

**FEEDING THE SHEEP MOLDY BREAD: AN EVALUATION OF  
THE PASSION TRANSLATION**

By

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## **Feeding the Sheep Moldy Bread: An Evaluation of The Passion Translation**

Church history is replete with divisions. Some are caused by foundational doctrinal disagreements, which pertain to matters of orthodoxy and therefore separate Christians from non-Christians. Others result from disagreements over secondary but important matters that affect the organization and structure of the church and have therefore led to the formation of denominations. In recent times, further divisions have taken place within Christianity over the question of English Bible translation. In this way, one of the blessings given to the church simultaneously presents a problem: the large number of available English translations. With more than 100 major translation projects completed, others ongoing, and several to come, there has been much debate over which translation is best.<sup>1</sup> The core of this debate concerns standards for translation.<sup>2</sup> Some people argue that there is only one authoritative translation in English, others argue there is only one authoritative textual tradition and others argue over translation methodology.

There is a new English translation, which is the subject of this paper: *The Passion Translation* (TPT), translated by Brian Simmons.<sup>3</sup> As attested by its endorsements, TPT is growing in its influence in public ministry and private devotion – both uses of which Simmons strongly encourages.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I argue that the use of TPT for both public ministry and private devotion is inappropriate. Firstly, for the purposes of this argument, I assume general agreement that the use

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<sup>1</sup> John V. Madison, “English Versions of the New Testament: A Bibliographical List,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 44, no. 3/4 (1925): 261-88. doi:10.2307/3260255.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Simmons, *The Passion Translation New Testament (2nd Edition): With Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Songs*, (Racine, WI: Broadstreet Publishing Group, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

of Scripture is central to public ministry and private devotion, but I briefly review relevant Biblical evidence in support of this assumption. Secondly, I summarize standard approaches to translation for the purposes of comparison. The literature discussing translation methodology is extensive and so the focus of this evaluation is on the suitability and application of the translator's stated objectives, and the translation itself, rather than the theory of the stated methodology. Thirdly, I analyze the translation of specific Scriptures, interacting with academic commentary. Finally, I draw conclusions based on the analysis conducted, and make recommendations about the suitability of TPT for public ministry and private devotion.

### **Background**

According to TPT's publisher, Simmons, the lead translator, is a "Bible teacher, linguist, minister, and former missionary. As a missionary, he and his wife, Candice, pioneered church plants in Central America. As a linguist, Brian co-translated the Kuna New Testament for the Paya-Kuna people of Panama."<sup>5</sup>

In an interview on the television show, *Sid Roth's It's Supernatural!*, Simmons gives this account of a day in 2009:

Jesus Christ came into my room, he breathed on me, and he commissioned me...And he spoke to me and said 'I'm commissioning you to translate the bible into the translation project I'm giving you to do'...And he promised that he would help me and he promised me he would give me secrets of the Hebrew language...I believe that when he breathed on me, the spirit of revelation was given.<sup>6</sup>

While Simmons explains that he is not equating himself with the original authors of Scripture, he does continue to say "I felt downloads coming, instantly... It was like I got a chip put inside of me, I got a connection inside of me to hear him [God] better, to understand the scriptures better

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<sup>5</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, "About the Lead Translator," accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/about-the-lead-translator/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sid Roth's It's Supernatural, *Rekindle Your Passion for God*, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vMTufSKaY8>, 15:26-17:22.

and hopefully to translate.” The interviewer then asks Simmons, “Are you finding that when people read the translation you are working on it almost does a mind bypass and goes directly into the heart?” Simmons replies, “I think that is a brilliant way to say it. The poetic language of Hebrew and Aramaic release something inside of us, it’s divine, it’s full of revelation...it’s like thinking with your heart.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite a number of recent translations, including the 2011 revision of the NIV, the promotional material offers a justification for a new English translation, claiming that vocabulary undergoes a dramatic shift each passing century, and thus a new translation is needed to accommodate significant changes in the English language.<sup>8</sup>

To date, Simmons has translated the entire New Testament, as well as Genesis, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Isaiah. Among the numerous endorsements of TPT, Bill Johnson, of Bethel Church, Redding, describes it as “one of the greatest things to happen with Bible translation in [his] lifetime.” Ché Ahn, of HRock Church, Pasadena, claims that “...The Passion Translation will be the Bible of choice for the next Jesus people movement.” Research associate David Housholder says, “...finally I’ve found something that rivals the [translation] work of the great reformer [Martin Luther]. The Bible is an edgy book, and TPT returns that sword of the Word of God back to its razor-sharp edge and shine.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The preacher and his public proclamation: the nature of the preaching task**

Below is a summary of the Biblical perspectives on the nature of both preaching and private devotion, included to provide context before proceeding with the evaluation of TPT.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>9</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “Endorsements,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/endorsements>.

“Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:17, ESV). This is the command from the Chief Shepherd to Peter, and to each under-shepherd thereafter. God calls the preacher to one principal task: proclaiming the Word of God to the people of God. This pattern was established before the offices of the New Covenant church, stretching as far back as the model for prophetic ministry in the Old Covenant, where God explains, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” (Deut 18:18, ESV). The preacher’s task, then, is not to present his own words, but rather the words that God has spoken, that build the church (Eph 4:12 ESV), sanctify God’s people (Jn 17:17), and buttress the truth through the church (1 Tim 3:15, ESV).

In Acts 20:27, Paul “...did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole counsel of God” (ESV). Preaching the Scriptures was the model of Jesus himself who “...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:27, ESV). Preaching the Scriptures was also the model in the book of Nehemiah, where in 8:8 (ESV) we see that “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Scripture further teaches that God’s Word equips a pastor for all his work, including that of preaching: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17, ESV).

Writers, reflecting on the task of preaching, submit to the teaching of Scripture discussed above. Peter Adam defines preaching as “the explanation and application of the word in the assembled congregation of Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Jason Meyer argues that “...the ministry of the word in

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 61.

Scripture is stewarding and heralding God's word in such a way that people encounter God through his word."<sup>11</sup>

What is common among these commentators, and the Scriptures discussed, is the understanding that the content of preaching must be the Word of God. Preaching, then, is not a public announcement of personal reflections, but rather the proclamation and explanation of the truth from God's Word.

TPT is increasingly used for the purposes of preaching, as intended by the publishers who state, "The Word of God was never meant to be studied in personal isolation, but proclaimed and preached in community... The Passion Translation has been crafted with modern English readers and listeners in mind, which is why it is ideal for modern English churches."<sup>12</sup> Given this, and in light of the discussion above, the evaluation of TPT as Scripture is the key to determining its suitability for use in preaching and public reading.

### **The Christian and his private study: the nature of the devotional task**

The Bible contains detailed instruction on how we are to grow spiritually in relation to the Word of God. "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Josh 4:18, ESV). "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11, ESV). "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 119:11, ESV). "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4, ESV). What is evident here is that a Christian must seriously study the Word of God, speaking it, meditating on it, storing it up and delighting in it.

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<sup>11</sup> Jason C Meyer, *Preaching: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 23.

<sup>12</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, "Endorsements," accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/endorsements/>.

The promotional material for TPT makes a number of claims regarding its suitability for and impact on private study of the Scriptures:

This translation philosophy will benefit your serious study of Scripture in several ways... This version taps into the love language of God, letting the words of Scripture go through the human soul, past the defenses of our mind, and into our spirit... We are thrilled to offer this accurate, faithful, clear, and readable translation for your serious study of God's Word....<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the determination of whether TPT is in fact a translation that can be called the Word of God is the key to whether TPT is suitable for private devotional purposes.

### **Evaluation of the translation**

This evaluation of TPT focuses on translator competence (the composition and credentials of the translation team), text selection, translation philosophy (definition and method), and analysis of examples of both New and Old Testament translations.

#### **1. Strengths of TPT**

TPT aims to “bring God’s fiery heart of love and truth to this generation, merging the emotion and truth of God’s Word...”<sup>14</sup> While some theological traditions may rightly question elements of this phrasing, the general motivation of communicating truth emotively deserves some consideration. The contours of the original languages of the Bible are full of rich narrative, majestic poetry and varying emotion. Good translations should aim to reflect these dynamics, and there is an argument to be made that careful attention should be paid to these matters in translation.

