Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of *The Psalms* (The Passion Translation)

— **Andrew G. Shead** —

Andrew Shead is the head of Old Testament and Hebrew at Moore Theological College, Sydney, and is a member of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation.

****

Abstract: Brian Simmons has made a new translation of the Psalms (and now the whole New Testament) which aims to 're-introduce the passion and fire of the Bible to the English reader.' He achieves this by abandoning all interest in textual accuracy, playing fast and loose with the original languages, and inserting so much new material into the text that it is at least 50% longer than the original. The result is a strongly sectarian translation that no longer counts as Scripture; by masquerading as a Bible it threatens to bind entire churches in thrall to a false god.

****

1. Some Reflections on the Task of Bible Translation

Brian Simmons's translation of the Psalms[1] is one volume of a projected new Bible, of which the New Testament and a few other Old Testament books are also finished. Two things immediately mark it out as different from other English versions. First, it is a solo effort. And secondly, its approach to translation removes the final text much farther from the original words than any other English version.

In principle there is nothing wrong with this. Solo versions – think *The Message*, or the J. B. Philips translation – let the unique personality of their creator shine through in refreshing ways. And while they can be idiosyncratic and flawed, such as Mitchell Dahood's Psalms, or J. B. Phillips for that matter, they can also be faithful, as William Tyndale's was. And even the most formal of versions, such as the KJV or the ESV, embrace meaning-based translation. The word of God is conveyed not by the words in and of themselves, but by the *meaning* those words generate when combined into clauses, sentences and paragraphs. And this means that all translation involves interpretation.

So how can a translation avoid the dangers of subjectivism, of reading meanings into the text that were not there to start with? There are three main ways, all closely related to one another. (1) Through

---

[1] Brian Simmons, *The Psalms: Poetry on Fire*, The Passion Translation (Racine, WI: BroadStreet, 2014).

prayerful reliance on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit points us to Christ as the goal and meaning of all Scripture, and this understanding of the whole helps us better to appreciate and respect the original meaning of the parts. (2) Through Christian fellowship. Translators since Martin Luther have worked together in groups, not only to pool their expertise, but to restrain the idiosyncrasies, impulsive decisions and lack of wisdom from which the best of us suffer. (3) Through the canonical rule of the original words. When a Hebrew sentence has been translated into an English sentence of equivalent meaning, the original words are of course lost. But they can never be left behind: each element of meaning in the English has to justify its existence by reference to the words of the original, and each element of the original ought to be represented in some way in translation. This is because Holy Scripture is inspired at the level of its words.

Let me tease out this last point a bit more. The word of God takes many forms, but not all of them are Scripture. Any message which truly and faithfully presents Christ, such as a sermon or even a song, is a proclamation of the word of God. But for the word of God to count as Scripture, that is, the Bible, it must be a faithful equivalent of the specific words used by the inspired authors. The translation must not add to or subtract from the original words, or change their meaning. Not that there is anything wrong with adding, subtracting or changing words (so long as the message is not distorted), but the result will be an adaptation or commentary, which by nature lacks the authority and normative status of Scripture.

Finally, translators, even with God's help, are only human, and they do not get every phrase or even sentence exactly right. But context helps to correct these inaccuracies, and when more and more sentences are read together as a whole, their combined meaning becomes more and more accurate. The only exception to this is when a generally accurate translation strays from faithfulness in order to introduce a bias, or tendency. A good example is the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. While most of its sentences are faithful, they add up to a portrait of a different God.

2. The Textual and Linguistic Competence of the Translation

2.1. Textual Accuracy

The Hebrew Masoretic text of the Psalms (MT) preserves an old and accurate text, but it does contain copying errors and other damage, which we can often correct with the help of other ancient manuscripts. Apart from the Dead Sea scrolls, which Simmons does not cite even when their evidence is important (e.g., Pss 22:16; 107:29; 144:2; 145:13), these manuscripts are translations of the Hebrew, and so must be used with double care. First, we must decide if a phrase was translated literally enough to be able to tell what the underlying Hebrew was; then, we must decide whether that underlying Hebrew text is any more accurate than our text. The goal is always to recover the original reading that gave rise to the variety of readings reflected in the textual evidence.

Unfortunately The Passion Translation (TPT) shows little understanding, either of the process of textual criticism, or of the textual sources themselves. When it says 'Aramaic' it generally means Syriac – a confusion that some Syriac versions themselves perpetuate – but from a text-critical point of view the difference is important. The *Syriac Peshitta* is a generally conservative translation of a Hebrew text almost identical to ours, made a few centuries after Christ. Only rarely is it a witness to an earlier or more original text. The *Aramaic Targums* are based on the same Hebrew text, but often insert interpretations

into the text, so that Jews did not consider them to be Scripture.[2] Our oldest copy of the Aramaic Psalms is from after 800 AD. The *Greek Septuagint* is by far the oldest and most important non-Hebrew witness to the original. It has a complex history and varied character, and must be used with care.

