

CHAPTER 9

The Message

Language is sacred at its core. It has its origin in God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). When St. John rewrote Genesis, emphasizing the primacy of language (Word and words) in the very being-ness of God and the way God works, he went on to make the truly astonishing statement that “the Word became flesh and lived among us ...” (John 1:14 NRSV). With that statement St. John launched his detailed witness of Jesus as that Word, Jesus revealing who he is (who *God* is), Jesus using the Aramaic language, the local street language of his day, to do it, to reveal God, the Word that was God in the beginning. When John wrote his witness, his Gospel, he translated the words and stories that he had heard Jesus speak in Aramaic into Greek. This Word, this Jesus, did not walk the roads of Palestine stopping off in villages to give lectures on divinity in the abstract, or post rules in the public squares on conduct acceptable to God, or explain the way things are in order to satisfy our natural curiosity. He both was the language and spoke the lan-

guage that reveals God not from the outside but from the inside, God’s heart, God’s comprehensive way of being personally and relationally with us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the people understood him — “the common people heard him gladly” (Mark 12:37 ASV). He spoke the language of God in their language. As men and women received these words, they were *formed* by them into a “new creation,” they were “born again.”

This revelatory quality of language maintains its sacred creation and salvation core as we human beings continue to speak and listen to it, but especially as we use language to reveal to one another who we uniquely are. We are not just using words to exchange information — asking directions for making it across the street, getting or giving goods and services, identifying the red-tailed hawk and the fringed gentian, but *revealing ourselves*: revealing our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and prayers, that vast interiority that we summarize as *soul*, this unfathomable mystery of who we are as “image of God.”

This sacredness of language, whether spoken or written, is liable to sacrilege in two directions, downward and upward. Sacrilege downward takes the form of blasphemy, language used to defile and desecrate. The sacredness of language inheres in its capacity to reveal what cannot be weighed and measured, its capacity to reveal spirit, interior reality, whether divine or human. If it is debased into cant or cliché or mendacity it violates the sacred essence of a man or

woman — or God. It reduces reality, whether human or divine, to something less, something impersonal, a thing or an image that I can manipulate and use. Such language takes the attitude that if I have to be an ant-hill there aren't going to be any mountains.

Sacrilege upward takes place when language is inflated into balloons of abstraction or diffused into the insubstantiality of lacey gossamer. Pretentious language is as much a violation of the sacred core of language as blasphemy and cant. This happens when we use language to flatter or impress, when we use words to distance ourselves from relationship with others, whether the others are the persons of the Trinity or our parents, leaders, celebrities, friends, and neighbors. If we use language to set others on pedestals or install them in roles, we no longer have to deal with them as persons but only as ideas or representatives or functions. It sounds as if we are honoring them; in fact we are using language to keep them out of the neighborhoods in which we live our ordinary lives. We are then free to deal with them in escapist fantasies, in condescending criticism, in avaricious dreaming, or in curt dismissal. This is the desecration of language “upward.”

When it comes to reading and responding to Scripture the danger of violations upward is much greater than that of violations downward for the simple reason that it is more difficult to detect. Outright blasphemy — an angry “God dammit!” — calls more attention to itself than obsequious piety — for ex-

ample, “precious and exalted, holy and incomparable God Almighty ...” intoned in a quavering voice. Ironically, the latter may be more a desecration of language than the former.

We seldom if ever think of it, but it doesn't take much imagination to realize that the first people who read the Bible didn't know they were reading the Bible. They were simply listening to stories of their ancestors Abraham and Samuel, or reading notes from old sermons written on scraps of paper, or discussing a letter from a man whom they had never heard of but some friends had told them was well worth listening to. These words carried no external authority with them. If the readers judged the “book by its cover,” they could very easily be unimpressed, even scornful. The danger for them was sacrilege downward, despising what they didn't understand or reducing revelational intimacies to the latest in pious gossip. But it didn't take long for some of them to realize that these words revealed something about God that they could never have guessed, and gave them a language by which they could respond appropriately, answering from their hearts. The words were collected and honored; they became the text by which Christians lived their lives. That was a good thing; that is how we got our Bible.

But along the way the dangers of sacrilege shifted from downward to upward. Once the Bible became a revered authority it became possible to treat it as a thing, an impersonal authority, to use it to define or

damn others, and to avoid dealing with God's word in a personal, relational, and obedient way. It didn't take long for people to start using the Bible as a cover, as a front, by honoring it, praising it as a verbal artifact, defending it as the Truth against all comers, treating it as a classic, as great literature, rather than receiving these words and responding to these words as God's word to them, personally. But the words of Scripture are not primarily words, however impressive, that label or define or prove, but words that mean, that reveal, that shape the soul, that generate saved lives, that form believing and obedient lives. Impersonal, opinionated, propagandizing, manipulating words, no matter how ardent and accurate, inflate upward. They lose rootage in hearts. They lose grounding in human dailiness. They are no longer at the service of listening and responding to the word, those words that reveal God's will and presence, the language in which we are invited to likewise reveal ourselves in prayer and praise, in obedience and love. *Having* and *defending* and *celebrating* the Bible instead of *receiving*, *submitting to*, and *praying* the Bible, masks an enormous amount of nonreading.

For those of us who take the Scriptures seriously as the word of God and the authoritative text by which we choose to live, translation is one of the primary defenses that we have against sacrilege upward, against letting language inflate into pomposities or artifices that are no longer current with the way we express our ordinary lives. And because pomposities

are always "crouching at the door" of language, translators need to be on call to keep language from losing resonance with the common speech that we use when we talk with our children and friends. When the language in question is the Scriptures, the language God uses to reveal himself to us, the stakes are immense.

The most widely distributed and influential translation of the Bible in the English language was authorized by King James of England and published in 1611, the translation that continues to carry his name: the King James Version. This grand achievement, "the great monument of English and North American Protestantism,"¹ has benefited from a series of revisions based on the recovery of earlier and more accurate manuscripts.² But even though the revisions have provided us with an impressively accurate text, they have not prevented a continuously widening gap between the language of the Bible and the language we use in our everyday lives.

But then, in 1897 and later in 1923, archaeological discoveries were made that infused fresh blood into Bible translations. Translators went to work on the text with impressive results. The village of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt and the ancient kingdom of Ugarit in Syria were the sites where these discoveries took place, discoveries that introduced a completely new dimension into the post-King James world of Bible translation. The two place names are not exactly household words among Bible readers but they should be, for between them they bring into view a

world of language and culture that has revolutionized (not too strong a word, I think) the translation of the Bible.

Oxyrhynchus and Ugarit

Oxyrhynchus is in Egypt. Egypt has always been the darling of archaeologists, courted by virtually everyone interested in the ancient world. A world of wonders: the Giza pyramids, the inscrutable sphinx, the Karnak temple, the brobdingnagian statues, the high art of hieroglyphics. A place of marvels to behold and mysteries to solve. But the discovery that did far more to affect the Christian mind than all the previous Egyptian marvels and mysteries put together was made in a village garbage dump at Oxyrhynchus on the Nile, 160 miles south of Cairo. Oxyrhynchus boasted no temples, no pyramid tombs, no statues of Horus and Osiris, nothing worth photographing, nothing worth hiring a camel to go and see. Just that garbage dump where a couple of men unearthed some scraps of paper, the discarded contents of the town's wastebaskets. The men were British, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt. The year was 1897. The scraps of paper (papyri) they unearthed from that garbage dump had Greek writing on them. From the moment that Grenfell and Hunt read the first words on these discarded pieces of paper, they knew they were in on something big, *very* big. "Epoch-making," the phrase used by the American Lutheran lexicographers Wil-

liam Arndt and Wilfred Gingrich to describe the discoveries, errs, if anything, on the side of understatement.³

As already noted, in the world in which the twenty-seven documents that compose our New Testament were written, Greek was the prevailing language. Much as Aramaic had been the *lingua franca* of the Persian empire, Greek was the unifying language of the Greek and Roman empires that succeeded it. Regardless of your cradle language — Egyptian, Latin, Syriac, Arabic — if you had been alive in the age ushered in by Alexander the Great, a great missionary for all things Greek, you would have spoken some Greek. If newspapers had been published in those years, they would have been in Greek. Business was conducted in Greek, government decrees were issued in Greek, school subjects were learned in Greek. Not everywhere, of course, for local languages also persisted, but mostly.

