

The Word made Fresh: In defence of *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Peterson's Objective

Before Eugene Peterson began *The Message* he taught Hebrew and Greek for several years at a theological seminary. Becoming a pastor, he continued to live in the Biblical world whilst becoming very grounded and conversant with the contemporary world of North America. He noticed that archaic biblical language, 'language of Canaan' ('thee', 'thou', 'behold'..), alienated the biblical world for many. He decided to work on the originals and get the language of the Bible into the language of Today, and the language of Today into the language of the Bible. He did that for 30 years in one congregation. The result: *The Message*. It is radically rooted in the soil of Hebrew/Greek and, simultaneously, radically rooted in the soil of contemporary North America idiom and culture.

In his preface he states: "*The Message is a reading Bible. It is not intended to replace the excellent study Bibles that are available. My intent here is simply to get people reading it who don't know that the Bible is read-able at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again*". His passion is for people to pick up a Bible that reads in the style and idiom of contemporary literature – as it was for its original readers. He is doing for us today what William Tyndale did for the people of his day, translating the Greek and Hebrew so that '*the boy that driveth the plough*' can understand what is Written. Thus Peterson wants his readers to have an immediate world to live in as they read, not a remote world needing them to decipher and figure out what it says. He wants the Bible not to be a stain glass window in a church but a book to read on the lounge table.

His chief motive is to do what was originally done. When Isaiah preached, the original audience were addressed in their own contemporary idiom. They did not have to reach for the dictionary to understand. This is because God always spoke within the framework of the idiom and convention of His hearers - in the vernacular, *their* vernacular. The original Word came in terms familiar to the original audience, terms and concepts taken from the temple, the market place, the home, the military etc. Thus ordinary every day Christians could understand the medium of communication; so Paul in his rich theological masterpiece Ephesians addresses slaves and children!

The Originals and Translations: From the truth of the Museum onto the moving Train of modern living

For any person wanting to evaluate *The Message* it is necessary to understand something on the 'philosophy' in translating any documents from one language medium into another. When it comes to the Bible, it is crucial to remember that *only* the Hebrew and Greek writings are inspired as the inscripturated Written Word of God; they are the originals. 'It stands written!'. *Everything else* is a translation, reliable in so far as it faithfully reproduces those inspired originals. The same applies to the most ancient translations, from the LXX into Greek to *The Message* into late 20 century North American English. Thus originals are fixed and final - textual variants aside - whilst translations are fluid and in flux. One is like the museum, bearing witness to historical

artefacts, the other to a moving train, the daily cut and thrust of modern people, continually on the move. Translations come and go (as languages do) whilst originals remain unchanged. What any translator aims to do is to take 'museum truth' and talk about it to the people on the train – not an easy task!

Broadly speaking, there are two ways translations can be done:

- (1) provide an exact word for the original words – a 'word-for-word' translation. Here is a very stark illustration in Leviticus 19:23 that brings out well the issue for us:

'And when you come into the land and have planted all of the tree of food, then you shall circumcise its fruit, its foreskin, and it shall be uncircumcised for you three years; it shall not be eaten'.

This is what the Bible actually says. This is the 'word-for-word' translation. It is very technical, time & culture bound, and is difficult for the man on the train to understand. Yet it provides the 'stable historical core' of what we must deal with.

- (2) Communicate the sense of the original in terms of the language of today – a 'thought-for-thought' translation. The ESV on this verse:

"When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten.

Here there are different and fewer words used in order for the reader of the translation to understand the sense of the originals. This approach is built on the conviction that you can distinguish between the literal forms of the original words from their literal content of meaning or 'sense'. We talk of 'museum-truth' in terms that the commuter can relate to, normally using a lot of words to get the point across.

These two approaches in translation can be best described as two polarities: on the one hand is ***the Word of God Written***, and on the other ***the Word of God Spoken***; the '*there-and-then*' of Biblical wording (what it meant) and idiom and the '*here-and-now*' of our wording and idiom (what it means). These two poles are extremely important to understand in appreciating *The Message*.

Where the differences in translations occur is in how much the original wording needs to be kept in order for the communication of its thoughts into the vernacular. Answers to this question are all placed somewhere along this continuum of a stricter, chaste approach which attempts to keep as much of the original wording as is possible (KJV, NASB, ESV), to the other end which seeks to bring out the meaning of the originals for us today at as much cost to original wording as is needed (the free paraphrases of such J B Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English*, *The New Living Translation*, *The Message* etc). Yet at the end of the day, all would agree that the most important task is to bring out more than 'exact words', *we must bring out the exact thoughts and sense*

intended by the originals. However, we also need to realise that the further one strays from the forms and words of the originals in the endeavour to communicate meaning in the vernacular, the greater the danger of imposing an *interpretation* onto the Written Word. We can end up with not what Paul actually said but what interpreters think Paul meant. It ends up very subjective. Subjectivity is in *all* translations, but less in those ones that choose to leave the originals as ambiguously as they stand, even at risk of contemporary misunderstanding.

If we keep these things in mind, we will be in a much better position to provide an enlightened verdict on *The Message*. Given that his work is in the genre of a free paraphrase, only real question to ask is: *Does Peterson bring out the sense of the originals?* Here is my verdict

How does *The Message* weigh in?