None of these considerations seem to weigh with Simmons, because his aim does not appear to be the reconstruction of the original text. In many places where the Syriac is actually an important witness to the original Hebrew text, Simmons makes no reference to it at all (e.g., Pss 2:9; 24:6; 42:4; 49:11; 73:7; 145:13). He seems instead to be looking around in ancient sources for changes and additions that he can use as he himself changes and adds to the text.[3] As a general rule, when ancient versions disagree over the original Hebrew, Simmons either ignores the problem or uses all of them. The famous line in Psalm 22:16, 'they pierced my hands and feet' (Dead Sea scrolls, Syriac, Septuagint), reads 'like a lion my hands and feet' in the MT; Simmons uses both 'lion' and 'pierce', the latter twice over for good measure.

To give one more example, in Ps 74:3a the Syriac has 'servants' (*'bd'*) instead of the Hebrew 'steps' (פעם), possibly because the Syriac translator read the word פעל in his Hebrew source-text (*p'l* means 'to labour' in Syriac). The Septuagint, ignored by Simmons, has yet another reading ('hands'), which suggests an ancient interpretive struggle here, possibly due to a textual uncertainty. Simmons's response is to mistranslate the 'Aramaic' (Syriac) in a footnote, and use it as an apparent licence to provide a double translation that bears no resemblance to the Syriac or any other ancient version![4]

2.2. Linguistic Accuracy

Linguistically TPT is just as questionable. One of its most frequent techniques is to find words with more than one meaning, and create a double translation containing both of them. This is sometimes legitimate, since poetry in particular can play on the double meaning of words. But context must determine case by case whether word-play is intended, and Simmons clearly does not feel himself bound by this.

Take Ps 18:2, 'my God is … the horn of my salvation'. The word קרן, meaning an animal horn, is frequently used as a metaphor of strength (e.g., Ps 75:11; 89:17; 92:10, etc.). But there is one verse where horn, because of its shape, is used to mean 'ray of sunlight' (Hab 3:4, where it is in parallel with 'brightness' and 'light'), and Isaiah uses it once with the meaning 'hill', to create a rhyme (Isa 5:1). A related verb means 'to send out rays', but the horn's shape underlies all these derived meanings. Simmons ignores the core meaning of the word (strength) and creates a double translation combining all the derived meanings: 'You are Salvation's Ray of Brightness / Shining on the hillside'. He also makes the false claim in a footnote that the root word means 'ray of brightness or hillside'. It means neither.

---

[2] The Targums were written versions of the oral Aramaic explanations given in the Synagogue after the text had been read out in Hebrew.

[3] Nothing illustrates this better than his willingness to use Augustine's translations (e.g., in Ps 9:1), when it is well known that Augustine creatively adapted Latin translations of Greek Psalms manuscripts of such poor quality that sometimes they made no sense at all.

[4] The Syriac 'those who are arrogant' becomes 'those who take them captive' in Simmons's footnote. This is not the only time he mistranslates Syriac. In Ps 19:4, for example, he inserts the word 'gospel' on the basis that it is a 'literal translation from the Aramaic'. However, the word in question, while it means 'gospel' in the NT, has 'tidings' as its primary meaning in the OT.

Despite all these glaring problems, if the context pointed strongly enough in this direction then a case might be made for *ray*, or in theory even *hill*. However, the other descriptors of God in Ps 18:2 are all about strength: 'rock', 'fortress', 'deliverer', 'refuge', 'shield', 'stronghold'. If we did not know what קרן meant, we could still make a pretty good guess from a context as strong as this. Simmons derails the verse with his fanciful misuse of the dictionary.

This is a relatively minor error for Simmons, because at least the three words in question go back to a single word ('horn'). There are many places, like Ps 117:1, 'Praise the Lord', where things get worse. Simmons's double translation is 'Shine with praise to Yahweh!' A footnote claims that 'the word for *praise* is taken from the word *shine*'. This is a basic fallacy, which falsely assumes that the Hebrew הלל = 'shine' must be the same word as הלל= 'praise', just because they look the same. It's equivalent to translating 'He bowed before the Queen' as 'He bent forward before the Queen like the front of a ship', because two unrelated words just happen to be spelled 'bow'.

