

What's Wrong With The Passion "Translation"?

By [Andrew Wilson](#) | Wednesday 6 January 2016

In the circles I move in, people are beginning to ask me about The Passion "Translation" (which, for reasons that will hopefully become clear in a moment, I am deliberately putting in scare quotes). Is it faithful? Do you use it? Should I read it devotionally? Publicly? Would you preach from it? Is it even a translation? Stuff like that. I was actually asked for my thoughts on the project very early on, via a good friend who is involved, so I had a heads-up before most people in the UK. But since then, partly through the influence of Bill Johnson (who is a fan), it's gained in popularity in the Pentecostal and charismatic world, and that's prompted people to start asking about it. Hence this post.

Personally, I think an awful lot of things are wrong with *TPT*, but before I get onto that, let me say something up front. I don't know Brian Simmons personally, but he seems to me like a genuine, gifted, intelligent and godly man with a passion for Jesus, who has put his best work into a project for years, in order to serve the church. He has worked hard and sacrificed a lot (he previously translated the Bible for a people group in Panama), and in many ways, I take my hat off to him. Given all that, it could seem cheap, in comparison, for people like me to sit here throwing rocks at the result. Yet for all that, the world is such that "translations" like this matter, and shape people, and have the power to do considerable damage to people's understanding of the scriptures. Brian and I are brothers, and we (presumably) disagree on something important. Neither of those truths should cancel out the other.

So, with that said, here are some of the things that are wrong with *TPT*.

1. It is not really a translation. Translations attempt to convey as accurately as possible the thought of the original, whether they lean towards the word-for-word (KJV) or thought-for-thought (NIV) end of the spectrum. The Passion "translation" inserts all kinds of concepts, words and ideas of which the original gives no hint whatsoever (despite the occasional footnotes which say "implied by the context"). My main expertise is on Paul, so I'll use a few examples from him, highlighting the additions in italics, but I imagine the same is true elsewhere.

a. This example comes from the promotional website. In [Gal 2:19](#), *hina theō zēsō*, which simply means "that I might live for God", has been "translated" as "so that I can live for God *in heaven's freedom*". To be clear: there is no indication whatsoever in the Greek of that sentence, or the rest of the chapter, that either heaven or its freedom are in view in this text. It's not a translation. It's an interpolation, or a gloss, or (more bluntly) an addition. I don't want to play the [Revelation 22](#) card, but Christians really shouldn't do this.

b. You would think that greetings were fairly straightforward to translate, which is why virtually all the major translations render [Phil 1:1](#) pretty much the same way: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus." But *TPT* throws in at least two ideas that fit the agenda of the version, but appear nowhere in the text: "*My name is Paul and I'm joined by my spiritual son Timothy, both of us passionate* servants of Jesus, the Anointed One." It doesn't stop there: in the next verse, when Paul simply says "Grace and peace to you," the "translation" reads, "*We decree over your lives the blessings of divine* grace and *supernatural* peace." Those comments may even be helpful (although in this case, I don't think they are), but the point is that whatever else they are, they are not translations of the original. At all.

c. In [Gal 1:6](#), when Paul expresses his amazement that the Galatians are turning aside "to a different gospel" (*eis heteron euangelion*), we have this: "a distorted gospel *of salvation by works*." Even if this reading of Galatians had not been greatly problematised, if not completely discredited, by the last forty years of Pauline scholarship, it would remain a sheer insertion into the text, rather than a faithful rendering of it.

d. The word *ethnikōs* in [Gal 2:14](#) is translated "like an Aramean" (!) rather than "as a Gentile", based on

some much later Aramaic translations (see below). This is doubly strange, because not only is it thoroughly inaccurate with respect to the Greek original, it is also more confusing for contemporary readers.

e. [Gal 6:1](#) takes *en tini paraptōmati*, or “in any transgression”, and turns it into “overtaken with a fault *and has fallen from the place of victory*.” This does not correspond to anything in the original, and seems to have been inserted as a Pentecostal catchphrase.

f. Various texts are “translated” as if “Messiah” and “Christ” are two different words, which is both puzzling and redundant (e.g. [Rom 1:4](#), “And now he is our Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ”), and risks creating confusion about both those terms and Paul’s meaning.

g. Sometimes, entire clauses are inserted for no obvious reason. So, in [Rom 1:8](#), we have: “I give thanks to God for all of you, *because it’s through your conversion to Jesus Christ, that you are becoming well known*. For the testimony of your *strong, persistent* faith is spreading throughout the world.” Where on earth does this lengthy insertion come from? How could it possibly render *hoti hē pistis humōn katangelletai en holō tō kosmō*? Is it trying to indicate that Christians will be famous, and not just our faith? Who knows?

2. Despite all these (and many, many other) examples of why it isn’t a translation, it presents itself as if it is. This, frankly, is the big problem. I don’t see anything wrong with dynamic readings or performances of biblical texts, in order to make them fresh to readers or hearers; I’ve done it [myself](#). But when we do this, we are not translating the text: we are inserting all kinds of glosses, interpretive opinions and explanatory notes, and producing something more like a targum than a translation. Now: if *TPT* called itself a targum, or a paraphrase, or a fresh interpretation of Scripture, or something like that, I would probably have no problem with it. But it calls itself a *translation*, and presents [itself](#) as appropriate for serious study and for preaching (“The Passion Translation is an excellent translation you can use as your primary text to seriously study God’s Word ... the text has been interpreted from the original language, carrying its original meaning and giving you an accurate, reliable expression of God’s original message”), even though it is repeatedly inserting words and thoughts that do not appear in the original. I find it hard to believe that anyone trained in biblical studies at a mainstream university or seminary would agree with statements like these.

