

The Passion Translation: Galatians

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What is The Passion Translation?

The Passion Translation (hereafter TPT) is a “heart-level” translation that attempts to communicate “God’s fiery heart of love to this generation, merging the emotion and life-changing truth of God’s Word.” The translator is Brian Simmons, a former missionary who worked with the Paya-Kuna people of Panama.

Is The Passion Translation a bad translation of the New Testament?

We need to first say a few words about English Bible translations. In terms of purpose and usage, we can differentiate between “official use” translations and “supplementary” translations. “Official use” translations are those that are treated as works to be used *as the Bible*, for public worship and personal Bible study, to study as Scripture and memorize as Scripture (such as the KJV, NIV, NRSV, and ESV). For all intents and purposes, for those whose main language is English and cannot read Greek and Hebrew, this is their

“Bible.” Then, there are all kinds of “supplementary” translations; these are aids or tools for better understanding the Bible, such as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. Peterson didn’t see this as *replacing* traditional translations, but more so as an aid, to help readers *understand* their Bibles better.

So, to answer the question, YES and NO. Yes, TPT is a misleading, inaccurate, and overall “bad” translation *if* it was intended as an “official use” Bible. But no, it is not necessarily a “bad” translation if it is designed as a help or tool for understanding the Bible, essentially one person’s theological approach to the Bible. The degree to which it is “good” as a supplemental translation depends on whether the reader finds it a meaningful and theologically accurate reading of the Bible. I will give my opinion below in relation to Galatians.

Are single-author translations a bad idea?

Again, if we are talking about “official use” translations, then yes, it is a bad idea. Most official Bible translations are carefully planned out with checks and balances to avoid theological bias and to reinforce a sense of “consensus” in terms of the translation reflecting the best biblical scholarship available today. Yes, there are a number of single-author translators out there, but most of them would *never* want their work to be used as *the Bible* (e.g., N.T. Wright, Kingdom New Testament). The reason why some of these single-author translations can be helpful is that they might provide a unifying theological coherence to Scripture. But with that “coherence,” you often have bias and blind spots. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it becomes a major liability if that is your main “Bible.”

Is Brian Simmons qualified to write an “official use” Bible translation?

No—for a number of reasons: First, we rely on diverse and balanced academic translation committees to hold each other to a high standard of scholarship, and Simmons seems to have been working

on his own authority. Second, he regularly makes unusual translation decisions of varying levels of significance (which we will detail below regarding Galatians). Third, Simmons seems to not grasp some fundamentals of Bible translation and interpretation. For example, he is not very consistent in his translation of key theological words (again, see below). Perhaps most troubling, is his insistence on “using” Aramaic texts as the most accurate biblical texts. Now, virtually all scholars and academic Bible translators (including myself) believe that Paul wrote his letters in Greek. It is odd and misleading for Simmons to appeal to Aramaic originals. *Why would Paul, apostle to Gentiles (i.e., Hellenized non-Jews) write in Aramaic to readers like the Galatians who had little (if any) knowledge of Jewish languages and culture?*

To give some reasons why I doubt Paul originally wrote Galatians in Aramaic, note the following:

- We don't have manuscript evidence of Aramaic versions of Galatians from the first or second centuries.
- If Paul regularly wrote in Aramaic, one would expect more loan words (from Aramaic to Greek) to creep into the Greek manuscripts we have. But we only have a precious few of these that seemed to have predated Paul's ministry, like *marana tha* (Come, Lord; 1 Cor. 16:22) and *abba* (Father; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15; cf. Mark 14:36).
- Paul regularly employs wordplay *in Greek* in his letters, and many of his arguments depend on making certain Greek word connections. For example, the word for adoption in Galatians (*huiiothesia*) is built on the word “son” (*huios*) and connects to the sonship of Jesus. The wordplay/word connections are not as clear in Semitic languages as they are in Greek. This is central to Paul's theological reasoning in Galatians.
- Sometimes Paul quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the OT that was popular in Paul's time. This points to Paul's preference for writing in Greek. For example, Paul's OT quotations of Genesis 15:6 (Gal. 3:6) and Isaiah 54:1 (Gal. 4:27) “agree” with the Septuagint over and against the Hebrew Old Testament.

Another question we could ask is if Simmons is qualified to write a “supplementary” Bible translation. In that case, the proof of the pudding is in the eating—is it accurate and helpful? Given that there are many excellent supplementary translations already out there (for example, in academic commentaries), probably not. But he has some nice turns of phrases and interesting interpretations here and there.