Finally, the translations of Syriac and Greek referred to in footnotes are often simply wrong. Two examples: (1) Simmons renders 'word' in Ps 119:11 as 'prophecies', claiming that this is translated from the Septuagint. The Greek word in question (λόγιον) means 'word', 'teaching' or 'saying'; thrice in the Bible it means 'oracle'. But in Psalm 119 it is a key term meaning 'word' or 'promise' – and this is how Simmons translates all 18 other cases in this psalm where the Septuagint has λόγιον. It appears that he was just looking for an excuse to slip prophecy in, despite the fact that the Psalm celebrates God's written word, not the spoken oracles he gave his prophets. (2) Simmons rejects the line 'The fear of the Lord is clean' (Ps 19:9) in favour of 'Every one of the Lord's commands are right, / Following them brings cheer'. His claim, 'as translated from the Septuagint', is false. The Greek reads, 'The fear of the Lord is pure'. One gets the impression that Simmons felt more comfortable with a response of cheer than fear in this verse, and simply made up an excuse to distort the text. I'm not saying this is what he did, but it is the unfortunate impression the text gives.

Simmons seems as uninterested in linguistic accuracy as he is in textual accuracy. He searches the dictionary, and sometimes apparently his imagination, for ways to insert new ideas that happen to align with his goals, regardless of their truthfulness. What results from this process may still technically count as a translation of the psalms, because there are many ways to translate, including impressionistic and reader-responsive translations. But it does *not* count as a faithful witness to the original text. There is no possible way in which a reader of this translation could ever know whether a given unit of meaning in TPT has an equivalent in the original. And this severing of meaningful connection to the words of the inspired original firmly excludes Simmons's translation from the category of Scripture.

3. The Translation Itself

To deal with all the issues raised by the translation would take a book many times longer than the original. So rather than simply pick and choose from across the book, it seems fairer to look closely at a block of text, to prevent the 'cherry-picking' of translation issues. I shall therefore look at an excerpt from Psalm 18. Along the way I will also make reference to other psalms.

3.1. Additions, Omissions and Alterations in Psalm 18:1–6 and Beyond

The NIV, ESV, CSB and even *The Message* all take between 108 and 110 words to translate Psalm 18:1–6; Simmons takes 164. He is even more expansive later on (e.g., 18:24–34 take 290 words to the NIV's 169). Where do all these extra words come from?

	NIV	*TPT*
1	I love you, Lord, my strength.	Lord, I passionately love you! I want to embrace you, For now you've become my Power!
2	The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.	You're as real to me as Bedrock beneath my feet, Like a Castle on a cliff, my forever firm Fortress, My Mountain of hiding, my Pathway of escape, My Tower of rescue where none can reach me, My secret Strength and Shield around me, You are Salvation's Ray of Brightness Shining on the hillside, Always the Champion of my cause.
3	I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies.	So all I need to do is to call on to you Singing to you, the praiseworthy God. And when I do, I'm safe and sound in you.
4	The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.	For when the spirit of death wrapped chains around me And terrifying torrents of destruction overwhelmed me,
5	The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.	 Taking me to death's door, to doom's domain;
6	In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.	I cried out to you in my distress, the delivering God, And from your temple-throne You heard my troubled cry. My sobs came right into your heart And you turned your face to rescue me.

3.1.1. Additions

The most common source of extra words is double and even triple translation.

- Double translations of single words and clauses: 'Love' becomes 'passionately love' (v. 1); 'rock' becomes 'Bedrock beneath my feet' (v. 2); 'torrents' becomes 'terrifying torrents' (v. 4); 'the snares of death' becomes 'to death's door, to doom's domain' (v. 5); 'my voice' becomes 'my troubled cry' (v. 6); 'blameless' becomes 'loyal and true'.
- Double translations of entire lines: 'I passionately love you/I want to embrace you' (v. 1), which Simons justifies in a footnote spuriously claiming the word used for love here 'carries the thought of embrace and touch'. In the 44 remaining verses there are about 23 more cases, e.g., v. 31: 'Could there be any other god like you? / You are the only God to be worshipped'.
- Often the doubled clause or line makes space for ideas (underlined) not represented in the original: 'So all I need to do is to call on [sic] to you / Singing to you, the praiseworthy

God' (v. 3); 'My sobs came right into your heart / <u>And you turned your face to rescue me</u>' (v. 6). These cases of exegetical expansion count as alterations, not just additions.

Double translation is Simmons's principal translation technique, but his constant addition of images and ideas into the text is not confined within his double translations. Sometimes he creatively alters the Hebrew (<u>underlined</u> below); elsewhere he creates stand-alone additions, or attaches them by hyphen to a word in the text. They mostly fall into two categories:

(1) 'Spiritual' images, especially of light, height and mystery, designed to inspire feelings of awe and worship; all but the words in [brackets] have no counterpart in the Hebrew:

> Ray of brightness … shining (v. 2), singing (v. 3), <u>spirit</u> (v. 4), burning (v. 7), spirit-[wind] (v. 10), mystery-[darkness] (v. 11), blessing … treasure (v. 24), all at once … <u>floodlight</u> (v. 28), revelation … brightness (v. 28), worship (v. 31), ascend … [peaks of] your glory (v. 33), [warfare]-worship (v. 34), <u>power</u> within (v. 35), conquers all … lifted high … towering over all (v. 46), with high praises … highest [God] (v. 49), magnificent miracles (v. 50).