A further stated motivation for TPT is that “God refuses to meet us only in an intellectual way. God also wants to meet us heart level, so we must let the words go heart deep—which is

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<sup>13</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

what we're trying to do with this project."<sup>15</sup> While there may again be some hesitation about the particular phrasing used, it is true that God desires for both our minds (Rom 12:2, ESV) and our hearts (Matt 22:37, ESV) to be enlisted in understanding and loving God. To this end, within the suitable glosses of words in English, there is a case to be made for translating in such a way that the mind clearly understands the message, and the heart is stirred by its content and form.

A potentially helpful formatting feature is that “portions not in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts, but are implied from the context and their essential meaning [are italicized].”<sup>16</sup> The NASB also includes this feature, which might be useful to some readers.

Finally, an innovative feature is the use of detailed footnotes to articulate relevant information about translation choices, such as “cultural and historical aspects lost to modern readers; important reading of Old Testament verses in light of Jesus Christ; variations in ancient manuscripts; alternative translations; cross references to other Scriptures in the Bible; renderings which depart from traditional expressions; contextual implications; and verses which use the lens of Aramaic for greater insight.”<sup>17</sup> Again, some Christians may rightly disagree with particular uses, yet the feature has the potential to aid the reader in better understanding the translation decisions and other relevant information.

## 2. Translator competence

### *a. Credentials of the single translator*

A common fallacy when making an argument is an “appeal to authority” where the proposer of an argument asserts that the argument must be true based on the credentials of the person making the argument. The corresponding fallacy when responding to an argument is the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



“*ad-hominem*” where the respondent claims that the argument is not true because the person making the argument does not have suitable qualifications. Both of these are problematic because the strength or weakness of an argument is based on its premise and evidence, not its proposer. This kind of paradigm does not apply, however, when considering matters of professional competence, where the credentials, training and experience of a person conducting an activity is directly related to the outcome.

Regarding Simmons’ official training, his education includes a doctorate from an unaccredited institution.<sup>18</sup> This unaccredited doctorate is not in linguistics, biblical languages or any related field, but in the subject of prayer.<sup>19</sup> Thus Simmons does not have any recognized qualifications in any fields relevant to the task of translation. With respect to experience in translation, the publisher claims that Simmons was “co-translator for the *Kuna New Testament* with New Tribes Mission...”, providing him with a “...linguistic and biblical-languages background...”<sup>20</sup>

There is, however, no evidence to support the claim that Simmons co-translated the Kuna New Testament. As mentioned above, Simmons states that he was a member of a church planting team sent by New Tribes Mission, a missions organisation, now called Ethnos360. Don Pederson, Director of the International Ministries Office of Ethnos360, confirms this is correct, and that Simmons “served in Panama from July 1980 until May 1987 with a one year furlough in 1985.”<sup>21</sup> Some of Simmons’ other claims, however, do not appear to be accurate. Pederson not only speaks as a Director of Ethnos360, but also in light of his personal relationship with Simmons. In 1977,

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<sup>18</sup> Wagner University, “*Accreditation*,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://wagner.university/accreditation/>.

<sup>19</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “*FAQs*,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Don Pederson, ‘Brian Simmons and The Passion Translation,’ Email, December 5, 2019.

Pederson was in the New Tribes Mission missionary training program with Simmons, where they spent time working together.<sup>22</sup> Pederson, an expert linguist, having obtained both a Master of Arts and a PhD in linguistics from University of Southern California, states, “Brian [Simmons] is not a linguist of any sort.”<sup>23</sup>

Pederson elaborates, “Brian [Simmons] has claimed that he did linguistic work and translated the Bible into the Paya-Kuna language. This is not the case. Our church planting team worked in partnership with Keith Forster of Wycliffe Bible Translators.”<sup>24</sup> Wycliffe Bible Translators confirm that the translation was performed by Keith and Wilma Forster, with Kuna Pastor Lino Smith, making no mention of Simmons, and that the New Testament in Paya-Kuna was completed in 1995, 8 years after Simmons left New Tribes Mission.<sup>25</sup>

According to Pederson, it is possible that Simmons “...may have had some involvement in doing some comprehension checking in the early stages of the translation project....”<sup>26</sup>

Comprehension checking, or testing, is one of the components of evaluating the results of translation. In comprehension testing, according to Mildred L. Larson, the objective is “to see whether or not the translation is understood correctly by speakers of the language who have not seen the translation previously. It is designed to find out what the translation is communicating to the audience for whom it is intended.”<sup>27</sup> Comprehension testing essentially ensures that the results of translation are meaningful in the receptor language, after translation has occurred. Thus, conducting comprehension testing cannot be construed as the act of translation itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Wycliffe Bible Publishers, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.wycliffe.org/blog/posts/part-of-the-team-the-whole-bible-for-the-kuna>.