I believe that when we place *The Message* against the originals and understand what Peterson is trying to do, we find there are more positives than negatives. Some of the positives:

1. *The Message* often brings out the original meaning better than other translations (e.g. In Matthew 28: 20 none of the popular translations bring out the original as well as *The Message*: 'I will be with you *all the days*' is the Greek, 'always' (ESV) rather flat. 'I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day...' *The Message*. Peterson is much closer to the original Greek here, as well as the original intent of the words. [Actually, judging Peterson's work would require a good knowledge of the meaning of Hebrew and Greek originals.]
2. A great advantage of any paraphrase is in the use of *picture-language*. Hebrew has very colourful idioms and pictures which may be translated without us truly grasping the meaning or power of it. (Idioms of dead languages are the hardest part of translation). English tends to be more abstract, unlike Afrikaans. Peterson in *The Message* excels in using colourful modern idioms to convey biblical meanings, with masterful skill. 'Gird up your loins' is translated as 'roll up your sleeves' *The Message* in 1 Peter 1:13. So, this too is more faithful to the original than other translations.
3. Peterson brings out *the thrust and passion of the originals* in a way that other translations do not. His translation has hands and feet to carry us away. For example, when I am respond to a knock on the door, 'I'm coming', it does not tell you my passion or intent communicated. 'OK, I *am* coming!' does. Thus with Peterson, who take the liberty to add in words to communicate what he believes in the thrust of the divine communication. 'Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings – meetings, meetings, meetings – I can't stand one more!' (Isaiah 1:13f).

Though he is not faithful to the exact wording of the text (as the ESV above), yet he is more faithful to the divine emotions in this verse than any other translation.

4. The layout and form of *The Message* is more in keeping with the originals. Thus he has no verses imposed in the paragraphs, keeping the literary flow very well.
5. He confronts our shameful malady of coming to the Bible *presuming we know what it says*. 'You make me want to vomit!' is how Peterson translates the words of Jesus to the lukewarm Laodiceans. This is a much better way of putting Jesus' words than the usual 'spit out of My mouth' and surely is how Jesus would say it today (the point of *any* translation).
6. Since Peterson loves poetry and English literature, his translation choices for the English words he uses are normally very good, contemporary, and pleasing to the ear – bringing out the Word as it really should be understood by us today. In The Revelation we have a 'huge Dragon' (better than 'large') and 'an angle plummeting down to earth'. These choice of words is actually a more descriptive and arresting choice of words, bringing the scene alive for us today.
7. Lastly, *The Message* is brilliantly at doing what any preacher must do: take the original form and meaning of the Hebrew and Greek, and, through their own unique human personality, *make that Word fresh and flesh for the congregation*. Thus *The Message* is an excellent example of the Word Spoken (as against the Word Written).

Some Negatives.

1. Because it is so well done, people can forget that *they are reading the interpretation of Eugene Peterson*. It can be forgotten that the work is a free paraphrase more than a tight representation of the *Written Word*. This is the greatest subtle danger. When quoting from *The Message* we cannot say 'It stands written!' but must say 'Peterson says' (but remember our Leviticus illustration above; the same applies to the ESV!... 'the ESV says').
2. By only using *The Message* readers can become lazy and forget the work that they themselves need to be doing in getting into the original historical meaning of the Scriptures. Yes, Peterson in does encourage his readers to do that, but many of his fans forget that.
3. Since many places in the Bible are interpreted differently by competent scholars, we are always reading Peterson's interpretive choices, correct or incorrect as they may be. Though this cannot be avoided with most translations today, it is more true with his work. Only Hebrew and Greek scholars will know.

4. *The Message* is very culture bound and does not always read well to certain people groups outside of North America. I hope that someone in SA should do the same for our culture! (*'Esau was a man of the veld'*)

All in all, I believe we can answer: Yes, Peterson does bring out the sense of the original for us today in a very helpful and illuminating manner. I personally think his work is brilliant and a master-piece of modern Bible translation not to be missed.

In Conclusion

Please remember that using any paraphrase as your main Bible runs the risk of moving too far away from the historical nature of the Written word. It is what *was* said by God back then, that is to be our point of reference, not what it might say to us today. We need to continually remind ourselves that the Bible is *firstly a historical document not addressed to me* ('the-there-and-then' principle). Once that is understood, only then are we in the right place to begin to appreciate the urgent need for the Word to become 'flesh', that Word addressed for me in 'the-here-and-the-now'. It is the truth in the museum that needs to impact the life on the train, not the other way around. The Revelation must be made relevant!

Finally, I may be so bold as to say that either you can spend your next 30 years studying Greek and Hebrew to mine out the full wealth that is in the originals, both in matter and manner of what is written or you can take three good translations (one word-for-word, one thought-for-thought and one in-between translation) and begin to enjoy the full dimensions of what is written. I recommend the Hebrew and Greek, but if you do not have time for that why not read the ESV, the NIV, and then the excellent contemporary translation *The Message* and enjoy reading the fruit of a man who has poured his life into the originals and the local congregation, and now brilliantly communicated his life-work for any person to read?

The proof is in the eating!

(by Dr P B Hartwig 2013)