

Whose Message?

Lena Wood

I enjoyed *The Message* on first read. But after a time of testing and a little digging, I'm liking this paraphrase less and less.

1. First, it's not a translation, and in some places hardly a paraphrase. As an author, I appreciated the snappy, colorful prose. But I quit using it except for the occasional reference, then not at all. I couldn't have told you why. But when I asked my daughter's opinion of *The Message*, her answer expressed it well: "I would read it, then find myself going to an actual translation to find out what the Bible *really* said." *The Message*—though well written—does not always carry the same content and tone as a bona fide translation.
2. Peterson seems to have a low view of the historicity of the Scripture. He (along with Foster, Willard, and Brueggemann) oversaw the study notes portion of the Renovaré Spiritual Formation Study Bible. The historicity of Genesis 1–11 is denied, Isaiah is viewed as mere "poetic imagination," and the messianic nature of Isaiah's prophecies is discounted.
3. Some Christians formerly involved in the occult are deeply disturbed by changes in terminology to words with hidden meanings. For example:
 - a. "As above, so below" is a crisp, but odd rendering of "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). This unique phrase comes from "The Emerald Tablet" (c. 1200), one of the most revered magical documents in Western occultism. The phrase "as above, so below" allegedly embraces the entire system of traditional and modern magick and is believed to hold the key to all mysteries: macrocosm is the same as microcosm; the universe is the same as God; God is the same as man, who is the same as the cell, and so on, ad infinitum.
 - b. The "energy" of the "Master Jesus." Peterson almost always translates the Greek word *kyrios* as "master," an acceptable change from "lord." He translates *dunamis* ("power") as "energy," which is not in *Vine's Expository Dictionary* as a possible definition. Do an online search of "Master Jesus" and "energy," and you'll find that the top sites reference not Jesus Christ but "the Master Jesus," one of the ascended masters of early twentieth-century occultism. The "energy of the Master Jesus" may sound like the same thing as the "power of the Lord Jesus," but in the lingo of New Age occultism it isn't; it's another Jesus.
 - c. In the fruit of the Spirit passage (Galatians 5:22, 23), Peterson's paraphrase suggests that Christians can come to "a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people." This suggests pantheism, "God in all things," a Hindu teaching that all is one. Compare Peterson's paraphrase with the *NIV* or *NASB* here. Which one is clear; which one is muddy, even misleading?
 - d. Changing "lily of the valley" in Song of Songs 2:1, 2 to "lotus" may be an insignificant detail to most readers, but if Peterson's goal is clarity, why switch the name of a flower? No other translation I could find does this ... and no symbol in Eastern paganism is more sacred than the lotus. In a ritual from the Egyptian Book of the Dead called "Transformation into the Lotus," the god exclaims: "I am the pure lotus, emerging from the Luminous one. I carry the messages of Horus" (H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, p. 380). For whatever reason, Peterson introduced "as above, so below," "lotus," and other terms—"God of green hope," "divine guardians," "centered in lotus land," "light-bearer," "golden circle"—that have direct links to occultism. I would not recommend *The Message*, if for no other reason than in deference to former New Agers (now Christians) who are appalled at the sprinkling of terms from their former occult beliefs into the Bible.