At the time that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Greek was already an ancient language — at least a thousand years of writings that made up an impressive library of literature: Homer and Xenophon, Pindar and Aeschylus, Sappho and Euclid, Heraclitus and Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle. Great epics, spellbinding drama, penetrating history, lyrical poetry, profound philosophy, clear-sighted science. This Greek was a resilient, elegant, and supple language capable of immense subtleties.

Around 500 B.C. the dialect of Athens (Attic Greek) had emerged as the dominant Greek of the area and imposed itself on the several dialects of the Greek homelands; it became the common dialect, the common vehicle for communication, especially in business affairs and military expeditions. It was also this Attic Greek that gained enormous status as a literary language in the classical period (500 to 323 B.C.). But at the time of Alexander the Great's military and cultural conquests of all the countries from Greece to India and from Syria to Egypt, as Greek developed into the common language across this vast, many-languaged territory, it lost a good bit of its elegance. As it was adapted to international usage — military, mercantile, diplomatic — the gap between where this Greek began (preserved in Attic classical literature) and where it ended up (the language of the people) became significant. The Attic dialect of Athens thus evolved into what we customarily refer to as the *Koine* or “common” Greek of the Hellenistic period and of the New Testament. Meanwhile, philosophers, poets, dramatists, and historians continued to write in classical Greek, “proper” Greek. All students learned that serious writers must shun the common (*koine*) language, which was fit only for nonliterary use.

The consequence was that in the course of the three centuries preceding Jesus and the formation of the Christian church, there were two levels of Greek language: the classical Greek represented by the great writers of the past, and the common Greek in use

across the empire to conduct all the affairs of everyday life. If you intended to write history or philosophy or poetry, you would use the best Greek available, classical Greek. But if you were carrying on a conversation with your neighbors or shopping in the market, you would use the *Koine*, the common tongue. If from time to time you supplemented your conversation with writing, this nonliterary writing found its way into a wastebasket and from there eventually to the garbage dump.

So here's the thing: Only what was written in classical Greek survived, the writings that ended up in libraries and government archives, or on monuments and in formal inscriptions — the kind of writing that professional writers, “real” writers, wrote.

Time passed. The documents that became our New Testament were gathered and honored. Eventually they were wedded to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) and became the text for the Christian church — authoritative as the word of God. As the Roman Empire extended its range and influence they were, bit by bit, translated into Latin. The translators, of course, noticed that the Greek of Paul and Mark was quite different from the Greek they had learned in the schools. The Greek of the New Testament sounded so barbarous to the educated that it had to be defended by the early church. Over the centuries of translation two theories emerged to account for the oddity of New Testament Greek as compared to classical Greek. One group thought that New

Testament Greek must have been a translation from an original Hebrew text. These were the “Hebraists”: they argued that an underlying Hebrew original accounted for the un-Greek quality of the writing. The other group — these were the “purists” — conjectured that New Testament Greek was a special language, created by the Holy Spirit to suit the purposes of God’s revelation. The classical Greek that provided the base was purified of its pagan origins by the refining fire of the Spirit.

The Greek New Testament has a vocabulary of about five thousand words. Of those five thousand words, about five hundred were considered unique to the New Testament, never appearing in any extant secular Greek literature up to that point. The “purists” seized on this statistic to suggest that the Spirit modified the secular Greek to give it a distinctive “Holy Spirit” cast, and then seeded it with freshly coined “Holy Spirit” words to confirm its exalted status as the language of revelation. Just as the Holy Ghost inspired the writers, Mark and Luke, Paul and John and the others, he also supplied the special words necessary to convey the uniqueness of the message. This language, “biblical Greek,” was exclusive to the Bible and never profaned by common use. A German theologian, Richard Rothe, went so far as to call it the “language of the Holy Ghost.”⁴

There was never any question but that New Testament Greek was different from classical Greek. But how to account for the difference? The “Hebraists”

and the “purists,” in their quite different ways, did their best to come up with an answer.

Until that April day in 1897 when Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt fished that first piece of paper out of the Oxyrhynchus rubbish heap. And then another and then another. As they read these they were able to piece together what life was like on the muddy streets, crowded markets, and noisy playgrounds of ancient Alexandria. Early on they noticed that many of the words they were reading were among the five hundred or so Holy Ghost words that were supposedly unique to the New Testament. As they continued to decipher and read what was written on these unimposing scraps of papyrus paper they were able to account for nearly all five hundred words. The words came from wills, official reports, letters from husbands away on business to their wives at home, a letter that a son who had become a soldier wrote to his parents, a letter in which a father admonished his children who were away from home, petitions, accounts, shopping lists, bills and receipts — the kinds of writings that never get bound into books and catalogued in a library. This was the kind of writing that, when it has done its work, is thrown away. Scholars and translators working on the Bible had no idea that this language was even there for the very good reason that it had never come within throwing distance of a library — these casual, “unliterary” writings had all been buried in the garbage dumps. All those special words that occurred nowhere else in written records,

those “Holy Ghost” words, were all the time buried in a town garbage dump, preserved under Egyptian sand. They were all street words, spontaneous, unstudied expressions out of the immediacy of workplace and kitchen.

The scholars who now went to work on these unpretentious scraps of paper would completely reorient the presuppositions of biblical translators. A young German professor, Adolf Deissmann, was the pioneer. He carefully assessed each new word, studied its context, and worked at understanding and appreciating the kind of language God uses as he makes himself known among us.⁵ He was followed up by the great English Greek scholar James Hope Moulton, who immediately went to work rewriting the definitive grammar of New Testament Greek by using the new evidence from the scraps of paper, the “papyri.” Summing up the impact of what he was doing he wrote:

The New Testament writers had little idea that they were writing literature [otherwise they would have written in literary Greek]. The Holy Ghost spoke absolutely in the language of the people, as we might surely have expected He would.... The very grammar and dictionary cry out against men who would allow the Scriptures to appear in any other form than that “understood of the people.”⁶

A half-century later, Professor C. F. D. Moule weighed in with his assessment: “The arrival of papyrus fragments from Egypt upon the philologists’ desks marks a new area in the study of New Testament Greek.”⁷

A generation before these discoveries were made — discoveries that absolutely revolutionized biblical translation — Bishop Lightfoot, one of England’s most insightful New Testament scholars, in a prescient aside while lecturing, said, “if we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for understanding of the language of the New Testament generally.”⁸ Well, they were discovered — and what a help they have been!

The difference that this has made to Bible translation and Bible reading is hard to exaggerate. In retrospect it shouldn’t have been such a surprise that this was the kind of language used in the Bible, for this is exactly the kind of society that we know that Jesus embraced and loved, the world of children and marginal men and women, the rough-talking working class, the world of the poor and dispossessed and exploited. Still, it was a surprise: our Bibles written not in the educated and polished language of scholars, historians, philosophers, and theologians but in the common language of fishermen and prostitutes, homemakers and carpenters. Not entirely, to be sure. F. F. Bruce cautions against exaggerating the extent to which the Greek vernacular is taken over wholesale into the Greek New Testament. There are wide differences in style within the New Testament, ranging from true literary works (Hebrews and First Peter) to the vernacular conversation of ordinary people (the Gospels), with Paul coming roughly half-

way between.⁹ But now that it is all laid out before us, it makes perfect sense. Of course the witnesses of God's revelation to us would use the language most accessible to us. Professor Moulton had it right: "The Holy Ghost spoke absolutely in the language of the people, as we might surely have expected He would."

Two representative examples. An adjective appears in the Lord's Prayer, the word usually translated "daily," for which there is no precedent in classical Greek (Matt. 6:11 and Luke 11:3). It would be hard to find a more striking instance of a "Holy Ghost" word: "Give us this day our *daily* bread." In Greek *epiousion*. So what kind of bread are we to pray for?

One commentator on the Sermon on the Mount targets the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer as its most famous crux: "the most controversial and difficult of the petitions."¹⁰ So much hangs on the proper translation of *ton arton ton epiousion*, which is usually (and properly) translated "daily bread."