<sup>26</sup> Don Pederson, ‘Brian Simmons and The Passion Translation,’ Email, December 5, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1984), 492-493.

In summary, the evidence suggests that Simmons does not possess the training, skills and experience necessary to produce a reliable translation.

*b. Translation committee vs. single translator*

In support of the single translator process of translation, the publisher notes:

While Brian serves as the lead translator for The Passion Translation, every book (including the numerous footnotes) is evaluated by respected scholars and editors.... Single-author translations have deep, historical roots. In the early church Jerome composed the Latin Vulgate; during the Reformation Martin Luther translated the original biblical languages into German; William Tyndale's English translation later impacted the King James Version...his work has been theologically reviewed by professionals such as Rick Wadholm Jr. (PhD), Gary S. Greig (PhD), Jacqueline Grey (BTh, PhD) Jeremy Bouma (ThM), and others.<sup>28</sup>

The majority of translations are completed by committees of experienced scholars who possess the necessary skills to render an accurate translation, although there have been a few notable exceptions where generally accurate translations have been completed by individual translators like William Tyndale, Martin Luther, or N.T. Wright. The difference between the solo efforts of Simmons in comparison to these individuals is that they each had exceptionally high levels of training and competence in the original languages, something that Simmons does not possess. In general, individual translations tend to be highly personalized, reflecting the personal preferences of the translator. When there is a diverse and qualified committee, personal expression is prevented from dominating the process.

Another concern is that none of the professionals listed as reviewers appear to have experience in the fields of linguistics, biblical languages and translation, except for Gary S. Greig, who was associate professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Regent University, School of Divinity. These reviewers could be considered somewhat sectarian since the majority of their published materials relate particularly to the study of Pentecostalism, not biblical and linguistic

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<sup>28</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, "FAQs," accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

studies. Nonetheless, these individuals are reviewers, as opposed to co-translators, and so TPT is functionally a single-translator translation with some external review.

### 3. Text selection

The first stage of the translation process is the selection of accurate source texts, or manuscripts, from which to translate.<sup>29</sup> For the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament, the primary text used for TPT is the Masoretic Text, which has sufficient attestation via other manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other relevant ancient texts.<sup>30</sup> Any transmission errors present in the Masoretic Text are correctable in conjunction with other manuscripts, though Simmons does not seem to cite these even in cases where this is crucial to manuscript accuracy.<sup>31</sup> The reliability of the Masoretic text has led to its adoption as the standard text, most commonly accessed in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). The usage of this text is pervasive to the extent that Gordon D. Fee states that “All contemporary English versions use it as their primary source text for the Old Testament.”<sup>32</sup> Whilst the use of the BHS in TPT is positive, the problems arise in Simmons’ use of other ancient texts. Several translations and footnotes indicate that Simmons does not properly understand the process of textual criticism to attest the original Hebrew reading, nor the source texts themselves. An example would be Simmons’ use of the Aramaic Psalms, of which the earliest copy we have is dated around 800 AD.<sup>33</sup> Andrew G. Shead, a member of the NIV Bible Translation Committee, observes, “None of these considerations seem to weigh with Simmons, because his aim does not appear to be the reconstruction of the original

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<sup>29</sup> Frederick C. Grant, *Translating the Bible* (Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1961), 116.