Additions aimed at stirring up ecstasy are unsurprisingly prominent in TPT's praise psalms. In Ps 148:2–3 Simmons plays DJ to the psalmist, expanding the repeated imperative to 'praise him' (NIV) with 'go ahead', 'keep it up', 'don't stop now', 'take it up even higher'. He rounds off Psalm 150 by inserting 'crescendo of ecstatic praise'.

(2) 'Corporeal' images of touch, ardour and physical intimacy designed to intensify feelings of love:

> Passionately (v. 1), embrace (v. 1), around me (v. 2), in you (v. 3), <u>wrapped</u> (v. 4), <u>sobs</u> (v. 6), <u>heart</u> (v. 6), reached down into my darkness (v. 16), <u>I was helpless</u> (v. 17), <u>held onto me</u> (v. 18), his love broke open the way (v. 19), heart (v. 24), surrendering to him (v. 24), taste (v. 25), you love (v. 25), wrap-around God (v. 30),[5] wrapped (v. 32), your wrap-around presence … stooping down (v. 35), your loving servant (v. 50).

Again, added vocabulary of physical and emotional intimacy is ubiquitous in the book, as evidenced in the frequent description of God's people as his 'lovers'. This is Simmons's regular gloss for the Hebrew חסידים, which means 'faithful ones', or 'godly ones', but definitely not 'lovers'. And he even uses it to translate words as neutral as 'people', e.g., Ps 95:7, where 'we are the people of his pasture' becomes 'we are the lovers he cares for'.

3.1.2. Omissions

Omission is rare, and mostly consists of the repeated words and phrases that characterise Hebrew parallelism. Clearly Simmons's preferred style is not that of the Hebrew poets, who build argument through the juxtaposition of parallel ideas:

---

[5] There is some justification for 'wrapped' in v. 32, as the word means 'put on' or 'gird', but the image is martial, suggesting a sword rather than a cloak. However, 'wrap-around' (vv. 30, 35) is unjustifiable, and the footnote's claim that 'shield' means 'to wrap around in protection' is incorrect. The word refers to a shield that was often used as a weapon as well as defensively. Only once is there a sense of wrapping around (Ps 3:3), which is conveyed in Hebrew by adding the preposition 'around' to the noun.

'The cords of the grave coiled around me' (v. 5) is omitted following a very similar line in v. 4; 'I cried out' (v. 6b) is omitted following 'I called' (v. 6a). Eight more omissions follow in the rest of the psalm, mostly of verbs or noun clauses repeated in parallel lines.

3.1.3. Alterations

Some types of change are very frequent, such as the conversion of [a] speech *about* God or others into speech *to* God (nine times in the psalm); [b] metaphor into simile (once); [c] concrete images into more abstract ones (about ten times, including the elimination of feet, deer, path, bow, rock, shield); and [d] the removal of historical references (including the removal of about half the references to enemies and nations). The examples show ESV → TPT:

ESV	*TPT*	*Analysis*
'The Lord is my rock' (v. 2)	'You're as real to me as Bedrock'	a, b
'from my enemies' (v. 3)	'in you'	a, d
'From his temple' (v. 6)	'from your temple-throne'	a, d
'to him … his ears' (v. 6)	'right into your heart … your face'	a
'a shield' (v. 30)	'a secure shelter'	c

Many English versions occasionally replace concrete images with more abstract explanations [c], according to their translational goals. However, the other categories are harder to defend. For example, in v. 28 the expression 'keep my lamp burning' refers to the preservation of the psalmist's life (cf. Prov 13:9; 20:20, 27), and specifically to the preservation of the king's life and therefore the life of the nation (compare 2 Sam 21:17 with 22:29). But Simmons lifts the image from its historical context and turns it into one of illumination: 'you turned on a floodlight for me!' Shifts from external events to internal states occur frequently in his translation.

Even the historical psalms in TPT, such as Psalm 106, tend to make historical people and places less prominent, though the majority of them are retained. Thus there are no tents in TPT 106:25, no Canaan in 106:38, etc. On the other hand, references to pagan gods are intensified: 'works of darkness', 'serve their gods', 'demon spirits', 'dark practices', 'murder and bloodshed' are all additions to the original text of Ps 106:34–39.

Other pieces of dehistoricizing and spiritualizing are more theologically loaded. 'Inherit the land' (Ps 37:9, 11) becomes 'live safe and sound with blessings overflowing' in v. 9 and 'inherit every promise' in v. 11. And in Psalm 22 the bulls of Bashan in v. 12 become 'forces of evil', and the dogs in v. 20 become 'demons'. At each point Simmons explains in a footnote that these represent 'the many demonic spirits' who 'were bent on destroying Jesus on the cross'.