4. Peterson completely misses a deeper meaning here and there. In Job 38:31, 32, God asks the suffering Job, “Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons?” Astronomically speaking, Pleiades *is* bound; it’s an anomalous cluster of stars that are bound together, moving through space in the same direction and same speed. And Orion *is* loosed; its stars are drifting apart at different speeds. Peterson’s rendering of this verse completely misses the fascinating science behind God’s questions. Peterson’s paraphrase says: “Can you catch the eye of the beautiful Pleiades sisters, or distract Orion from his hunt?” Peterson translates verse 33, “Do you know the first thing about the sky’s constellations and how they affect things on Earth?” But God is asking Job if he can control the laws of the heavens as God does, not how the constellations “affect things on earth.” That’s astrology.
5. A narrow, trendy rendering. The Bible is a personal, living message for all people for all time. There will be passages that do not resonate with me, or with you, or maybe with most people some of the time. But I don’t agree with the narrow view that some passages are best left to the mystics, or Peterson’s compromising view that the text should be reworded into “the vernacular” whenever we aren’t willing to accept its original meaning.
6. The “voice.” This is a subjective observation, but one with serious implications. Everyone who has a favorite author becomes very familiar with his or her voice. If you were to rip out a random page from an Agatha Christie novel and give it to my sister, she’d likely know it was Christie’s writing without having to see the title. Even when Agatha Christie writes the dialogue of a number of characters, there is still something of her voice in the conversation. When I read the Bible—whether *NASB*, *NIV*, *New Century Version*, *King James Version*—I hear God’s voice. When I read *The Message* I hear Peterson’s voice. It’s a fine voice—well written, dynamic—but it’s not the true Author’s voice. Similarly, it’s been observed that all the New Testament writers sound alike in *The Message*. In a Bible paraphrase written by a gifted scholar, shouldn’t the reader hear the voices of the individual New Testament writers—and the ultimate Author behind them—and not the voice of the paraphraser?
7. I’m especially put off by Peterson’s occasional flippant reworking of the words of God. He quotes Jesus: “I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, ‘Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our super-spiritual projects had everyone talking.’ And do you know what I am going to say? ‘You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here’” (Matthew 7:22, 23).

The problems of voice and fast-and-loose paraphrase don’t help America’s spiritual drift: people naively responding to religious authorities—human and nonhuman—who supposedly speak God’s truth. The shift is toward neo-paganism and away from the Shepherd’s voice. People are hearing what they want to hear, even when spiritual messages “from beyond” contradict God’s established Word. Sincere folks who don’t know the Word, who don’t know the Lord’s voice, are ripe for delusion.

8. Peterson’s disapproval of other translations. Here are excerpts from blogger Tim Challies, referencing *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*: “[Peterson’s] distaste for literal translation soon becomes more apparent. [He says,] ‘In my work as a pastor and writer, teacher and preacher, I began to gather observations and witnesses on the nature of translation, noticing how unsatisfactory “literal” turns out to be and how conveniently it serves as a cover for avoiding the obvious intent of words spoken or written (p.170). ... Preference for the literal has a long life. But I have come to believe that it is an unthinking preference. ... The language [in a literal translation] is lobotomized—the very quality that gives language its genius, its capacity to reveal what we otherwise would not know, is excised. Extreme literalism insists on forcing each work into a fixed immovable position, all the sentences strapped in a straightjacket’ (p.171).”

Challies goes on to say, “Is it possible that Peterson feels that the Scriptures are somehow a little bit deficient? That they are not the best way that God could have revealed Himself to us? [Peterson says,]

‘There is a sense in which the Scriptures are the word of God dehydrated, with all the originating context removed—living voices, city sounds, camels carrying spices from Sheba ... all now reduced to marks on thin onion-skin paper’ (p. 88).” Challies concludes: “What Peterson fails to mention is that this is exactly how God intended to give us the Scriptures. God never refers to His Word as ‘dehydrated’ or in any way deficient. ... The Scriptures, exactly as they are, are just what God desired that we have. Any fault we perceive in them is a fault within us.” (Read the full piece at: <https://www.challies.com/articles/eugene-petersons-philosophy-of-bible-translation/>)

Is Peterson actually saying the *NASB* and *NIV* Bibles are “dehydrated” and “lobotomized”?

The more I looked into *The Message*, the more miffed I got. Does God not know how to make himself known and understood? Is he so inept? My own experience with the Word is that it is brilliantly stunning, fathoms deep, shockingly relevant, and true any way you slice it. Jesus said, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). It’s disheartening to realize that seasoned scholars have missed the boat on deeper communication with the Creator because they’d rather fiddle with the Word than trust it.

“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar” (Proverbs 30:5, 6).

“Whose Message?” © 2011 Lena Wood; revised 2021. Lena Wood is the author of *Elijah Creek & The Armor of God*, Vols I, II, III, IV. More at LenaWood.com. This handout is available at LynnLusbyPratt.com.