<sup>30</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew G Shead, “Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of The Psalms (The Passion Translation)” *Themelios* 43.1, (2018): 59.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 112.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew G Shead, “Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of The Psalms (The Passion Translation)” *Themelios* 43.1, (2018): 60.

text.... As a general rule, when ancient versions disagree over the original Hebrew, Simmons either ignores the problem or uses all of them.”<sup>34</sup>

For the Greek of the New Testament, there is a more challenging decision to be made regarding textual tradition due to the approximately 5,400 extant manuscripts. There is almost entire agreement that the critical Greek text—from which we now translate the New Testament—contains the entirety of the original text either in the main body or in the text variant footnotes.<sup>35</sup> The standard critical editions of the Greek text are the *Nestle-Aland 28<sup>th</sup> Edition* and *United Bible Society 5<sup>th</sup> edition*. The primary departure from this textual tradition is the *Textus Receptus*, from which the *King James Version* and the *New King James Version*—with footnoting of variant readings—is translated. Simmons recognizes that there are numerous variants between the critical text and the *Textus Receptus* when he states, “The KJV includes several passages most Bible scholars believe were not in the original text, reflecting the inferior manuscript *Textus Receptus*.”<sup>36</sup> Aside from these versions, Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss state that “all other modern versions follow the critical text.”<sup>37</sup>

TPT uses the NA27, but, according to the publisher, includes “insights from the Syriac Peshitta, as well as the Roth text.”<sup>38</sup> The use of the Peshitta text, and the Roth text (which is included in an English translation by Andrew Gabriel Roth from Aramaic texts, and is based on the Peshitta text anyway) are inappropriate. Firstly, the earliest manuscripts we have of the Aramaic texts of the New Testament are dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century; and secondly, Simmons makes a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 113.

<sup>36</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 114.

<sup>38</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

text-critical error because the Syriac Peshitta is a dialect of Aramaic distinct from the Galilean dialect which Jesus spoke.<sup>39</sup> This refutes Simmons' justification of including insights from the Syriac Peshitta on the basis that it is "widely known that Aramaic was the language Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest Christians spoke."<sup>40</sup>

The publisher is correct that, "while it is generally agreed upon that Greek was the language in which the New Testament was written, for several decades there has been a debate surrounding the primacy of Greek versus Aramaic as original texts for the New Testament," and that, "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."<sup>41</sup> However, the mere presence of the debate does not justify the use of Aramaic (especially irrelevant dialects) as a source language for translation of the New Testament. Simmons acknowledges that Greek is generally accepted as being the original language of the New Testament, so the mere presence of minority alternate views does not justify arguing the substitution of Aramaic sources.

Additionally, the publisher claims that, "it's time to bring this forgotten, neglected language [Aramaic] into the translation equation because of how influential the language was during the first and second centuries on the biblical world and the Bible itself."<sup>42</sup> The publisher continues, "this translation reclaims lost Aramaic texts, bringing the full texture of God's Word to the surface, and helping you recapture the original essence of the teachings of Jesus and His disciples."<sup>43</sup> The use of "forgotten," "neglected" and "lost" as adjectives of the Aramaic texts is

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<sup>39</sup> Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, "Aramaic" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 72.

<sup>40</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, "FAQs," accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

surprising, since almost all modern translations make comparisons with, and draw insights from, other relevant ancient texts (Aramaic included) when translating the New Testament from the Greek manuscripts. This indicates an ignorance of the process of translation in general. Further, the use of these terms strongly resembles the language of gnostic texts, which regularly claim to provide secret, lost, or hidden information.

The publisher makes one final innovative claim that “Greek speaks to the mind while Aramaic and Hebrew speak powerfully to the heart.” A feature of this esoteric rhetoric is the striking resemblance it bears to the Islamic view that the “*Qur’an*’s essence as Allah’s very words is tied to the Arabic tongue.”<sup>44</sup> Christians do not believe that there is one holy or efficacious language, as demonstrated by the inspired New Testament writers who regularly quoted directly from the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament), referring to it as Scripture.

In summary, the level of confusion demonstrated in selecting and discussing source texts leads to significant doubt as to the reliability of TPT as a whole.

#### 4. Translation philosophy

The task of translation is to convey the meaning of a message in an original language in a receptor language.<sup>45</sup> In the translation of text, translators agree that their task is to communicate this message so that the meaning that would have been understood by the readers of the original language will be understood by the readers in the receptor language.<sup>46</sup> There is, however, debate over what form the translation must take: should it aim to produce the form found in the original language, or to produce a form that is natural in the receptor language? If the primary goal is to match the form of the translated text to the original language, this approach to translation is

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<sup>44</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur’an* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 52.

