

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TRANSLATION AND A PARAPHRASE

The other day someone mentioned they enjoyed The Message "paraphrase" of the Bible. The term mislabeled The Message and put a spotlight on two words that we often confuse. Let's peak at the difference between a translation and a paraphrase.

Technically something is a paraphrase when someone is asked to "put something in your own words." We take something in our native language and re-word it, using our own vocabulary. A translation is something that is found in one language and is "translated" into another language. If someone asks for yesterday's sermon to be put into Spanish, then a translator will take the words spoken in the sermon and find suitable words to convey the meaning in Spanish. That is a translation.

A translation can either be a "word-for-word" translation, or a "thought-for-thought" translation. The latter often makes the translation flow more smoothly in the new language.

The old Living Bible (the "Green" edition that almost all of us had in the 70s) was a paraphrase. Kenneth Taylor paraphrased the Living Bible by putting the English old Revised Standard Version of the Bible into his own words. He did not know either Greek or Hebrew. He did not refer to the other languages at all. He produced his own paraphrase of the Bible. Many scholars criticized the Living Bible because of times when the wording was inaccurate – but it was not supposed to be accurate because it was not a translation. This is what the Bible meant to Kenneth Taylor.

The Message is not a paraphrase; it is a translation. Eugene Peterson was something of a linguist, knowing several languages, including Greek and Hebrew. Peterson went to the original languages and tried to translate the wording into the vocabulary that most of us use today. Again, technically The Message is a "thought-for-thought" translation, but it causes us "consternation" because it doesn't "sound" like the New International or even the New Living Translation, which really is a translation now.

I prefer to call The Message a phrase that I think I have coined myself. I have not seen the term used anywhere else, but you are welcome to join my bandwagon and we will call it a "trend." I call The Message an "idiomatic translation." Rather than "word-for-word" or "formal" translation (which is what the New American Standard Bible is) or a "thought-for-thought" or "dynamic" translation (which most of today's popular versions are), The Message seems to spend more time taking idioms from the original languages and putting them into idioms that are popular and common today. It takes a little more "liberty" with the words and usage, but it places the translation into a vocabulary with which we are most familiar. It "sounds" like a paraphrase, but it is not. Believe it or not, I have read literature put out by NavPress - which owns the rights to The Message - using the word paraphrase because people are drawn to something that doesn't sound like a translation. But technically The Message is not a paraphrase.

Some scholars believe that the original King James Version actually "tried" to be more of a Message than we realize, because we use the English language of 2021 rather than the English language of 1611. In its day, the King James Version of the Bible was "street" language, not the King's English.

Hope this helps the confusion.