So why is this petition a crux? Because if we get this one wrong, the entire prayer is undermined, or at the very least skewed. This is the only petition that deals with materiality. The Prayer has six petitions: the first three pray for the furtherance of God and his work — his holiness, his will, his kingdom; the matching triad is oriented around human needs — food, forgiveness, deliverance. The pair of triads is connected by the phrase, "on earth as it is in heaven," which is to say that prayer has its source in heaven, the home

country, so to speak, of God, but the action takes place on earth — *our* home country. Prayer that is not firmly grounded "on earth" is not prayer as our Lord taught us to pray.

The petition immediately following the "on earth" formula is the petition for bread, as if to underline the earthiness of the entire prayer. Bread is unique among the six items prayed for in that it is the only one that is unavoidably physical, material, something that we can touch and taste, that enters into our bodily functions. All the others — God's holiness, will, and kingdom, our forgiveness of sin and deliverance from evil — are "spiritual" and not subject to examination in a laboratory. And so they are also vulnerable to "spiritualization," the understanding and interpreting of them in unearthly ways. But not bread. We are physically involved with bread, whether in its making or purchase or eating. We can't go to the market and buy God's holiness, will, or kingdom, or our forgiveness or deliverance. But we can bread. We can't knead and bake, butter and eat the holiness, will, and kingdom of God, nor our forgiveness of sin and deliverance from evil. But we can bread. Bread stubbornly resists spiritualization. We can't spiritualize bread.

Or can we?

Most readers of Matthew and Luke when they come to the fourth petition, even though they don't know the precise meaning of *epiousion*, read it in the plain sense: *daily* bread, bread *for the day*, enough to eat. But a considerable number of men and women,

more often than not from the company of biblical scholars and theologians, have not read it that way. *Epiouision*, because it could not be defined from the dictionary or other usage, seemed to provide an open invitation to reinterpret plain ordinary bread into something quite different, some kind of “spiritual” bread. *Epiouision*, after all, was one of the “Bible words.” And occurring right at the center of the Lord’s Prayer, it must, it was assumed, have a deeper “spiritual” meaning consistent with and maybe even exceeding the spirituality of the other five petitions, a “Holy Ghost” meaning.

The unique word proved irresistible to reinterpretation by devout scholars and they went to work on it with great zest almost immediately, “spiritualizing” bread in various ways. We find instances as early as the second century A.D. It was common in the early church to completely suppress the petition as a request for actual bread. It must be something very special to get a special adjective all to itself. Some suggested the Bread of Life; others the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist), miracle manna, the Messianic banquet. Lancelot Andrewes, the leader of the King James translators, taking his cue from Psalm 78:25, came up with “angel’s food.” Origen, writing in Alexandria in the third century, a scholar and theologian of immense learning, served up the most “spiritual” suggestion of all, *supersubstantial bread*. But Origen was a man ill at ease with his own body; in order to keep his mind concentrated without distraction on the things

of God he had himself castrated. In his homily *On Prayer*, his exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, he goes on at great length, first remarking on the absence of the word *epiouision* (daily) in any Greek writing known to him and then speculating on what must have been its very special spiritual meaning. It didn’t seem plausible to someone of Origen’s mind-set to imagine that Jesus would teach us to pray for a plain loaf of pumpkinnickel made of flour and yeast and baked in an oven. He must mean bread that is beyond mere bread. Origen is unambiguous and emphatic: “the bread for which we should ask is spiritual ... ‘the living bread that comes down from heaven.’”¹¹

Seventeen hundred years after Origen, Albert Debrunner, a professor at the University of Bern, was going over some of the Oxyrhynchus scraps of waste-paper at his library worktable and discovered the very word, *epiouision*, in an ancient housekeeping book, a shopping list that also included chickpeas and straw.¹² In 1914, eleven years before Debrunner published his findings, Adolf Deissmann, without specific evidence, had speculated that *epiouision* “had the appearance of a word that originated in the trade and traffic of the everyday life of the people.”¹³ With the Oxyrhynchus scrap of paper before him, Debrunner confirmed it.

And there it stands: perhaps at the very moment that Jesus was on a Galilean hillside teaching his disciples to pray for daily bread (*arton epiouision* — or their Aramaic equivalent), down in Egypt a mother

was writing out a shopping list for her teenage son as she sent him off to market, emphasizing that the bread was to be fresh, *today's* bread — “Don’t let that baker sell you any stale, day-old bread, make sure it’s fresh (*epiousion*) bread!”

In retrospect we can reconstruct this scenario: Origen, honored still today as one of the most learned of all the biblical scholars that the church has ever had, wrote out his interpretation of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, assembling page after page of evidence (nine and a half pages in my English translation) demonstrating that it is unthinkable that Jesus would instruct us to pray for anything remotely suggesting the bread that we toast and butter and eat with our morning coffee. And all the while he was at his desk, writing devoutly and learnedly, the very word that he was taking such pains to de-materialize was buried a couple of hundred miles south in that village garbage dump just west of the Nile River. There it was, this unpretentious adjective quietly waiting to make its appearance and insist on the so frequently overlooked obvious, that bread, fresh-baked, yeast-fragrant, crisp-crust-ed bread is the pivotal petition in the Lord’s Prayer, pivotal for keeping “on earth as it is in heaven” as the firm foundation for our prayed obedience in following Jesus.

Hans Dieter Betz, in his magisterial commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, after comprehensively reviewing every attempt to spiritualize the bread that Jesus commanded us to pray for, doesn’t buy it — des-

pite the authority of Origen and his considerable progeny. His conclusion: “There is hardly any doubt that [Jesus] refers to real, not merely ‘spiritual’ bread....”¹⁴

Another example. Near the end of First Peter, Jesus is referred to as the “chief Shepherd” of our souls (5:3). “Chief shepherd” was one of those five hundred “biblical words” with no known occurrence in secular usage, a word looking very much as if it had been newly coined by Peter especially for Jesus. Jesus had, after all, referred to himself as the good shepherd (John 10:11). What could be more fitting for Peter than to raise the “good” to a higher level, to “chief.” The term “chief shepherd” is a compound word, a combination of *archē*, chief, and *poimēn*, shepherd, producing *archipoimēn*, chief shepherd. It makes perfect sense in the context of Peter’s letter to read it as an exalted title: Jesus, the chief shepherd, the shepherd of all shepherds, a superlative after the manner of “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16). And then the word was found in an Egyptian garbage dump, written this time not on a piece of paper but on a slip of wood hung around the neck of an Egyptian mummy, a kind of dog tag, identifying the corpse. There was a grammatical mistake in the labeling, evidence that it was written hurriedly by someone not well-educated. And its presence in a garbage dump was evidence that the family and friends couldn’t afford a decent burial — a far cry from the opulent pyramid tombs for which Egypt is so famous! No, this

was an Egyptian peasant who had been the overseer of two or three other shepherds, an *archipoimēn*, what we would probably designate as a straw boss, or, at most, a crew foreman.¹⁵ Contrary to exalting Jesus above the common herd, Peter used a word that put Jesus in the company of working-class peasants and cheap burials. And what else would we expect, knowing Jesus' embrace of the "poorest of the poor" and his identification with the despised and the weak.

The discoveries made at Oxyrhynchus and other Egyptian sites are irrefutable evidence that the language of our New Testament is primarily the language of the street (although, as noted earlier, not entirely). Why should this surprise anyone? But it invariably does. When Augustine first read the Bible he was greatly disappointed. As Peter Brown explains,

He had grown up expecting a book to be cultivated and polished: he had been carefully groomed to communicate with educated men in the only admissible way, in a Latin scrupulously modeled on the ancient authors. Slang and jargon were equally abhorrent to such a man; and the Latin Bible of Africa, translated some centuries before by humble, nameless writers, was full of both. What is more, what Augustine read in the Bible seemed to have little to do with the highly spiritual Wisdom that Cicero had told him to love. It was cluttered with earthy and immoral stories from the Old Testament; and, even in the New Testament, Christ, Wisdom Himself, was introduced by long, and contradictory, genealogies.¹⁶

It was only after his conversion that he realized that this word of God was not an elevated language used by philosophers and poets to discourse on the "higher things" but the language in which men and women were finding themselves addressed by the Holy Spirit in the thick of everyday life.