<sup>45</sup> John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 20

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

referred to as literal. If the primary goal is to produce a form of the translated text that is natural to the receptor language, this type of approach to translation is referred to as idiomatic.<sup>47</sup> In practice, however, neither of these approaches is perfectly attainable because of the nature of language itself. Instead, the translated text usually falls somewhere on a spectrum proposed by Beekman and Callow, containing 4 broad categories: highly literal, modified literal, idiomatic, and unduly free.<sup>48</sup>

Highly literal (which would essentially amount to an interlinear) translations are unacceptable because they might convey grammatical form but lose meaning in the receptor language. Unduly free translations (often incorrectly referred to as paraphrases) are unacceptable because whilst they may communicate a similar general idea, they lack precision and may lose meaning that is communicated by grammatical form of the original text. Acceptable translations typically fall into the categories of modified literal and idiomatic translations as a whole, but individual translations always contain at least some components of both. As Dave Brunn states, “Every translation fluctuates back and forth along this continuum [between modified literal and idiomatic]—some more than others—but all translations vary in their degree of literalness from passage to passage, verse to verse and even word to word.”<sup>49</sup> Whatever approach is selected, Brunn states that, “...all [translators] are agreed that the meaning of the original must be preserved in the translation.”<sup>50</sup>

Central to the objective of an accurate translation is to avoid adding, subtracting, or transforming information that is necessary for communicating meaning.<sup>51</sup> If the translator wants to claim that the meaning of the original text is preserved, such alterations must not be made.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 20.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 38.



Naturally, some adjustments are needed to convey meaning in the receptor language accurately (for example, when translating a Greek substantive into English, an implied noun is often supplied for the sentence to make sense). This is not an alteration of the meaning, but rather the form.

Certain other translations are commonly referred to as paraphrases. This word is inappropriate when discussing translation philosophy because, by definition, it refers to two different statements in the same language that have the same meaning.<sup>52</sup> Rather, what are commonly called paraphrases are better classified as the extreme end of the category “unduly free.” This paper uses the latter term.

The publisher states that:

“The Passion Translation’s philosophy is that the meaning of God’s original message to the world has priority over its exact form, which is why our goal is to communicate the meaning of Scripture as clearly and naturally as possible in modern English. Brian and other reviewers have sought to remain faithful to the original biblical languages by preserving their literal meaning, yet flexible enough to convey God’s original message in a way modern English speakers can understand.”<sup>53</sup>

In light of the discussion above, the theory of this approach is not unique to TPT and is followed by many other translations as an objective.

### Analysis of examples

These examples evaluate whether Simmons applies the approach discussed above, and demonstrate some categories of translation error that are broadly representative of TPT.

#### **2 Timothy 4:1-2**

**NA28:** “Διαμαρτύρομαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, τοῦ μέλλοντος κρίνειν ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς, καὶ τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῦ, κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, ἐπίστηθι εὐκαιρῶς ἀκαιρῶς, ἔλεγξον, ἐπιτίμησον, παρακάλεσον, ἐν πάσῃ μακροθυμίᾳ καὶ διδαχῇ.”

**ESV:** “...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>53</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

**TPT:** "...proclaim the Word of God *and stand upon it no matter what!* Rise to the occasion and preach when it is convenient and when it is not. Preach in the full expression of the Holy Spirit—with wisdom and patience as you instruct and teach the people."

The publisher suggests that the insertion of implications like "*and stand upon it no matter what!*" assists the reader in understanding the meaning of the text.<sup>54</sup> Whilst this idea is practiced by most translations in a few necessary cases, the publisher indicates that it is used as TPT's general approach by stating that the TPT "is an expansive translation, expanding the essential meaning of God's original Word in order to make God's essential message to you and the world clear and readable."<sup>55</sup> This runs contra to the stated objective of communicating the meaning of God's Word, choosing instead to expand the meaning, resulting in high levels of interpretation.