The most radical cases of alteration involve the complete rewriting of a line or couplet, often resulting in a different meaning (e.g., the rewriting of Ps 18:25 as 'Lord, it is clear to me now that how we live / Will dictate how you deal with us', as the first element of the verse's double translation). Twenty times in the first twenty psalms the justification 'implied in the text/context' is added in a footnote, but the great majority of alterations and additions are unmarked. In Psalm 13, for example, the four verses of lament are fairly modestly treated, but the final two verses of praise are more than doubled in bulk, changing the meaning of the whole psalm in the process. They do this first, by making David's rejoicing something he will do conditionally on being rescued; second, by identifying God's goodness

to David with the therapeutic benefits of his suffering; and third, by the invention of two entire lines at the end that make the theme of the psalm the triumph of David's confidence in the face of his enemies' skepticism. Here is TPT vv. 5–6, with additions underlined and alterations in italics:

> [5] <u>Lord</u>, I have always trusted in your kindness,
> <u>So answer me,</u> [Note: implied in the text]
> I will <u>yet</u> celebrate <u>with passion and joy</u>
> <u>When</u> your salvation <u>lifts me up</u>.
> [6] I will sing <u>my song of joy</u> to <u>you</u>, the *Most High*,
> For <u>in all of this</u> *you* have *strengthened my soul.*
> <u>My enemies say that I have no Savior,</u>
> But I know that I have one in you!

Finally, while most alterations have theological implications, sometimes theology seems to be the driving factor, serving either to advance the author's favourite themes or to bring potentially problematic statements into his theological comfort zone. I will mention three broad types of theological alteration that pervade the translation.

(1) Changes aimed at explaining Christology, e.g., TPT Ps 22:31b, 'And they will all declare, "It is finished!"'; TPT Ps 110:1, 'Jehovah-God said to my Lord, the Messiah'. These changes can become perilous. The softening in TPT of Ps 22:1 – 'Why would you abandon me now?' – is explained by an addition to the biblical text in v. 24: 'He was there all the time.'

(2) Changes that seek to soften extreme statements that modern readers find uncomfortable, such as the psalmist's claims to be righteous. Here are examples from Psalm 18, NIV (or ESV) → TPT:

- I have kept the ways of the LORD → I will follow his commands (v. 21)
- I am not guilty → I'll not sin (v. 21)
- I have been blameless → I've done my best to be blameless (v. 23)
- [I] have kept myself from sin → keeping my heart pure (v. 23)
- God … made my way blameless (ESV) → you've shared with me your perfection (v. 32)

Violent or unforgiving language is also toned down, whether by completely changing the meaning (e.g., TPT Ps 23:5, 'You become my delicious feast / Even when my enemies dare to fight'), or by spiritualising and blunting the force of the original (e.g., Ps 137:9, 'Great honor will come to those / Who destroy you and your future, / By smashing your infants / Against the rubble of your own destruction').

(3) Most troubling are changes that tamper with statements about God, whether it be his attitude towards sin (e.g., TPT Ps 51:4, 'Everything I did, I did right in front of you'); judgment (e.g., TPT Ps 18:27, 'The haughty you disregard'); or death (e.g., TPT Ps 88:5, 'They're convinced you've forsaken me, / Certain that you've forgotten me completely—/ Abandoned, pierced, with nothing / To look forward to but death'). Sometimes even God's own character is impugned, e.g., TPT Ps 106:23, 26, 'So you were fed up and decided to destroy them … so you gave up and swore to them'.

In the early 4th century the great Church Father Athanasius wrote a letter commending passionate, Christ-focused, Spirit-filled interpretation of the psalms. But he concluded with the following warning:

> There is, however, one word of warning needed. No one must allow himself to be persuaded, by any arguments whatever, to decorate the Psalms with extraneous matter

or make alterations in their order or change the words themselves. They must be sung and chanted with entire simplicity, just as they are, so that … the Spirit, Who spoke by the saints, recognizing the selfsame words that He inspired, may join us in them too.'[6]

In short, altered Psalms cease to be Spirit-inspired Scripture.

4. The Style and Translation Technique of The Psalms

Simmons's style is certainly striking and absolutely contemporary. The book is a treasure trove of one-liners. 'You are my prize, my pleasure, and my portion' (16:5); 'My tears are liquid words, and you can read them all' (38:9); 'You call yourself a mighty man, a big shot?' (52:1). 'Here's my story: I came so close to missing the way' (73:2). 'Like a river bursting its banks, I'm overflowing with words' (45:1). Of course, many of these are not part of the text, but there are many vigorous, fresh and accurate translation choices that do faithfully reflect major theological themes, such as 'Yahweh now reigns as king!' (Pss 93:1; 97:1). However, the stylistic hallmark of *The Psalms* is not its linguistic freshening-up, but its genre.