In the ancient world, Jews had writings called Targums. These were a combination of Scriptural paraphrases with explanatory flourishes. TPT strikes me as Targum-like. In some ways, reading TPT was like reading a children’s Bible. At times, the explanations are interesting, even helpful (insofar as they are thought-provoking), but they certainly do not qualify as a true “Bible translation.”

TPT Translation of Galatians

Overall, I found TPT’s translation of Galatians occasionally thoughtful, but largely haphazard and “amateur” in its translation techniques. It lacks a consistent translation method, and does not take into account major trends and agreement in Galatians biblical scholarship. Many of the additional flourishes and interpretive glosses that TPT includes are misleading and/or overly speculative. Overall, I take TPT’s Galatians as the personal opinion of a missionary—which may have some value in its own right—rather than a consistently accurate “translation” of the Greek text of Galatians for serious use.

I will give some brief comments on TPT’s Galatians:

Positive Choices and Aspects

1:1: TPT prefers “Messiah” rather than “Christ.” I think that is a good choice.

1:16: TPT prefers “non-Jewish” over the term “Gentile.” That makes sense to me.

TPT uses “Anointed One” which can be helpful, but it is inconsistent.

Unusual Choices

1:1: TPT modernizes the text by adding “Dear friends” as if it is a modern letter. It is not heretical to do this, perhaps, but it strikes me as strange and unnecessary.

1:7: TPT translates *charis* as “loving mercy” rather than “grace.” What’s wrong with “grace”? He uses “grace” in 1:15. This is what I mean by inconsistent translation.

1:10: TPT converts Paul’s rhetorical question into an indicative statement. Why?

1:13: “doctrines of Judaism”: this is not really what Paul was talking about. Jews didn’t think in terms of “doctrines.”

1:18: Referring to “Peter” rather than “Cephas.” The Greek says “Cephas.”

2:14: Why does TPT render *aletheia* (truth) as “revelation of grace”?

Chs. 2-3: TPT inconsistently translates *pistis* sometimes as human “faith” and sometimes “faithfulness of Messiah.” TPT should pick one theological perspective. Otherwise, it is very confusing.

4:21-22: TPT inconsistently translates *doulos* (slave). See also 5:13.

5:24: I could not figure out what “self-life” means here.

6:15: Unusually inconsistent rendering of the same phrase:

NRSV 5:6: “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.”

NRSV 6:15: “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything.”

TPT 5:6: “circumcision and religious obligations can benefit you nothing.”

TPT 6:15: “Circumcision doesn’t mean a thing to me.”

If TPT knew the Greek in both verses is nearly the same, why would they translate so differently?

Problematic Choices

1:7: TPT regularly over-interprets information. TPT presumes the problem behind Galatians is about those “who mingle law and grace to confuse you with lies.” This is one possibility, but this gloss (not in the original text) should be a study note, not a translation feature.

1:16: “I kept it a secret”—TPT engages in speculation here. Best to leave unnecessary speculation out of a Bible translation.

2:3: TPT makes strange comments about Titus being “Syrian.”

2:4: TPT theologically imports the problem of “legalism” and “legalistic bondage of religion” (see also 2:13); TPT *could* be right, but because we don’t quite know, it is best not to add such words. (Again, this might make for a study note if you align with this interpretation.)

2:12: TPT says Peter was acting like “an orthodox Jew”—this is very misleading, given the category of “orthodox Jew” is something very specific today. Also, in early Judaism there were many perspectives and expressions of what it means to be faithful to God.

2:15-16: TPT goes too far in assuming and glosses justification as “receiv[ing] God’s perfect righteousness” (imputation). Again, this could be right, but the language seems forced.

3:11: TPT’s quote of Hab. 2:4 focuses on the human life of faith, which seems to contradict TPT’s translation of 2:15-16.

3:19: The Greek text translates as “because of transgressions.” TPT adds (why?): “It was meant to be an intermediary agreement added after God gave the promise of the coming One! It was given to show men how guilty they are...”

3:28: Perhaps the most egregious problem with this translation is the way it renders “slave or free” as “rich or poor.” This choice to “modernize” the text commits several translation and theological mistakes. Not only does it blatantly change the message of Scripture, it ignores the very serious problem of actual ongoing slavery in the world, and sexual slavery that still exists in the U.S. TPT does a similar kind of decontextualizing of the ancient context in 5:19.