

## **"The Message" by Eugene Peterson: A Critique**

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What first alarmed me about "The Message" was the author's use of what sounded like New Age terminology: Life-Light, God-Colors, God-Expression, true selves, child-of-God selves, and other similar terms. I recognized these types of composite terms as being analogous to those used in New Age and Occult literature. My question was: why was this type of terminology now being used in what was being advertised as a "fresh, contemporary version of the New Testament"?

NavPress is usually thought to be an evangelical publisher, and the author of "The Message" is also considered by many to be an evangelical, Eugene Peterson. He is Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, which is an evangelical school in the opinion of most. So why the strange, composite, New Age-like terminology?

I think that Peterson, being a teacher of spiritual theology, is strongly influenced by mystical thought. Spiritual theology is concerned with the inner-life and the devotional or prayer life or spiritual development of the individual. Often it delves into methods of prayer and techniques for meditative contemplation which have been used throughout the ages, especially those of the Christian mystics. This is why "The Message" more closely resembles a commentary on the New Testament by a professor of spiritual theology, than it does an accurate transference of the Greek New Testament into everyday English.

The reason the terminology in "The Message" appears to be New Age or Occult-like is because the Christian mystics use terms similar to those used by the New Age and Occult mystics. I believe Peterson is writing as a Christian mystic. The problem with this is that the similar terms represent similar concepts of God and how the mystics believe we can relate to, or be united with, God. These concepts and meditative or contemplative prayer methods are not found in the Bible, but come instead from non-Christian sources such as the Hindu Upanishads and the Buddhist Scriptures as well as the Neo-Platonic writers who profoundly influenced the early Christian mystics.

Because of this, many well-meaning Christian mystics fall into an erroneous concept of God, such as monism or pantheism due to this influence from non-Christian beliefs and practices. It is not the purpose of this article to debate the validity of Christian mysticism, but only to point out that "The Message" seems to have a rather strong mystical flavor. Considering the dangers that have always been inherent in Christian mysticism, and the fact that most Christians desire to observe only those practices and beliefs which are in

the Bible, why didn't the author and his publisher acknowledge that this is not just another version of the New Testament, but is in fact an overtly mystical and liberal version. (Eternal punishment and the naming of specific sins such as homosexuality, have been omitted.)

In a promotional brochure for "The Message," the publisher claims: "'The Message' is a fresh, contemporary version of the New Testament that transfers the informal and earthy flavor of the Greek into the rhythms and idiom of everyday English." In the same brochure, Gordon D. Fee endorses "The Message," saying that it is "exegetically sensitive yet speaks in the language of today."

The back cover of "The Message" has an endorsement from J. I. Packer who says that it "catches the logical flow, personal energy and imaginative overtones of the original very well indeed." NavPress says again that, "'The Message' brings out the expressive, earthy flavor of New Testament Greek."

Here is the problem I have with these statements: the average Christian does not know Greek, but is certain that these renowned scholars are expert authorities in the Greek text and therefore trust their judgement. Regardless of the claims by the publisher and those of these highly respected scholars, it does not take a scholar to discover that "The Message" is not by any stretch of the imagination a contemporary version of the New Testament. I believe that the publisher has made use of two logical fallacies in this advertising campaign: blinding with science (since most people don't know Greek) and the appeal to authority (since most people trust and respect Packer and Fee as well as the others who lend their endorsement to "The Message").

Upon my examination of "The Message" and my comparison of it with the Greek New Testament, I soon realized that it was extremely unfaithful to the Greek. Peterson's transference of the Greek into English is very imaginative, but produces a perversion of the Word of God and not a new version of it. The claims of the publisher are misleading at best. They never mention that it is a paraphrase and not a translation, and a very free paraphrase without a doubt.

Observe the following comparison of Scripture passages taken from "The Message" with those taken from the New International Version:

**NIV**  
**"The Message"**  
Mt. 3:12  
"unquenchable fire"  
"out with the trash"  
Mt. 10:28  
"destroy both body and soul in hell"  
"has in his hands"  
Mt. 12:32

"sins not forgiven"  
"sawing off the branch"  
Mt. 18:9  
"thrown into hell"  
"exercising 20/20 vision from inside hell"  
Mt. 23:33  
"condemned to hell"  
"worm your way out"  
John 1:12  
"children of God"  
"true selves, child-of-God selves"  
Rom. 3:28  
"justified by faith"  
"welcome his action and enter into it"  
Rom. 6:4  
"raised from the dead"  
"raised into a light-filled world"  
1 Cor. 6:9-10  
[lists various sins by name]  
[omits all sins by name]  
1 Tim. 1:10  
"pervert"  
omits

These last two passages have the Greek word which is translated "homosexual" contained in them. It is the only two times the word occurs in the New Testament. The NIV translates the word as "homosexual" in 1 Cor. 6:9, but changes it to read "pervert" in 1 Tim. 1:10. "The Message" omits the word both times it occurs.

Two other passages are particularly disturbing. The first one is Mt. 28:19 which in the NIV reads: "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "The Message" changes this to read: "baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This makes it sound as though there is one God who has three names rather than three persons in the Godhead.

The second passage is Rom. 8:11 which the NIV translates as: "he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies." "The Message" puts it this way: "he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself." This sounds as if Jesus had to be spiritually regenerated or born again! Both of these passages are clearly poor renderings of the Greek text indeed.

In conclusion, let me say that "The Message" is a bad paraphrase of the New Testament which is very unfaithful to the original Greek. The use of mystical terms, the apparent aversion to offending the reader by naming specific sins and the alteration of passages referring to eternal punishment, establish reason enough to warn the would-be readers of "The Message." Although it is advertised as a version of the New Testament which is

faithful to the Greek, and is endorsed by many reputable scholars, no one should be misled into thinking that this is true. It is not.

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