Simmons has changed the genre of the Psalms from Near Eastern poetry to poetic prose. Notice in the following example, where I have laid out TPT as prose, how words are omitted (underlined in ESV) that would have created duplicate sentences saying the same thing, and words are inserted (underlined in TPT) that turn the remainder into a complex prose paragraph whose elements are logically joined into a narrative. A poetic flavour is added back into this prose by means of abundant alliteration, a technique used in at least every second verse, and by multiplying colourful, emotive, and exclamatory language wherever possible.

Psalm 18:4–6 ESV	*Psalm 18:4–6 TPT*
The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave <u>coiled around me</u>; the snares of death <u>confronted me</u>. In my distress I called to the Lord; <u>I cried to</u> my God <u>for help</u>. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.	For <u>when</u> the spirit of death wrapped chains around me and terrifying torrents of destruction overwhelmed me, <u>taking</u> me to death's door, to doom's domain, I cried out to you in my distress, the delivering God, <u>and</u> from your temple-throne you heard my troubled cry. My sobs came right into your heart <u>and you turned your face to rescue me</u>.

The effect is often striking, and would make for an interesting meditation on the psalms, albeit with a strong sectarian flavour. However, by eliminating the poetic techniques of parallelism and juxtaposition, TPT denies the reader the chance to follow the particular logic of the psalms. By abandoning the 'how' of Hebrew poetry and replacing it with prose-poems we are left at the mercy of the translator's impression of the theological story each psalm relates.

A clue to Simmons's translation technique is his frequent elimination of the second verb in a verse and reversal or mingling of the elements of its two lines; he also tends to split logically subordinated

---

[6] 'The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms,' in *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation: The Treatise* de incarnatione verbi Dei, ed. and trans. A Religious of CSMV, 2nd ed. (London: Mowbray, 1953), 116.

sentences into simpler, unconnected sentences. Psalm 50:6 is a good example (comparing ESV and TPT):

The heavens declare his righteousness,	And the heavens respond:
for God himself is judge!	"God himself will be their judge,
	And he will judge them with righteousness!"

This suggests that Simmons has adapted the method of translation, pioneered by Eugene Nida, of reducing Hebrew sentences to their simplest kernels, transferring those simple structures to English, and then freshly generating a semantically equivalent text.[7] This is a tried and true method, common among translators who work to give language groups in the majority world their first Bibles. It can produce clear, faithful and accurate translations, but the method needs to be carried out with care to prevent meaning from being lost in the transfer process.

To counter the loss-of-meaning problem Nida stressed the importance of moving beyond linguistic meaning, by recognising (1) contextual specification of meaning, in which the relevant component of a word's meaning is clarified through its interaction with other word-meanings nearby,[8] and (2) connotative meaning, namely, the reactions that words prompt in their hearers.[9] It may be that Simmons has tried to respect these two elements of Nida's method by means of (1) his constant double translations, and (2) his constant additions of emotive language. However, Simmons has strayed so far outside Nida's programme that his work would not be recognised as legitimate by any Bible translation society in the world, past or present. Here is Eugene Nida on the question of style and exegesis:

> It is style we are concerned with, not exegesis. The two questions are quite independent. Exegesis is wrong, entirely apart from any stylistic considerations, if it (1) misinterprets the point of the original, or (2) adds information from some nontextual source, and especially from some other cultural milieu. … We may then contrast a linguistic translation, which is legitimate, and a cultural translation or adaptation, which is not.[10]

---

[7] Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), esp. p. 68: 'Instead of attempting to set up transfers from one language to another by working out long series of equivalent formal structures which are presumably adequate to "translate" from one language into another, it is both scientifically and practically more efficient (1) to reduce the source text to its structurally simplest and most semantically evident kernels, (2) to transfer the meaning from source language to receptor language on a structurally simple level, and (3) to generate the stylistically and semantically equivalent expression in the receptor language.'

[8] Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 56–90.

[9] 'Because any theme is inevitably interpreted in the light of the distinctive set of values maintained by each culture or society, one must expect that events will never be mere events, any more than words are mere words. They are always colored by associations, and evaluated in terms of the emotive reactions of people' (Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice*, 98).

[10] Ibid., 133–34.