Not unlike Augustine, we often thoughtlessly suppose that language dealing with a holy God and holy things should be stately, elevated, and ceremonial. But it is a supposition that won't survive the scrutiny of one good look at Jesus — his preference for homely stories and his easy association with common people, his birth in a stable and his death on cross. For Jesus is the *descent* of God to our lives just as we are and in the neighborhoods in which we live, not the *ascent* of our lives to God whom we hope will approve when he sees how hard we try and how politely we pray.

And Ugarit in Syria. Oxyrhynchus was an immersion in biblical language, a street language that no one in the first century would have dreamed of using when writing anything serious, the same kind of language that we use when we are exasperated with our children or buying a used car. The discoveries made in the excavations of Ugarit had a different impact. Ugarit provided an immersion in the culture within which the biblical faith was formed — and what a culture it was! The promised land into which God led our fathers and mothers was, famously, "flowing with

milk and honey.” But it was also, the Ugaritic evidence shows, flowing with violence and sex and magic.

Thirty years after the Oxyrhynchus wastebaskets were unearthed and sorted through in Egypt, a farmer in Syria working his field plowed into a burial tomb. The tomb turned out to be the tip of a glacier, the ancient kingdom of Ugarit, buried under three thousand years of Syrian sand. Within a year or two a team of French archaeologists had gathered thousands of baked clay tablets inscribed in an unknown cuneiform alphabet and in an unknown language. It wasn't long before both script and language were deciphered. The language turned out to be very much like biblical Hebrew. The clay tablets provided a detailed accounting of the culture that the Hebrews encountered and were immersed in upon arriving in Canaan after their long stint of Egyptian slavery. One of the men who figured out the alphabet and language of Ugarit had learned his trade from years spent cracking enemy secret codes during World War I, a nice juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary!

As tablet after tablet was translated, a whole world gradually opened up, the world that the Hebrews inhabited when they entered “the promised land.” At the time, Israel was a people still in formation. In many fundamental ways they didn't “fit” into the culture and politics of Canaan. Canaan was made up of city-states, each ruled by its own king; Israel was loosely organized by tribes, each with its own tradition and identity. When necessary, a “judge” would

emerge to take care of whatever crisis faced the people at the time. Loosely organized as they were, they didn't get along with one another very well. They were an embryonic people of God still, in formation as the People of God. But Canaan and the culture of Canaan was now their home and would be for several hundred years.

Previous to discovering the kingdom of Ugarit and its huge library, we knew Canaan — the country in which Israel lived and worshipped, believed and rebelled, sang songs and preached sermons — only from the outside, that is, from what we could pick up from allusions and references embedded in the Hebrew Bible. For the most part Israel's Scriptures portrayed Canaanite culture as the enemy: hostile, pagan, and a powerful and unrelenting source of seduction away from the life of salvation and faith to go “whoring” (the crude but bluntly accurate verb used by the Hebrew prophets) after the “other gods” of Canaan, of which, it turns out, they had a great number and variety to choose from.

None of this cultural information was absolutely new. For two hundred years our scholars had been learning a great deal about the world in which the biblical story was formed as the languages, religions, and politics of Mesopotamia and Egypt came to light. We knew where the Hebrews had come from and a great deal about their surrounding cultures. But we never knew much about their next-door neighbors, the people they rubbed shoulders with as they were

being formed into a people of God. Ugarit provided that, sharpening our understanding and appreciation of how Israel managed to both survive and maintain its identity “in but not of” the culture of Canaan.¹⁷

Two things coming out of the Ugarit explorations are of particular interest in terms of Bible translation. One is that Israel shared the Canaanite language and culture without being overpowered by it. The other is that while they used similar literary forms, the content was radically different: Israel faithfully wrote the family stories of their ancestors, in contrast to the Canaanites, who invented fanciful myths about gods.

Take culture and language. Israel used the language of Canaan, wrote its poetry in the style and rhythms of Canaan, used the god-words of Canaan. But they took the culture of Canaan and used it to make something distinctively and uniquely their own — which is to say that the culture of Israel doesn’t come to us in a pure state, a culture uncontaminated by the sex-and-religion paganism of Canaan. The scriptural revelation and life of salvation did not develop in isolation from their Canaanite neighbors.

For instance, *El*, the regular Canaanite term for god, was also a term freely used by the Hebrews. Among the Canaanites *El* was the head god, the father of the gods, who with his wife Asherah fathered a vast progeny of gods and goddesses. The Hebrews seemed unembarrassed to share the word, tainted as it was, with their neighbors. Likewise, there were col-

orful phrases that the Canaanites used in relation to their gods that the Hebrews picked up from old myths and used freely in prayers to their God: *rider of the clouds* (cf. Ps. 68:4), *you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan* (Ps. 74:13-14). Psalm 29 and other psalms display close parallels in terminology with Canaanite poems discovered at Ugarit. Perhaps even more significant than the taking over of Canaanite god-words and phrases is that Israel also took over the Ugaritic forms of poetry. Much of the Hebrew Bible is written in poetry, and the Hebrews were magnificent poets. As the translated cuneiform tablets accumulated, it became clear that the Hebrews had learned much of their craft of poetry from their Canaanite neighbors. One of the glories of the Hebrew Bible, its skillfully employed poetic forms and rhythms used to the glory of God, turns out to be a hand-me-down from pagan Canaan.

But while the Hebrews were perfectly at home in Canaanite culture in one sense, willing and able to use the language and adapt its forms, they were also practiced in discernment. They knew how to say “no” to the culture when they had to. This becomes clear when we realize that in a culture that celebrated many gods, Israel was fiercely loyal to one God, represented throughout the Old Testament as a “jealous” God. The prohibition “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” (Exod. 20:4 KJV) was absolutely unique in that world — there was nothing like it in the whole ancient Middle East. The Canaanites carried out an as-

sembly line industry in god-images, but not a single figure of a male deity has yet been found in the debris of any Israelite town. On the other hand, a great number of mother-goddess figurines are found in every excavation of Israelite houses, which indicates that at a popular level it was common to verge dangerously near to polytheism. But one of our best interpreters of this archaeological evidence, George Ernest Wright, conjectures that people had the female figurines in their homes “not so much for theological as for magical reasons, using them as ‘good luck’ charms,”¹⁸ much as a rabbit’s foot or a Christopher medal shows up casually among us without any sense of the second commandment being violated. And it is significant that in a culture that was saturated with female goddesses the Hebrews did not even have a word for “goddess” — even though their neighbors held female divinities in the highest regard. As far as Israel was concerned there was nothing to them — not even a word for them!

Moreover, a sharp line was drawn against all magical practices. Canaan was full of magic, technologies designed to manipulate the gods and goddesses to perform favors. Israel was adamant in its rejection of anything that so much as hinted at magical religious technology — God is not at our service, we are at God’s service. The Mosaic commandment not to boil a kid in its mother’s milk (Exod. 23:19 and 34:26), sitting on the page as it does completely without context, has puzzled Bible readers no end. Judaism

later did the best it could to take this text seriously by developing a kosher dietary system that insisted on a strict separation of dairy and meat products. But it is possible (but by no means certain) that the text may turn out to be an abrupt, one-liner rejection of anything that smacked of magical practice. A Ugaritic cuneiform tablet that deals with a magic spell cast by means of milk may indicate that the Mosaic prohibition in essence says, “Stay clear of all the Canaanite magic spells and rituals! Your job is to worship God, not wheedle him.”¹⁹

And stories. The other aspect of the Ugaritic discoveries that illuminates the way we translate and read our Scriptures has to do with the Canaanite fondness for myth-making. A myth, in contrast to a story, is cut loose from history and without rootage in the world that we live in; it is a tale about the gods in settings that do not include us. We are spectators at best — the gods operate in a world of their own. All the real action takes place between gods and goddesses. As it turns out, most of the action has to do with fighting and copulating. Violence and sex keep the action going. The myths of Canaan are no different in this respect from those everywhere else in that world; what is new for us is the realization that these myths are the stock-in-trade of Israel’s neighbors, the people who lived across the street, the merchants they haggled with at the market. Canaanite religion was all about gods and their adventures. If you wanted

in on it you engaged in magical manipulations — impersonal, nonrelational, acquisitive religious technologies. While their Canaanite neighbors were elaborating their wonderful myths of sky gods, thunder gods, and fertility gods and goddesses off somewhere in the far north, Israel was telling stories of their ancestors whose names they knew and in whose land they lived, ancestors who listened to and understood God present and personal to them in their everyday lives. God was present and active among them. Local and ancestral history, not legendary mythic worlds, was where they learned to deal with God. Their stories were rooted in the family history of their parents and grandparents. By implication, they were included.