The most significant alterations to the text concerns the addition of "Preach in the full expression of the Holy Spirit" and the deletion of "reprove" (ἐλεγεζον) and "rebuke" (ἐπιτίμησον). Neither the words nor the idea of "the full expression of the Holy Spirit" is present in the text. Further, the passage gives ministerial instruction on activities to be conducted with respect to the Word. According to Thomas Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, "Timothy was to correct error by the use of reasoned argument. He was to rebuke a straying conscience whenever the need appeared. He was to give hope to the fainthearted by providing tender encouragement in the face of discouraging opposition."<sup>56</sup> To delete the imperatives "reprove" and "rebuke," which are central to the text's meaning and instruction, is to tamper with the nature of God's commands to ministers.

### ***Psalm 18:1***

**BHS:** "אֶרְחֶמְךָ יְהוָה הַזִּקְנִי:"

**ESV:** "I love you, O Lord, my strength."

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, "FAQs," accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 243.

**TPT:** “Lord, I passionately love you and I’m bonded to you, for now you’ve become my power!”

TPT here adds an adverb “passionately” and an additional claim “I’m bonded to you.” In his footnote to this verse, Simmons explains the translation:

David doesn’t employ the common Hebrew word for “love,” *’ahav*, but instead uses the Hebrew word for “pity” or “mercy.” How could David have mercy for God? The word he uses, *raham*, is the word used for a mother who loves and pities her child so much it manifests with a deep love and emotional bond. This concept, although difficult to convey in English, carries the thought of embrace and touch. It could actually be translated “Lord, I want to hug you.” Haven’t you ever felt like that?<sup>57</sup>

This is a significant linguistic error. The verb form of love (*raham*) in this text is in the *qal* stem, whereas the meanings “pity” or “mercy” are glosses of the *piel* stem (HALOT). Further, this is a double translation, which Shead argues “only serves to distance the reader from the original.”<sup>58</sup>

The result is a rendering more like the Amplified Version than a translation, demonstrating that Simmons does not seem able to precisely express meaning in English, opting rather to include multiple renderings of single verbs. While there are occasions where double translations may be appropriate, Simmons’ frequent use of them appears to be a matter of personal preference or linguistic incompetence, rather than fidelity to the text. Simmons’ word choices and sentence structure also significantly alter the style, to the extent that Shead observes, “Simmons has changed the genre of the Psalms from Near Eastern poetry to poetic prose.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, TPT strays so far from accepted translation practice that, even when compared with the less literal methodology of Eugene Nida, Shead states that Simmons’ work “would not be recognised as legitimate by any Bible translation society in the world, past or present.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> BroadStreet Publishing Group, “FAQs,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/faqs/>.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew G. Shead, “Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of The Psalms (The Passion Translation)” *Themelios* 43.1, (2018): 58.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 66

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

### *James 5:16*

**NA28:** “ἔξομολογεῖσθε οὖν ἀλλήλοις τὰς ἀμαρτίας, καὶ εὐχεσθε ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων, ὅπως ἰαθῆτε· πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη.”

**ESV:** “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

**TPT:** “Confess and acknowledge how you have offended one another and then pray for one another to be instantly healed, for tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer of a godly believer!”

In his translation, Simmons is prone to the removal or softening of ideas that may be offensive to modern sensibilities.<sup>61</sup> In the footnotes for this text, Simmons notes that the Critical Text has “confess your sins”, yet he has chosen to substitute the idea of offense, in place of sin. This is a particularly troubling rendering, because, according to Douglas J. Moo, the sins discussed in this text are “those sins that might be hindering physical healing.”<sup>62</sup> The focus is therefore on barriers to healing, as indicated by the preceding verses, rather than relational unity as implied by Simmons’ translation. The next error is the importing of the idea of being “instantly” healed, which although present in the Gospel narrative (e.g. Matt 8:3, ESV), has no warrant in the text. Finally, Simmons also adds the adjectives “passionate” and “heartfelt” which are not in the text and even includes a disturbing footnote with the quasi-gnostic speculation that this can mean “a prayer within a prayer.”

### *Ephesians 2:10*

**NA28:** “αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἐσμεν ποίημα, κτισθέντες ἐν χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐπὶ ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς, οἷς προητοίμασεν ὁ θεός, ἵνα ἐν αὐτοῖς περιπατήσωμεν.”