5. Conclusion: Passion, Translation and Scripture

5.1. The Aim: 'Passion'

The aim of TPT is 'to re-introduce the passion and fire of the Bible to the English reader' (p. 7). 'This is a heart-level translation, from the passion of God's heart to the passion of your heart' (p. 8). Now this may seem an obvious question, but what does 'passion' mean? For Simmons it means a type of emotion. It might be happy, or sad, or angry, or loving, but what makes any emotion into a passion is simply its strength. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines passion as: 'a very strong feeling of sexual love', 'a very strong belief or feeling about something', or 'a very strong liking for something'. But more than this, Simmons wants his translation to 'trigger an overwhelming response to the truth of the Bible' (p. 8). This valuing of being *overwhelmed* by something is what seems to drive his whole project. And here's the thing – this is a uniquely modern, even novel, cultural phenomenon. The idea that things are more real, more true, more valuable, when we feel them strongly is a product of 19th century Western Romanticism. Not that Simmons believes that our emotions make God himself more real. Rather, they make him more real to us; the stronger the emotion, the more fully we realise our 'quest to experience God's presence' (p. 4).

5.1.1. Emotions in the Bible

Emotions are a contentious topic in Christian theology, because they are both powerful and morally ambiguous. The Bible is both deeply affirming of human emotions, and acutely aware of the danger of being controlled by them.[11]

To be human is to have emotions, and the Bible is full of them. There's no denying the depths of Jacob's love for Rachel (Gen 29:20); of the exiles' grief at the loss of Jerusalem (Lam 1:2); of the Magi's joy at seeing Jesus (Matt 2:10). Jesus, too, shared the emotions common to humanity, both negative and positive. He felt extreme grief at the prospect of his death (Matt 26:38); he was consumed by jealousy on the Lᴏʀᴅ's behalf (John 2:16–17); he exulted when the Spirit showed him what the Father is like (Luke 10:21).

Not all emotions are desirable, of course, and the Bible uses language of being 'overwhelmed' for unwelcome emotions, emotions that come from outside and 'prevail against' us, such as terror, guilt, or grief (e.g., Pss 55:5; 65:3; 88:7–8). Not that there is anything wrong with feeling them – it's part of living in a fallen world. However, 'passions' are another story. The word 'passion' is used to translate a wide range of Greek and Hebrew words whose meaning spans craving, strong desire, lust, jealousy, rage, or anguish. What these very different internal states have in common is that they tend to overwhelm us and control our behaviour. They pull at us so that we will give in to them. They long to direct our lives in place of the Holy Spirit.[12]

In short, emotions are a mixed bag. There is good fear and bad fear, good grief and bad grief, even good joy and bad joy (Jer 50:11–13). One key principle holds this mixed picture together: *Right*

---

[11] For a good introduction to this vast topic, see Michael P. Jensen, ed., *True Feelings: Perspectives on Emotion in Christian Life and Ministry* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2012).

[12] See Rom 1:26; 6:12; 7:5; 1 Cor 7:9; Gal 5:24; Eph 2:3; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:5; 1 Tim 5:11; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:6; 4:3; Tit 2:12; 3:3; Jas 4:1; 1 Pet 1:14; 2:11; 4:2; 2 Pet 2:10; Jude 18; Rev 14:8. In nearly all these verses TPT avoids using the word 'passion'.

emotion flows from right knowledge of God. We learn to love what God loves and hate what he hates by encountering him in Scripture (Deut 6:5–6; Prov 2:6–10). To be in Christ means being shaped by the Word of God, which includes our emotions (Col 3:16). Joy, for example, is a fruit of the Spirit because it is evoked by coming to understand what God has done for us in Christ (Ps 105:43; Luke 2:10; Rom 15:13). The emotions of a believer do not grow stronger; instead, by the grace of God they become redirected. And this process of redirection also entails learning to govern emotions and not be ruled by them (Tit 2:11–12; Jas 4:1). Again, the word of God is key.

5.1.2. Emotions in **The Passion Translation**

Fatally for Simmons's 'passion' programme, the emotions TPT seeks to evoke do not arise naturally from the word of God, but are artificially introduced. TPT generates emotions from the translator's personal response to the text, and uses them to shape our reception of the text. It evidently does not trust in the power of Scripture to move the hearts of its readers without a good deal of outside assistance. After all, if Scripture were sufficient for the task, TPT would not have dialled the emotional volume up to eleven. And the problem is not simply that actual references to emotional states in the Hebrew Psalms are multiplied until they completely and wrongly dominate the whole book. It's the nature of these insertions as well. The Bible's emotions are modified. Feelings of awe are directed towards total ecstasy; feelings of ardour and intimacy are directed towards total surrender. In short, Simmons makes a false claim when he states that TPT will 're-introduce the passion and fire of the Bible to the English reader.' It's the other way round – Simmons is trying to introduce the 'passion and fire' beloved of his own culture into the Bible. He is trying to make the Bible value something that we value – the feeling of being overwhelmed by a strong emotion – in spite of the strong stance the Bible consistently takes against this exact thing. As Ps 117 TPT says (but the Bible does not), 'Let it all out! … go ahead, let it all out! … O Yah!'

