
Message from Hell

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Back in the days of the Judges, the LORD raised up Ehud to convey a message to Eglon the king of Moab (Jud. 3:20). Unfortunately for Eglon, however, the message from God was in the form of a two-edged dagger thrust into his belly (Jud. 3:21).

Eugene Peterson, formerly the pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, and now Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, thinks he has a message from God as well. Although his message is called *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, it is not a message from God at all—it is a message from hell.

This new "Bible" was first issued as a New Testament in 1993 by NavPress of Colorado Springs, Colorado. Back then it was called *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English*. The "New Testament Exegetical Consultants" included big names like William Klein of Denver Seminary, Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary, Donald Hagner of Fuller Theological Seminary, and Moises Silva of Westminster Theological Seminary. The original dust jacket contained endorsements from Gordon Fee, Leighton Ford, Jay Kesler, J. I. Packer, Warren Wiersbe, and Jack Hayford. Over two million copies of this New Testament were sold.

Peterson's message from hell began in 1990 after he received a letter from an editor asking him to work on a new version of the Bible along the lines of what he had been doing as a pastor. After the New Testament was published in 1993, the Psalms followed in 1994, Proverbs in 1995, the Wisdom Books in 1996, the Old Testament Prophets in 2000, the Pentateuch in 2001, and the Old Testament history books in the first part of 2002. The complete Bible was issued in the latter part of 2002. The work of translating actually took ten years, from June 1991 to November 2001.

When doing his translating, Peterson, who has an M.A. in Semitic languages from Johns Hopkins University, and "for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary," "worked with the text strictly from Greek and Hebrew to English." The publisher claims that "biblical scholars recognize his intimate knowledge and understanding of Greek and Hebrew languages." In his preface to *The Message*, Peterson mentions that when he was a pastor: "Those old biblical languages, those powerful and vivid Hebrew and Greek originals, kept working their way underground in my speech, giving energy and sharpness to words and phrases, expanding the imagination of the people with whom I was working to hear the language of the Bible in the language of Today and the language of Today in the language of the Bible."

There is no mention anywhere of any specific Greek or Hebrew text in the preface to *The Message* or the publisher's promotional literature.

The primary reason given to justify most new Bible translations is that the Bible needs to be translated into contemporary language. The fact that at least one new version making this claim has been published each year for the past thirty years did not deter Peterson or his publisher. The opening page of *The Message* claims that it is "a contemporary rendering of the Bible from the original languages, crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events, and ideas in everyday language." The publisher insists that "the original books of the Bible were not written in King James English, and that *The Message* recaptures the Bible in the words we use today."

What is not so evident about *The Message* is that it is actually a paraphrase. Although there is no mention of this fact in the Preface or Introduction, the dust jacket calls *The Message* a "paraphrasing translation." In the publisher's promotional literature, *The Message* is said to be "a direct translation of the original texts" that "is not considered a paraphrase of the Bible." Yet, the publisher also claims that *The Message* is a "paraphrase from the original languages." But as is evident on the opening pages of the Old and New Testaments, *The Message* is actually a radical paraphrase that takes great liberty with the Hebrew and Greek texts. So even though the publisher claims that this version "is heart-racing, mind-altering, and life-changing," it is actually so radical a paraphrase that it makes the *Living Bible* look conservative.

The first thing one notices about *The Message* is the absence of verse numbers. Therefore, it is not readily apparent that Matthew 17:21, 18:11, 23:14; Mark 7:16, 9:44, 46, 48, 11:26, 15:28; Luke 17:36, 23:17; John 5:4; Acts 8:37, 24:7, 28:29; Romans 16:24; as well as part of John 3:13, Acts 9:6, and Luke 4:4 have been eliminated from the Bible. The lack of verse numbers also makes it extremely difficult to check the readings of *The Message* to see exactly what has been altered. But even though there are "no distracting verse numbers," chapter numbers are given in the text and the range of verses on each page is given at the top of the page.

Since it professes to be in contemporary language, *The Message* abounds in modern expressions: "stuck up" (Pro. 30:13), "clean house" (1 Pet. 2:1), "get lost" (Gen. 19:9), "moonlighting" (1 Thes. 2:10), "said our piece" (1 Thes. 2:2), "slept with" (Gen. 4:1), "have sex with" (Lev. 18:6), "hanging out" (Pro. 7:12), "lock, stock, and barrel" (Mat. 4:9), "sponging" (1 Thes. 4:12), and "six feet under" (Isa. 38:18). Although such language is to be expected from a Bible that makes such a profession, the result is a Bible that does not read like a Bible at all. I suppose that is why a member of the rock band U2 said that "*The Message* was the most important book he'd read in his whole life."

But even though *The Message* is supposed to be in contemporary language,

there are many occasions when a simple word or phrase in the Authorized Version is replaced by a much more difficult word or phrase. This should come as no surprise since this phenomenon occurs regularly in most modern versions, including the NIV, NRSV, and NKJV. There are also times when words that are usually deemed to be archaic in the AV still appear in *The Message*.

The AV word *hindered* is changed in *The Message* to "stymied" (1 Thes. 2:18), *lump* is changed to "poultice" (Isa. 38:21), *fornication* is changed to "sexual promiscuity" (1 Thes. 4:3), *evil* is changed to "wanton" (Pro. 7:24), *blind* is changed to "sightless" (Mark 8:22), *ashamed* is changed to "embarrassed" (Mark 8:38), *strong* is changed to "awake, able-bodied" (Mat. 12:29), and *witchcraft* is changed to "magic-show religion" (Gal. 5:20).

