

Should We Use Eugene Peterson's 'The Message'?

In the aftermath of Eugene Peterson's controversial remarks about homosexuality, followed by his retraction, many have asked me if they should still use The Message Bible. My answer to the question remains the same today as it has always been: The Message is not a translation and should not be used as your primary Bible. However, as a very free paraphrase, it is sometimes powerful and brilliant while at other times it is seriously off target.

We can get a glimpse of the strengths and weaknesses of The Message by looking at how Dr. Peterson treated a number of key verses dealing with homosexual practice. This is a useful place to start, given the controversy currently surrounding this popular, 84-year-old, Christian author.

Let's look at Leviticus 18:22, first in the ESV, a conservative evangelical translation, then in The Message. The ESV reads: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The Message reads: "Don't have sex with a man as one does with a woman. That is abhorrent."

Nothing is watered down here, and the paraphrase is close and fair. And the word "abhorrent" is as good a rendering of the Hebrew as is "abomination."

Next, we'll compare Romans 1:26-27.

The ESV reads: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." The Message reads: "Worse followed.

Refusing to know God, they soon didn't know how to be human either—women didn't know how to be women, men didn't know how to be men. Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another, women with women, men with men—all lust, no love. And then they paid for it, oh, how they paid for it—emptied of God and love, godless and loveless wretches.”

Dr. Peterson's paraphrase here is vivid and powerful, with nothing watered down or weakened, describing the most debased aspects of homosexual practice in stark, clear terms. (For the record, Paul was not saying here that homosexual couples are incapable of love or that all homosexuals are sex fiends. He is emphasizing how these same-sex acts are flatly contrary to God's design and also explaining how, historically, the human race was given over to idolatry and sin.)

When it comes to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, The Message is not clear at all, but I don't think it's because Dr. Peterson was trying to water down the two Greek terms used for homosexual practice. Instead, he became way too cute with words in general, taking away from the clarity of the original and even introducing some foreign concepts. This displays The Message at its worst, and it's another reminder as to why we should never use it as our primary Bible.

As translated in the ESV, Paul wrote, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” In The Message this becomes, “Don't you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don't care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom.”

So, The Message does speak about those who “use and abuse each

other, use and abuse sex," but what in the world does that mean?

If you're reading the ESV (or most other translations) and you're sleeping with your girlfriend or committing adultery with your neighbor's spouse or practicing homosexuality, Paul's words will hit you between the eyes: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality ... will inherit the kingdom of God."

If you're reading The Message, it will go right over your head: "Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom." In fact, you might even turn to your partner as you read the verses together and say, "That doesn't describe us! We love each other, and we're not using or abusing each other."

This, again, is a great weakness of The Message: It sometimes produces beautifully phrased lines at the expense of the truth of Scripture. And notice also the reference in The Message to those who "use and abuse the earth and everything in it." When did Paul write this? He didn't.

Of course, I could cite hundreds of brilliant renderings in The Message, and sometimes, when preaching, I'll cite one of them, since it powerfully drills home the point. I've even cited The Message in some of my academic, biblical commentary writing.

But, to repeat: It should never be used as your primary Bible, since it is not a translation of the Bible but rather a free paraphrase of the Bible. And whenever I see people carrying The Message into church services, I groan, since I assume that, for those people, it *is* their Bible.

Use it, then, in a supplemental way and, where it really nails things or clarifies things, learn from it. But use it with

caution: It is, by design, a very free paraphrase.

In sum, my view today of The Message is the same as it has been for years, unchanged by the controversial events of this week. I appreciate the years of effort that were put into it, and I recognize it for what it is, with all its great strengths and great weaknesses.

For a fair assessment of Dr. Peterson's comments and retraction this week, see Bill Muehlenberg's article [here](#).
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