Not only does TPT seek to overwhelm its readers with emotions that have been imposed on Scripture, but the distortion of the word of God that results from these additions means that readers are deprived of the correct knowledge of God that is prerequisite for the proper shaping of their emotional responses. Simmons's reprehensible selectivity about the emotions he tries to 'trigger' in his readers plays a role here. In his listing of major genres in the Psalms ('themes', pp. 5–6) he completely omits the Psalter's most common genre, namely, lament. And while the translation does include the lament psalms, it does not give them the expansive treatment that praise receives.[13] Tragically, this illegitimate layering of selective passions over the top of Scripture – mostly those of physical intimacy and breathless elevation – prevents TPT from showing us the *actual* dimensions, the 'width and length and height and depth,' of the love of Christ as it shines from every page of Scripture.

To call a Bible a 'Passion Translation' would have been unthinkable until recent times. It would be like having a 'Greed Translation,' or a 'Lust Translation.' Meanings change, of course, and today 'passion' just means a strong emotion. And yet, while there is nothing wrong with strong emotion per se, there is everything wrong with putting it at the heart of the 'quest to experience God's presence.' Simmons aims for 'an overwhelming response to the truth of the Bible,' but does it by generating

---

[13] To list just two examples: TPT Ps 22:1–2 + 4–6 take a modest 103 words compared to NIV's 90, but the words of praise in v. 3 are doubled. And the gloomy final verse of Psalm 39 becomes 'Don't let me die without restoring / Joy and gladness to my soul. / May your frown over my failure / become a smile over my success.'

emotion that is foreign to Scripture and using it to whip us up into a response that is not shaped by the word.

5.2. The Method: Double Translation

It might seem intuitively true that when a Hebrew word does not have a precise English equivalent, what is needed is to use more than one English word. But TPT demonstrates just how wrong this can be. The whole point of meaning-based translation is that a sentence is more translatable than a word. It is context that adds the required precision of meaning, not double translation, which only serves to distance the reader from the original. When the Septuagint translators encountered a phrase they could not easily replicate in Greek, they often ensured that their paraphrase had the same number of words as the Hebrew – what scholars today call 'quantitative literalism.' The point is that every unnecessary word in a translation takes it one step further from accuracy. Simmons has produced a text so far removed from the original that it no longer counts as the Bible.[14]

And this is even before we remember TPT's lack of interest in textual and linguistic accuracy. So frequently does TPT misrepresent or ignore the original text that one is forced to conclude that its author had little interest in representing the meaning of the original as preserved in the manuscript tradition. Instead he abuses ancient witnesses, pressing them into the service of his own novel ideas about what the text ought to say. In Nida's words, this is not a linguistic translation; it is a cultural translation, and hence it is not a legitimate Bible.

5.3. The Result: A New Scripture for a New Sect

TPT is not just a new translation; it is a new text, and its authority derives solely from its creator. Like Joseph Smith and *The Book of Mormon*, Brian Simmons has created a new scripture with the potential to rule as canon over a new sect. Judging from *The Psalms* alone, I would say that it would be a Christian sect, and that unlike the Mormon cult its scriptures will point its adherents to saving faith in God the Son, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. But TPT is not a Bible, and any church that treats it as such and receives it as canon will, by that very action, turn itself into an unorthodox sect. If the translation had been packaged as a commentary on Scripture I would not have needed to write this review; but to package it as Scripture is an offence against God. Every believer who is taught to treat it as the enscripturated words of God is in spiritual danger, not least because of the sentimentalised portrait of God that TPT *Psalms* sets out to paint. Simmons's caricature of God as 'the King who likes and enjoys you' ('Introduction', p. 5) eliminates all but one facet of God's feelings about us, and then gets that one wrong.

This 500th anniversary of the Reformation is a time to remember how urgent and contested the question of Bible translation was, back when almost no one in the world had the Scriptures in their heart language. One of the accusations Catholic apologists brought against early Bible translators was that they added words to the text in support of their Protestant heresies, just as the Arians and Pelagians had done before them (all the Arians had to do was change one word in Prov 8:22). This was a dangerous charge, and William Fulke's defence of 1583 is a good place to end this review.

---

[14] An interesting comparison is the once-popular Amplified Bible, which clearly marked its amplifications as additions to the text, so that readers could distinguish Scripture from amplification.

The original text of the holy scripture we alter not, either by adding, taking away or changing of any letter or syllable, for any private purpose; which were not only a thing most wicked and sacrilegious, but also vain and impossible. For so many ancient copies of the original text are extant in divers places of the world … [that] we should be rather mad than foolish if we did but once attempt such a matter, for maintenance of our own opinions.[15]

---

[15] William Fulke, *A Defence of the Sincere and True Translations of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue*, ed. Charles Hartshorne for the Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843), 11. See also pp. 547–56.