Other potentially difficult words or phrases include "dalliance" (Pro. 5:20), "patronizing" (1 Thes. 2:7), "condescending" (1 Thes. 2:7), "glib" (Micah 2:11), "creel" (Job 41:1), "disposition" (1 Pet. 3:4), "dogged religious plod" (1 Thes. 4:1), "titillate" (Luke 11:29), and "maggoty" (Mat. 23:25). In Galatians chapter five alone we meet the words "annihilating," "antithetical," "exuberance," "impotence," "parodies," and "depersonalizing"—certainly not words in the "clear, direct language" that *The Message* is supposed to be written in to bring "Scripture to life, attracting people to read God's Word with understanding and clarity."

Instead of the AV phrase "Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture," we read in *The Message*: "The Scriptures provide precedent" (1 Pet. 2:6). In place of "I have perfumed my bed," we have "My bed is aromatic" (Pro. 7:17). Instead of "all things are become new," we have "a new life burgeons" (2 Cor. 5:17). Instead of "dwelt among us," we have "moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14).

The Message also contains some jaw-breaking neologisms like: "Tipsy, sloppy-fat, beer-bellied parodies" (Isa. 28:1) and "all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants" (Gal. 5:20). Then there is the ultra-hyphenated concoction "GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies," which occurs many times in the Old Testament as a substitute for "the LORD of Hosts" (e.g., Isa. 39:5, Micah 4:4, Zech. 7:13, Mal. 3:17). "The Son of Man is no lackey" (Mat. 12:8), "devil mud" (Mat. 12:27), and "Jonah-evidence" (Mat. 12:39) are words put into the mouth of the Lord Jesus in just one chapter.

Even though most modern versions and critics of the AV consider the word *haunt* (as it is used in the AV) to be archaic, *The Message* uses it where the AV never had it in the first place (Mat. 12:44). The words "Leviathan" and "dragon" are even retained in Isaiah 27:1.

Key passages about the word of God are altered in *The Message*. "Every word of God" is now just "Every promise of God" (Pro. 30:5). The word of God is no

longer magnified above God's name (Psa. 138:2). The command to live by "every word of God" is missing from Luke 4:4. The reference to corrupting the word of God (2 Cor. 2:17) is now: "We don't take God's Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap."

Because it is a paraphrase, *The Message* regularly adds to the word of God. The familiar command in Proverbs 30:5 to "Add thou not unto his words" is completely obliterated; it now reads: "So don't second-guess him." The AV word *stranger* is changed in *The Message* to "promiscuous stranger" (Pro. 5:20), *dung* is now "dog dung" (Phil. 3:8), *saved* is now saved, to really live, "day and night" are now "Madame Day" and "Professor Night" (Psa. 19:1), and *flesh* is now "flesh and blood" (John 1:14). Someone named "Syzygus" is inserted into Philippians 4:3. A whole sentence is even added to the end of Matthew 5:22 and Philippians 4:2.

It is not surprising that *The Message*, because of its attitude toward the word of God, has some serious doctrinal problems, much like many other modern versions. Jonah was not a prophet (Luke 11:29), and neither was he swallowed by a whale (Mat. 12:40), but Peter was a "rock" (Mat. 16:18). No one ever serves his own belly (Rom. 16:18), or is a whoremonger (Heb. 13:4), an idolater (1 Cor. 6:9), or effeminate (1 Cor. 6:9). God doesn't just have a son, he has "sons" (Pro. 30:4). Sara no longer calls her husband *lord*, just "my dear husband" (1 Pet. 3:6). The word "baptism" is inserted into John 3:5. God's wrath abides on no man (John 3:36), and he sends no one to hell (Mat. 5:30), since it is not everlasting anyway (Mat. 25:41). Heaven and earth will not pass away (Mat. 24:35), so beware if you "abuse the earth" (1 Cor. 6:9).

Following a trend begun with some recent modern versions, there are some occasions when *The Message* uses gender inclusive language so as not to offend feminists and effeminate men. God did not create man, he created "human beings" (Gen. 1:26). The word "sister" or "sisters" is sometimes appended to the word *brother* (e.g., Mat. 5:22, 1 Thes. 4:6, 1 John 4:20), even though no such Greek word occurs in any manuscript.

In addition to these doctrinal problems, *The Message* attacks the Lord Jesus Christ. The deity of Christ is censured in Luke 2:33, Luke 23:42, Acts 9:5, 2 Corinthians 5:19, 1 Thessalonians 5:28, and 1 Timothy 3:16, as it is in most modern versions. Over and over again, Peterson, like Judas (Mat. 26:49), refers to the Lord as "Master" (Acts 16:31, Eph. 6:24, Phil. 3:20, 2 Thes. 3:18, 1 Pet. 1:3, Rev. 22:21). Further attacks on the Lord Jesus Christ are: forcing him to eat leftovers (Luke 24:42), not allowing him to take vengeance on his enemies (1 Thes. 1:8), making him spend time in a deep grave after his death (Mat. 12:40), and robbing him of being the creator (Col. 1:16).

Perhaps the most egregious perversion of the word of God found in *The Message* is the replacement of the word *gospel* with "message" (Mark 1:1, Rom.

1:16, 1 Cor. 15:1, 1 Thes. 2:8). Since the name of this new version is *The Message*, this substitution is intolerable.

Although this complete edition of *The Message* has glowing endorsements from J. I. Packer, Bill Hybels, and Bill McCartney of Promise Keepers, God never sent "a message by the hand of a fool" (Pro. 26:6) like Eugene Peterson who thought that America's great spiritual need was another version of the Bible.

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