Myths are a way to create an imaginative world in which we can visualize the gods, put them on stage and see them at work, and then, by employing magical rituals and incantations, try to get them to work for us. It is all out in the open; there is no mystery. Neither is there any personal relationship — the gods couldn't care less about us; our only recourse is to bribe or manipulate them in some way or other. You may know the names of the gods and goddesses, but they don't know yours. Stories, in contrast, are restrained, respecting the reclusiveness and silence of God, letting God work and be in God's own way, respecting the essential mystery of his being and trusting his goodness and providence in our lives.

Baal is the most colorful god by far in the Canaanite

mythology and gets the most press.²⁰ Most of the action features blood and mayhem. In one scene Baal has a fight with two rival gods, Sir Sea (Yamm) and Sir River (Nahar). Sir Craft (Kothar), the god who makes things, brings Baal two magical clubs, Chaser (Ya-grush) and Driver (Ayamur), to help him out. In the fight, Chaser turns out to be ineffective; Sea and River get knocked around a good bit but not knocked out. Then Baal grabs Driver, the second club; the magic kicks in and the rivals are vanquished. Just as Baal is about to finish them off, the mother goddess, Asherah (maybe Baal's mother or grandmother), steps in and restrains him: "What do you think you are doing? You have no business killing gods! Don't you have any sense?"

The gods are like schoolboys duking it out on the playground during recess. And then the school principal, a stern and sturdy woman, stops the mayhem, grabs them by their ears, and hauls them off to her office.

A companion myth features Baal's wife Anath on an occasion in which she goes on a rampage of vengeance against the henchmen of Baal's great rival Sir Death (Mot). The massacre takes place across a vast area from seacoast to sunrise. Heads roll like soccer balls across the ground. Severed hands fly up and fill the air like a swarm of locusts. Anath ties the heads between and around her breasts, hangs the hands from her waist, and strides through the bloodbath that she has created, up to her hips in gore. Then, as if

that were not enough — her breasts resplendent with the bloody skulls and her hips festooned with the bloody hands — she fills a temple with men, locks the doors, and assaults them by hurling chairs and tables and footstools. Soon she is up to her knees in blood — no, up to her neck! “Her liver swelled with laughter; her heart was full of joy.” When all the killing was done, she became all feminine again. She got a basin of water and washed in the “dew of heaven,” beautified herself with cosmetics — eyeshadow and rouge — and anointed herself with expensive perfume. Such a fine lady! She was, after all, the goddess of both love and war. The Egyptians, the pornographers of the Middle East, improved on the basic legend by portraying Anath provocatively naked on a galloping horse, brandishing shield and lance.

There are a lot more myths of the same sort. These are the myths that formed and filled the Canaanite imagination, ranging from the silly to the sordid (state-sponsored Ugaritic X-rated television).

Meanwhile, living in that same environment, sharing that identical culture and language, the Hebrews were telling stories, a narrative form far removed from myth. Only human beings make history, and all the history of the Hebrews was local, family history. The story of Abraham, Sarah, and the three strangers is representative (Gen. 18:1-15).

When three strangers show up at his tent one day, Abraham welcomes them and offers hospitality:

Sarah makes fresh bread, Abraham runs off to get a calf and directs his servant to barbecue it. When all is ready, he sets out milk and curds and stands in attendance as his guests eat the sumptuous meal under the shade of oak trees. Then there is this conversation. The men ask Abraham, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” “Right there in the tent,” says Abraham. One of the guests speaks, “I’ll be back in a year and by the time I arrive, Sarah will have a son.” Sarah, hiding behind the tent flap, is eavesdropping. When she hears that, she can’t help herself; she laughs. She is an old woman, eighty years old; her husband is an old man, a hundred years old. A joke, certainly. Sarah laughs. Then the storyteller, without calling attention to what he is doing, identifies one of the guests as God, “the Lord.” God proceeds to counter Sarah’s levity with a solemn assertion, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Where did the Hebrews learn to tell God-stories like this — spare, understated, embedded in the daily ordinary? Certainly not from the neighbors with whom they shared a common culture. In this story God enters into the lives of Abraham and Sarah anonymously and unobtrusively. The setting, the oak grove at Mamre, is unpretentious. The action is anchored in routine desert hospitality. The conversation is unadorned and matter-of-fact. Sarah is quite right, we feel, to laugh at what one of the men — only later identified without fanfare as God — says. And what God says without any rhetorical flourishes has

to do with ordinary life — conception, pregnancy, birth. The “impossibility” regarding what is said, is absorbed in the ordinariness of what will take place. Israel’s way of telling stories about God was not to write about God as such, but about God as he is present, often unnoticed, frequently anonymous, among actual men and women located in time and place, in the context of their ancestors and in the towns and valleys and mountains in which they had all grown up.

And there are a lot more stories of the same sort. These are the stories that formed Israel’s imagination — quiet, everyday, the supernatural camouflaged in the natural, the presence of God revealed in the places and among the people involved in our day-to-day-living. The entire biblical text stands in sturdy contrast to the myths of Ugarit — but also to the potpourri of religious psychology, self-development, mystical experimentation, and devotional dilettantism that provides the textual basis for so much contemporary religion.

Many people prefer to have their Bibles translated in the finest prose and poetry. It stands to reason: Language that deals with a holy God, holy ideas, and holy things ought to be an elevated language, stately and ceremonial. They want to keep the language of the Bible refined and, as far as possible, isolated from association with the sinful world. And they want it printed on India paper and bound handsomely in

leather. It stands to reason: The culture in which God works requires protection from the noisy, contaminating world. A Bible ought to reflect a culture of reverence and majesty.

But the Holy Spirit will have little of that. The inspiration arrives in a rough, bumpy, and earthy language that reveals God’s presence and action where we least expect it, catching us when we are up to our elbows in the soiled ordinariness of our culture (Ugarit!) and when spiritual thoughts are the farthest thing from our minds (Oxyrhynchus!). That is not to say that there is anything irreverent or flip in our Scriptures. And it is not to say that there are not splendid writers in our Bibles. There is an enormous sense of awe and respect and reverence in this Bible. Mystery is everywhere. The Holy is pervasive. But the surrounding culture is pagan, and much of the language from right off the street.

The greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale (the first printing of his New Testament was published in 1526), somehow knew this long before the discovery of the Oxyrhynchus papyri and the Ugarit tablets. I think he knew it because he knew how the gospel worked, knew that the language of the message had to be congruent with the character and way of life of the Messenger. He said that he was translating so that “the boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures. He knew by gospel instinct what the papyri and tablets confirmed four hundred years later, that (as James

Hope Moulton put it) “not only is the subject matter of the Scriptures unique but so also the language in which they came to be written or translated.”²¹ Tyndale did not mean a uniqueness provided by a special “Holy Ghost” language, as had once been thought, but saw the language of the Scriptures as being uniquely colloquial, the language of everyday. And Martin Luther, contemporary with Tyndale and grandfather of all Reformation translators (his New Testament was published in 1522), was adamant that when faced with translating the biblical text, “You’ve got to go out and ask the mother in her house, the children in the street, the ordinary man at the market. Watch their mouths move when they talk, and translate that way. Then they’ll understand you and realize that you are speaking *German* to them.”²² The power of his translation of the Bible into German came as much from what he learned on the streets as from the work that he did in the library. To understand, for instance, the sacrificial rituals in the Mosaic law, he had the town butcher cut up sheep so he could study their entrails.²³