**ESV:** “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

**TPT:** “We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance *our destiny* and the good works we would do *to fulfill it!*”

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 246.

The average number of words contained in this verse in a sample of 27 translations is 24 (rounded up to the nearest whole number).<sup>63</sup> The shortest rendering is the Weymouth New Testament, with 20 words. The longest is the particularly wordy Good News Bible, with 33 words, “God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.” The latter uses a greater number of shorter words, but still communicates the central ideas of the text. TPT renders this verse with 59 words – almost two and a half times as many words as the average above, and 75% longer than the longest translation in the sample. This significant lengthening of the text is not isolated to individual verses, to the extent that Shead concludes that TPT text of the Psalms is “at least 50% longer than the original.”<sup>64</sup>

This text also shows that Simmons imports entire paradigms of thought into his translations. The idea of “destiny” and the need “to fulfil it” is alien to the text and its surrounding context. As Steven M. Baugh observes, the emphasis of this text is on the contrast between the former lives of the Ephesians who were once dead in their trespasses and sins in which they walked (Eph 2:1, ESV), and their new lives as ones who are now “alive” (verse 5) and “created in Christ” such that they walk in good works (verse 10).<sup>65</sup> The text highlights the difference between those outside of Christ and those who are in Christ, not an eschatological destiny to be obtained by Christians through deeds, as Simmons expressly states in his translation.

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<sup>63</sup> NIV, NLT, ESV, BSB, BLB, NASB, NKJV, KJV, CSB, CEB, GNT, HCSB, ISV, NET, NHEB, GWT, NASB 1997, JUB, AKJV, ASV, DRB, DBT, ERV, WBT, WNT, WEB and YLT

<sup>64</sup> Andrew G. Shead, “Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of The Psalms (The Passion Translation)” *Themelios* 43.1, (2018): 58.

<sup>65</sup> Steven M. Baugh, *Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 164-165.

### *Summary of analysis of examples*

Simmons does not appear to achieve his stated objective of translating with meaning-for-meaning. Instead, the texts above demonstrate the addition of unwarranted words or ideas; the deletion of important words or ideas; unnecessary double translation; alteration of genre, softening of theological categories; and excessive lengthening of passages. Further, the publisher claims that TPT "...is not rooted in any one tradition or denomination..."<sup>66</sup> While this analysis does not aim to evaluate the theological implications of Simmons's translation, the examples analysed above demonstrate a strong prevalence of sectarian language that is not common to other translations, and the importing of new ideas that are not expressed or even implied in the original languages.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis in this paper leads to a number of conclusions. Firstly, while some elements of the stated translation approach are acceptable, these are not applied in practice. Instead, Simmons has made significant linguistic and theological alterations, even importing foreign ideas into the text. Secondly, the decision to author a solo translation, instead of assembling a qualified committee, has produced an unbalanced translation that appears driven by a personal theological agenda. Thirdly, Simmons' lack of training and experience is evident in the misunderstanding of text-critical theory, basic linguistic mechanics, and the translation process in general.

Simmons's objective of representing the fiery heart of God is substantially a hermeneutic, resulting in a translation approach that is more an ideology than a method. Despite the few strengths and stated intentions, TPT appears to be a form of reworded interlinear, imposing the authors sectarian and personal ideas. If TPT was marketed as a personal reflection on Scripture, some kind of commentary, or a true paraphrase, instead of a translation, then this paper would not

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

be needed. Simmons, however, claims that TPT is an accurate and clear translation to be used for preaching and serious study. Unfortunately, the end result is not Christian Scripture, but an unduly free and sectarian translation that is therefore not suitable for public ministry or private devotion.

The wide reception of this severely flawed translation suggests that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was correct when he observed, “It has been granted to the Americans less than any other nation of the earth to realise on earth the visible unity of the church of God...American Christianity has no central organisation, no common creed, no common cultus, no common church history and no common ethical, social or political principles.”<sup>67</sup> In an ideal world of better educated clergy, common creedal agreement, and commitment to a right handling of the Word of God, perhaps TPT would not have found smooth waters in which to sail.

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<sup>67</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis, MN: Zondervan, 1991), 197.

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