ever means “horizon” (at least none of the dictionaries of ancient Greek that I possess list it as a meaning). The worry is that this kind of faulty linguistic principle has been used to justify certain renderings in the text.

## 5 Questionable Interpretations

Similar to this last point, there are places where dubious claims are made about the text. For instance, *The Passion Translation* translates the last phrase of Romans 1:5 as “the gift of apostleship.” The translation claims that “grace” led to the “gift of apostleship.” A footnote justifies this rendering: “Note that grace comes before service or ministry.” If by this note it is meant that the Greek word for “grace” comes before the Greek word for “apostleship,” then the claim is accurate. But the note rather suggests that the Greek suggests that the *concept* of grace comes before and leads to the *concept* of apostleship. For this, there is no basis in the text. Interpretations noted in the footnotes are often even more problematic. A note on the Greek work *doulos* in Romans 1:1 claims that the word means “one who has chosen to serve a master out of love.” But *doulos* means simply “slave” or “servant”; and the millions of slaves in the Greco-Roman world in Paul’s day would have been quite surprised to learn they were serving their masters “out of love.”

## 6 Challenges to Meaning-Based Translations

Every translation, whatever its philosophy, faces the challenge of putting Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek words and phrases into English *when there does not seem to be a way to say the same thing with the*

*same possible ambiguity.* Take the phrase we just mentioned in Romans 1:5. The Greek connects two words equivalent to the English words “grace” and “apostleship” in a genitive construction. English has no equivalent construction, so the translator has to choose from possible options, each of which has a slightly different meaning: “grace of apostleship,” “the grace that consists of apostleship,” “the grace that apostleship demonstrates,” etc. Let me make a crucial point again: every translation from one language to another faces this problem. No translation philosophy avoids it. Yet the problem is generally more acute for meaning-based translations, since they are attempting to find colloquial English language to express the meaning of the original. Difficult decisions have to be made. What it comes down to, is this then: good translations make good choices. I am not sure that good choices have been consistently made in *The Passion Translation*. Often one particular interpretation of a text has been chosen and rendered into appropriate English – often obscuring other options for its meaning. Another verse illustrates this point: Rom. 8:29. This verse begins with a verb that might mean something like “know about ahead of time” or “choose ahead of time.” *The Passion Translation* renders “he knew all about us before we were born,” locking us into one of the alternatives.

## 7 The Problem of the “One-Man Band”

As we noted above, *The Passion Translation* is basically the product of one person. It is not clear who the consultants mentioned on the website are; nor is it clear what role they had in the work. But the worry is that we are too often hearing in this translation one particular voice. Yet no single person is up to the work of translating the Bible. No person can be an expert in all three languages and in all 66 books. This is why the best translations are produced by teams of scholars. The NIV, for instance, on which I work, is the product of the Committee on Bible Translation, a team of fifteen scholars from different parts of the world and from different evangelical theological traditions. This committee, in addition, has changed personnel many times since its founding in 1966. Moreover, the committee has sought input from outside scholars as it has done its work. A conservative estimate is that 200 evangelical scholars

have had an important voice in the NIV translation. By seeking input from so many different scholars, biases (which we are not even aware of) are cancelled out.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, there are some good moments in the translation. The rendering in Romans 8:19, “The entire universe is standing on tip-toe...” hits the nail on the head. However, for the reasons I have enumerated, I would counsel believers not to use *The Passion Translation* as their Word of God. Much better options in the “meaning-based” translation space are available (e.g., The Message, the NLT).