But despite and in contrast to the pioneering and language-renewing colloquial translations of Luther in German and Tyndale in English, the King James translation with its smooth, majestic sonorities — an English least representative of the kind of language in which the Bible was first spoken and heard and written — continues after nearly four hundred years

to be the most frequently purchased and widely distributed translation in the English-speaking world. The King James translators used Tyndale’s text as their baseline, taking over approximately three-quarters of it essentially unchanged.²⁴ But what they did with that plagiarized text amounted to a violation of it — they put lace cuffs on Tyndale’s sentences. To use my earlier phrase, they “desecrated upward.” They skillfully and thoroughly shifted the tone of the language from the roughness of Tyndale’s plowboy to the smooth speech of the royal court. Most of the translators, after all, were part of the “old boy” network of King James, many of them bishops who lived a comfortable and protected life among the elite of the age. Adam Nicolson, author of a thorough study of the King James translators and an extravagant admirer of their work, is also explicit that

the King James Bible ... is not the English you would have heard on the street, then or ever.... These scholars were not putting the language of the scriptures into the English they knew and used at home. The words of the King James Bible are just as much English pushed towards the condition of a foreign language as a foreign language translated into English. It was, in other words, more important to make English godly than to make the words of God into the sort of prose that any Englishmen would have written.... Tyndale had produced a simple and plain man’s translation to be slapped in the face of the medieval church and its power-protective elite.... [He was] looking for immediacy and clarity in scripture which would

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shake off the thick and heavy layers of medieval scholasticism and centuries of accumulated dust.²⁵

The forty-seven King James translators, working in the sumptuous furnishings of the great universities and the royal court and relying largely on Tyndale's work (work he had done single-handed as a hunted exile on the run from the King of England eighty-five years before), essentially undid his work, turning his plain speech into the majestic grandeur of the King James Version. Making the English of his day the language of the Bible, Tyndale translated, "The Lord was with Joseph and he was a luckie felawe"; the King James translators translated "upward" to "and the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man" (Gen. 39:2). The King James translators put out a version of the Bible that became the literary classic of the Western world, but at the expense of Tyndale's plowboy.

That this is the Bible of choice for so many people, across the years and today (it is not known if they read it or not), is a great irony.²⁶

The Ugarit and Oxyrhynchus discoveries revealed a world of everydayness and a language of everydayness that plunges readers of the Bible into our own everydayness. Their cumulative effect is to overturn a huge barricade that interferes with a personal, relational reading of Scripture, namely, the supposition that it is written in a set-apart language, a religious language that comes out of sacred places and rituals, a

language composed of words that were whispered or spoken in reverential tones.

The surprise at Oxyrhynchus has to do with the language in which the New Testament was written — not a "Holy Ghost" language but a common street language that the Holy Spirit uses to "divide soul from spirit, joints from marrow" (Heb. 4:12 NRSV).²⁷ Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding if it is translated into the kind of language in which it was written. We don't have to be smart or well educated in order to understand it any more than its first readers did. It is written in the same language we use when we go shopping, play games, or ask for a second helping of potatoes at the supper table — and it requires translation into that same language.

At Ugarit the surprise is culture, the culture in which our Hebrew ancestors, the children of Israel, lived and died. Previous to the discovery of Ugarit, we knew very little of the Canaanite culture in which our Hebrew ancestors lived. Lacking information, it was easy to imagine the Hebrews, the saved people of God, leaving Egypt, disciplined to a life of obedience and holiness in the forty years of wilderness wandering, and then entering Canaan armed and prepared to carve out a holy culture all to themselves. That is not the way it happened. Nor is it the way it is now.

The Oxyrhynchus and Ugarit discoveries have far more to do with the tone of the language than the accuracy of the text, although accuracies are sometimes involved. Their primary effect is to counter this

creeping and seemingly innocent sacrilege upward to which all language, but especially biblical language, is vulnerable, and which insidiously removes the biblical text from its rootage in the actual ground on which we live our lives.

If there is anything distinctive about *The Message*, perhaps it is that the text is shaped by the hand of a working pastor. For most of my adult life I have been given a primary responsibility for getting the message of the Bible into the lives of the men and women with whom I worked. I did it from pulpit and lectern, in home Bible studies and at mountain retreats, through conversations in hospitals and nursing homes, over coffee in kitchens and while strolling on an ocean beach. *The Message* grew from the soil of thirty-five years of pastoral work. As I did this work, making choices of words and phrases, I was often aware of how thoroughly I was being influenced by those thirty-five years of pastoral life. I was translating for the saints and sinners who were trying to find their way in the muddle and mess of the world. I identified with the first writers and readers/listeners of Scripture, whose first concern had to do with living in the company of the Trinity while walking down the muddy roads of Galilee and Judea and navigating through the sexual chaos of Corinth. Theology, making coherent sense of God's revelation in our lives, comes later. I was doing my work for those who were aware of the urgency of life here and now —

and for God. I was translating “so he may run who reads” (Hab. 2:2).

As I worked at this task, I could see that this word of God that should form and transform human lives did in fact form and transform human lives. Planted in the soil of my congregation and community, the seed words of the Bible germinated and grew and matured. When it came time to do the work that is now *The Message*, I often felt that I was walking through an orchard at harvest time, plucking fully formed apples and peaches and plums from laden branches. There is hardly a page in the Bible that I did not see lived in some way or other by the men and women, saints and sinners, to whom I was pastor, and then, as I looked around, saw verified in my nation and culture. Or, to change the image, when a zeal for Holy Scripture and a zeal for common language collide, sparks fly. Sometimes the sparks become a translation. They did for me.

I didn't start out as a pastor. I began my vocational life as a teacher and for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. I expected to live the rest of my life as a professor and scholar, teaching, writing, and studying. But then my life took a sudden vocational turn and I became a pastor in a congregation. My workplace shifted from a classroom of saints and sinners to a congregation of saints and sinners.

I found myself in a very different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care

much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach them. Many of the people with whom I now worked knew virtually nothing about it — had never read it and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it, but for them it had gone flat through familiarity and been reduced to sclerotic clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few of them were interested in what I considered an essential element in my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers, videos, and pulp fiction more to their taste.

Meanwhile, I had taken on as my life work the responsibility of getting these very people to listen, really listen, to the message in this book. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

I started out by explaining the Bible to my congregation, getting them to buy study books — dictionaries and concordances to start with. There was so much to know! And I had so much to tell them!

In the midst of doing this, it occurred to me that the first people who heard or read the Bible didn't need a dictionary or a concordance. When Isaiah preached, the people didn't have to organize a seminar and hire a professor to figure out what he said. When Mark's Gospel showed up in a community, they didn't feel the necessity of putting together a six-month study course on Wednesday evenings. All these books came

out of the common life and common knowledge of the people, many, maybe even most, of them illiterate. Not unintelligent, mind you, but not schooled. So why was I intruding all my knowledge *about* the Bible into their reading of it?

So I shifted my style of teaching. Instead of informing them of Ugaritic words that illuminated the Hebrew text, instead of working through the intricacies of the synoptic variations in the stories and words of Jesus, instead of testing Paul's language against the Hellenistic philosophies and mystery cults, I just gathered people together to *read* the text as we have it. Their first response was almost always, "We can't understand this; tell us what it means — you're the one who has been to seminary." But I persisted. Together we would just read it imaginatively and prayerfully, try to enter into the words on the page as they were before us. Sometimes I would ask questions, hinting and guiding a little to observe what was there, giving them confidence to go ahead and bring the same kind of reading to the biblical text that they used in reading the morning newspaper. Most of the time, after an hour or so with a page of text, they would have come up with virtually everything of substance that could also be found in the commentaries. I was not averse to bringing in tidbits of lexical or archaeological lore that spiced things up. But mostly I trusted them to read the text.

There is a fancy word for what became clear in these gatherings: *perspicuity* — the conviction that

the Bible is basically readable as it is. It is not a body of secret lore accessible only to an academic elite. It is written plainly for plain men and women.

I lived in two language worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of today. I had always assumed that they were the same world, but these people didn't see it that way. So out of necessity I became a translator, daily standing between the two worlds, helping them hear the language of the Bible that God uses to create and save us, heal and bless us, judge and rule over us in the language of today that we use to gossip and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children.

And all the time those old biblical languages, those powerful and vivid Hebrew and Greek originals, were working their way underground in my speech, giving sharpness and energy to words and phrases, expanding the imagination of the people with whom I was working in the language of today — the language of today mined from the language of the Bible.