3. It is “translated” by one man. The major translations are all worked on by committees of experts, partly to avoid the risks of idiosyncratic decisions, personal hobby-horses or controversial convictions (see below) being smuggled into the text. They debate specific words and clauses in detail, sometimes for hours, in order to make sure that they have captured the sense of the original fairly. When there is only one translator, all of those checks and balances are removed, and this problem is likely to be exacerbated when the translator in question has never been to a mainstream seminary or university; consequently, there are grammatical errors in the English itself, let alone the Greek (“would that infer” rather than “would that imply”, etc). Purely at the level of method, this sort of solo attempt is unwise.

4. The much-vaunted Aramaic approach to “translation” is built on very shaky foundations. The publishers make the bizarre [claim](#) that “one of the unique benefits of The Passion Translation is that it has recovered this often-neglected language by consulting these ancient biblical manuscripts,” (as if other translations didn’t use Aramaic manuscripts when appropriate), and then defend the fact that sometimes, there is “a preference for the Aramaic over the original Greek” (as if we could look at a fifth century Aramaic text, and use it to adjust the second century Greek text on which it was based). They also claim that “the books of Ezra and Daniel were originally written in this language”, when this is actually only true of parts of them ([Ezra 4:8-6:18](#); [7:12-26](#); [Daniel 2:4b-7:28](#)). Frankly, there is a slightly esoteric, even Gnostic, flavour to some of the pronouncements about the use of Aramaic in *TPT* (e.g. “We believe it’s time to recover this important original language of the Bible,” or “Greek speaks to the mind while Aramaic-Hebrew speaks powerfully to the heart,” or “this groundbreaking attempt to re-introduce the passion and fire of the Bible to English readers.”) When it gets to the point of saying [things like](#), “By referencing the text written in the very language in which Jesus taught, and then overlaying that with the Greek, we are able to translate the root meanings of the Scriptures in a new, fresh way” - in other words, we *start* with the much later Aramaic manuscripts and then “overlay” it with the early Greek ones - then major warning flags need to be waved.

5. The statements about contemporary scholarship are also highly misleading. “Recent biblical scholarship has begun tracing many of Jesus’ teachings back to an original Aramaic source. Some even argue the original Greek manuscripts were translations of even more original Aramaic sources.” Only two biblical scholars are cited in support of these bizarre claims, Craig Keener and Mike Bird, and neither of them say anything like what the website implies they say about original Aramaic *texts* (although everyone agrees, of course, that Jesus *spoke* in Aramaic). I actually followed this up with Mike Bird, and his response was short and to the point; I won’t quote it, but it was effectively Australian for “I don’t think this person is correct.” I don’t know of any biblical scholars who think we can reconstruct an original Aramaic *text* with any level of accuracy, or who think the Peshitta is anything other than a translation of Greek originals.

6. Statements like this, from the promotional [website](#), provide their own rebuttal: “In past translations wonderfully gifted scholars were trained to focus on other factors besides the emotion of the text. As Brian has studied the original biblical manuscripts, he has uncovered what he believes is the love language of God that has been missing from other translations.” For all the merits of communicating Scripture with passion – and this is something I work hard at doing myself – we have to be clear that this sort of floaty self-endorsement does not add up to a translation methodology.

7. The proliferation of new translations is itself a problem, reflecting both the fragmentation of the church, and the contemporary preference to have a version that perfectly suits us and our preferences. [Eddie Arthur](#) is good on this, and there are also [websites](#) that track the ways the (very obvious) theological agenda of the translator has skewed the text (for all that, as a charismatic, I disagree with many of the reviewer’s convictions on this one). Many of these criticisms, of course, could also be levelled at *The Message* – and, in my opinion, fairly. But whereas Eugene Peterson was clearly paraphrasing the original, and few people read it as a translation, *TPT* explicitly claims to be a “translation”, to the point of suggesting it be used for serious biblical study (a claim I very much doubt Peterson would make for *The Message*). In contributing yet another new “translation” to an overcrowded market, particularly one characterised by the flaws above, I fear Brian Simmons has simply added to the confusion.

As I said at the outset, Brian Simmons is a brother, and one who has put in a huge amount of work on something very close to his heart. But the result, for a variety of reasons, is not good. I wouldn’t recommend people use *TPT*, and if they do, I would recommend they recognise that a) it is not actually a translation, and b) they use other versions as their primary texts for study. I’d also suggest that pastors who have *TPT*-users in their congregations should clarify the difference between it and the standard translations, just to bring some definition (and that this clarification need not be accompanied by arm-waving or mouth-foaming!) God’s love language is not hidden, or missing; it is in plain sight in the many excellent translations we have available. The Word of God, in any language, is a book of love and literature, heart and head, passion and perceptiveness, foundations and fire. It doesn’t need adding to.

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