Lost in Translation

My wife and I were lost in Jerusalem one day. It was a day that I had decided to speak only in Hebrew. My Hebrew is all book Hebrew, classroom Hebrew, Bible Hebrew. I had never before encountered Hebrew as a living language. We had been in Israel for a couple of weeks and I woke up that morning realizing that now

I had my chance. I wanted to see if I could make my way through just a single day using only this language that was so important to me. By now it was late in the evening in Jerusalem and my wife and I were lost. We were looking for a restaurant that had been recommended to us. We had the address but couldn't find it. We were hopelessly disoriented. We met a couple walking toward us who seemed likely to be Jewish. In my halting, clumsy Hebrew I asked for help — apologizing for bothering them but hoping they could get us at least pointed in the right direction. They listened patiently and courteously. When I had finished they broke into wide grins, "We're from Detroit!" And then they gave us the directions we needed — but in English. After sampling my spoken Hebrew, they clearly did not trust me to hear their Hebrew well enough to get us to the restaurant.

"We're from Detroit" is language used naturally and spontaneously, but hardly literally. Too much is lost in translation when it is done literally. The couple could have answered me literally, using the Hebrew in which they were fluent. And if they had been willing to speak very slowly and repeat themselves enough times, I would have gotten the help I had asked for. But we got much more. Their "we're from Detroit" put language to use at a very different level: it conveyed welcome, delight in being able to help us, a total absence of condescension regarding my awkward and inadequate Hebrew. We got more than directions to the restaurant; we were given a gift, however brief,

of friendship. This man and woman were not content to use language reduced to a mere exchange of information. They did not ignore our need for directions but they also revealed something of themselves, their common humanity with us, their incipient hospitality.

“We’re from Detroit” gives me a benchmark from which to reflect on the way translation works. To begin with, translation is not only between languages, it is implicit wherever and whenever language is used. It is not restricted to what happens when we translate, say, German into English. There is plenty of translation that takes place everyday in getting the American English I speak into the American English that you hear. I did it every Sunday from a pulpit and every day while raising my children, and I soon learned that I could take nothing for granted. We all use words differently. And we misunderstand frequently. Language is ambiguous. We have to repeat often and explain patiently. As we listen and respond to the speech of those around us, parents and children, teachers and students, government leaders and citizens, pastors and congregations, coaches and players, husbands and wives, we are constantly “translating,” using everything we can get our hands on to get it right: body language, tone of voice, our history with this other person, the present circumstances in which we are placed, and also, of course, but never in isolation, the dictionary meaning of the words and the grammatical structure of the

sentences.

The complexity involved in all of this forces the realization that a literal translation, apart from translating scientific data and information transfer, is almost always inadequate. And why? Because a literal translation excludes all the nonverbal dimensions that are at work whenever language is used. It also mindlessly repeats idioms, metaphors, and sentence structures that have no context in the receiving language.

Translation is a complex activity that takes place between a polarity of two questions. The question asked from one pole is, “What did he say?” The question from the other pole is, “What did she mean?”

“What did he say?” answered strictly on its own terms yields a literal translation. Find the German word equivalent to the English word and that’s it. A dictionary and grammar, a familiarity with the literature and culture of the language to be translated, are required.

“What did she mean?” requires an imagination, often a poetic imagination, that brings the “world” of the German text into the “world” of American English, and this necessarily involves a recreation of the text into another language. Far more is required than a dictionary and grammar in order to translate. We need a familiarity with the “life” that is being translated; but we also require a familiarity with the “life” into which it is being translated. Sebastian Brock

champions the primacy of “What did she mean?” in translation: “In the case of free translation, it could be said that the original is brought to the reader, but with the literal type the reader is forced to go to the original; or, to put it another way, in the first it is the reader who is stationary, but in the second it is the original.”²⁸ Each language is an intricate and living culture, a culture distilled in words, spread out in language. If all we are translating is dictionary meanings, the entire culture is lost in translation. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the great American poets in the nineteenth century and professor of languages at Yale University, translated Dante’s *Divine Comedy* into English. One of his critics complained that he had translated the *Comedy* into the English dictionary, not the English language.²⁹ And it is the culture — the way of living and thinking, believing and behaving, the assumptions and allusions — that requires translation as far as we are able. Like, “we’re from Detroit.”

In my work as pastor and writer, teacher and preacher, I began to gather observations and witnesses on the nature of translation, noticing how unsatisfactory “literal” turns out to be and how conveniently it serves as cover for avoiding the obvious intent of words spoken or written. But it is as parent and grandparent that most of us accumulate the most telling evidence.

One evening our family was gathered around the supper table. The grandchildren had been excused to

leave the table and play. A few minutes later, Hans, seven years old, came at full gallop through the dining room followed by his two little sisters. His father said, “Hans, there is no running in the house.” Hans shortened his stride by about eight inches and said, “I’m not running; I’m jogging” — a case study in literalism, common among children, as a way of avoiding meaning. But adults are not exempt.

An old canard that sooner or later gets introduced into discussions of translation is, “You, a translator? You’re a traitor!” (In Italian, *Traduttore? traditore!*) Translation is betrayal. All translation is inherently mistranslation. Each language is unique. The particular genius of a language cannot be carried over into another. By this criterion every translation is an adulteration of the original, a watering down, a reduction. And if the language being translated is the word of God, and translation by its very nature is falsification, then we’d better not do it.

Oh?

This position was actually espoused during the time when the King James Bible was being translated. John Smyth was a pastor of the Brethren of the Separation of the Second English Church at Amsterdam in 1608, a congregation made up of Lincolnshire farmers, Puritans in exile from English persecution. Smyth and his congregation held that every translation, however good, was bound to contain errors and so by definition could not be used. They needed to hear the

Scriptures in the original. If God had spoken in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, those were the languages in which he should be heard. And so hour after hour in their meetings, Smyth read out the Scripture passages of Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, of which his congregation had not the faintest understanding.³⁰

Such a stubborn insistence on the “literal original” is, of course, a parody of what is modified by good sense among most of the rest of us. But “literal” continues to represent in the minds of many the ideal in matters of translation.

Preference for the literal has a long life. But I have come to believe that it is an unthinking preference. My experience as a parent supplemented by my experience as a pastor cautions me that the peril of the literal is that it ignores the inherent ambiguities in all language, takes the source language prisoner and force-marches it, shackled and chained, into an English that nobody living speaks. The language is lobotomized — the very quality that gives language its genius, its capacity to reveal what we otherwise would not know, is excised. Extreme literalism insists on forcing each word into a fixed immovable position, all the sentences strapped into a straitjacket. I began to see why Luther, the grandfather of Reformation translators, did not take kindly to the critics who bashed his vernacular translation. He called them “those lemmings the literalists.”³¹

In recent years William Griffin has taken to translating a number of Christianity’s Latin classics into

English. He writes that when he set out on this task,

I fully intended to do the literal translation, of course, and yes, better than any of my predecessors had done, but I soon found myself faltering. Fidelity seemed its only virtue. Felicity was nowhere to be seen. But Fidelity without Felicity in translation can be a very mean virtue indeed.... As many before me, I’d always thought Paraphrase was bonkers. Why? Because my intellectual betters had told me so, and I had no occasion to say them nay. But what they never told me in so many words was that all translation was all too errant. Soon thereafter I concluded that if err I must, then I’d prefer to err on the side of Paraphrase rather than Literalese.³²

Griffin goes on to provide a most entertaining but seriously instructive apology for paraphrase, which, if doesn’t eliminate, at least tempers the condescension to which it is commonly treated by those of a literalist bent.

The African theologian Kwame Bediako further loosens the grip of literalese on our presuppositions by showing how translation in the African context, instead of taking responsibility for preserving the unique particularities of the biblical Hebrew and Greek, takes delight in releasing it in a new and fresh form. George Steiner, who writes with more insight and learning on translation than anyone I know, affirms the soundness of Bediako’s position when he insists that translation gives “the original a new resonance, a longer life, a wider readership, a more substantial place in history and culture.”³³ Writing out

of the context of the many African languages into which Scripture has been translated, Bediako notes that each of these African mother tongues has its own unique syntax and character, and so its own way of making its contribution to a fuller hearing of the inexhaustible riches of the word of God. Rather than diluting the pure word of God, each new translation elaborates it, provides fresh settings or contexts, offers metaphors that provide yet another access to transcendence; each translation creates refractions of the “immortal, invisible, God only wise” in words that add to the store of insight and adoration that provides us with fresh annunciations of the gospel in our common lives as the communion of saints worldwide. Bediako notes that the ease and frequency with which the Christian Scriptures have been translated into so many “mother tongues” can be accounted for by the refusal of the original biblical writers to use a “sacred” language. Christianity in the course of its expansion developed generally as a “vernacular religion.” He uses the African experience as documentation: “how fully at home we Africans have become in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each one of us, with access to the Bible in our mother-tongue, can truly claim to hear God speaking to us in our own language!”³⁴ Jacques Derrida from a very different perspective supports Bediako’s position when he writes that “the translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself *in* enlarging itself.” He refers to translation as a marriage contract with

the promise “to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth.”³⁵

Translation is interpretation. Always. It is interpretation because words always convey far more meaning than the dictionary assigns them. Words have histories, emotional associations, story-influenced connotations. And interpretation requires — to one degree or another — paraphrase.

My first experience with biblical paraphrase was J. B. Phillips’s *Letters to Young Churches*, a translation in paraphrase of the New Testament Epistles. I got my copy in 1948, a year after it had been published in England. I was a high school student. At the time I was a faithful and diligent Bible reader, but by means of Phillips’s paraphrase, my Bible reading became personal at a depth that it had never been before. My only Bible until then was the King James Version in the Scofield Reference Edition. It not only gave me the biblical text in majestically sonorous English but supplied me with extensive footnotes that instructed me in how to interpret what I was reading. I read the notes with as much or more care as I did the text. I *studied* the Scofield King James on the hunt for inspiration or gathering data for bull-session arguments to refute or convert my friends. When I read devotionally, I read mindlessly, taking in the inspired words with about the same degree of participation with which I received an IV the time I was in the hospital to get my appendix removed, the medicine needled directly

into my vein, bypassing the brain. Most of what I have later come to appreciate and honor as the word of God as it has formed my life — the quotidian tone, the all-encompassing story, the earthy poetry, the personal and prayerful participation — was lost in translation.

But Phillips gave me a Bible I could *read* — and I read and read and read. He introduced me to the world of Scripture, not just its words; he immersed me in its marvelous sentences, helped me to feel the impact of the metaphors. In describing his experience of translating, he wrote that he often “felt like an electrician re-wiring an ancient house, without being able to ‘turn the mains off.’”³⁶ I later learned that the first readers of his translation were young people of my age in the youth group in the London parish where Phillips was pastor. Translation was a pastoral act, his attempt to get the language of the Bible into the language world of his London adolescents. It wasn’t long before it made its way across the ocean and all the way west to Montana into the language world in which I and my friends lived. As he continued in the years following to translate the rest of the New Testament and a first installment of the Old, I avidly bought each new volume. Each edition expanded and deepened my sense of and participation in what “biblical” was — an immediate world to live in, not a remote world to decipher and figure out.

I kept reading. In a few years I was reading the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and finding that the first-handedness, the at-homeness that Phillips had in-

vited me into, was confirmed in the style and tone in which these Scriptures were first written and read, and that the only way that style and tone could be conveyed to the people among whom I lived was through paraphrase. Thanks to this pastor-translator, the biblical text carried me out of the small, cramped world of “figuring out” the text into the large, immense world of God’s revelation witnessed by the text. “Biblical” for me came to mean living, imagining, believing, loving, conversing in this world, living in this precisely rendered and richly organic context which comes to full expression in Jesus (who talked in street language) and to which I was given access by the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. It did not mean cobbling texts together to prove or substantiate a dogma or a practice. “Biblical” no longer meant merely referring to the Bible or substantiating my position from the Bible. It referred to a world — “the strange new world within the Bible” (Barth) — a world in which most of what takes place is invisible but with visible effects, a world in which I was a full participant — *involved*.

In retrospect, I realize that Phillips not only invited me into and made me at home in the world of God’s revelation by means of his translation, he showed me how to do it, sowed the seeds that sixty years later would be harvested as *The Message*.

What was done for me, I found myself wanting to do for others, doing everything I could to show

men and women that the Scriptures are *livable* — that God’s word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing — but not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom in these biblical pages to answer, to enter into the conversation. More than anything else the Bible invites our participation in the work and language of God.

I wanted to help my friends see the organic connection between the word read and the word lived. I wanted to get the street language of Jerusalem — “we’re from Detroit!” — onto American streets. I wanted to convey by means of American syntax and diction that everything in this book is livable, that the most important question is not “What does it say?” but “What does it mean and how can I live it?” I wanted to gather a company of people together who read personally, not impersonally, who learned to read the Bible in order to live their true selves, not just get information that they could use to raise their standard of living. I wanted to counter the consumer attitude that uses the Bible as a way to gather religious data by which we can be our own gods, and then replace it with an attitude primed to listen to and obey God, to take us out of our preoccupations with ourselves into the spacious freedom in which God is working the world’s salvation. I wanted to somehow recover that original tone, that prophetic and gospel “voice” that stabs us awake to a beauty and hope that connects us with our real lives.

I wanted this first for myself, then for my congregation and all who read and listen to *The Message*. But I am also aware that I’m not alone in this. Many, very many, men and women have preceded me in this work. And many more will continue the work. Translation takes place on multi-levels: study Bibles, reference Bibles, revisions of early translations, translations more suitable for formal worship, translations working along a spectrum of language from formal to colloquial. All, or at least most, are useful to the reading and worshipping Christian community. *The Message* comes out of a specific setting and time in our American culture and is not meant to replace but rather to supplement the excellent translations presently available. I am very conscious that I am in a vast company of translators — teachers in classrooms, pastors in pulpits, parents around the supper table, writers in languages all over the world, baptized Christians in workplaces and social gatherings past imagining — all of us at this same work, collaborators in translating the word of God, reading and then living this text, eating the book, and then getting these Scriptures into whatever language is heard and spoken on the street on which we live.

¹. Adam Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003), p. 188.

². Revisions were made in 1881 (RV) and 1901 (ASV). The RSV in 1954 and the NRSV in 1989 continued in the Tyndale-KJV tradition but also became more and more in-

dependent versions in their own right as they were increasingly concerned with dealing with antiquated language.

[3.](#) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third English ed., revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. v.

[4.](#) In James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols., third ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), vol. 1 (*Prolegomena*), p. 3.

[5.](#) He tells the story in fascinating detail in his *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. Lionel Strachan, fourth ed. (New York: George H. Doran, 1927; first ed., 1910).

[6.](#) Moulton, *Grammar*, p. 5.

[7.](#) C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 3.

[8.](#) Quoted by Moulton, *Grammar*, p. 242.

[9.](#) F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, revised ed. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991), p. 55.

[10.](#) Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. 125.

[11.](#) *Origen: On Prayer*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist, 1979), p. 141.

[12.](#) Werner Foerster in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, p. 591.

[13.](#) Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 78.

[14.](#) Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 399.

[15.](#) Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 100.

[16.](#) Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 42.

[17.](#) See G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, 1950).

[18.](#) George Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 117.

[19.](#) See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 27.

[20.](#) See James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 129-42; and Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1961), pp. 153-244.

[21.](#) Moulton, *Grammar*, vol. 3 (*Syntax*), p. 9.

[22.](#) Quoted in Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, p. 185.

[23.](#) Henry Zecher, "How One Man's Pen Changed the World," *Christianity Today* (October 2, 1983).

[24.](#) Actual computer-based statistics are 83 percent for the New Testament and 76 percent for the Old Testament. See David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 448.

[25.](#) Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, pp. 211-12.

[26.](#) The church and world had to wait four hundred years for a translator who would take up Tyndale's passion for getting the Scriptures into the language of "the plowboy." James Moffatt, a Scottish pastor and professor, taking his cue from the recently discovered papyri, gave us the first vernacular translation in English since Tyndale (the New Testament in 1913; full Bible in 1926).

[27.](#) It is not all street language, to be sure. Hebrews in the New Testament is written in an elegant and polished Greek and Isaiah in the Old Testament is written in a most exquisite poetry. With plenty of other exceptions — but they are

exceptions — for the most part our Scriptures are in the language of the common people.

[28](#). Sebastian Brock, “The Phenomenon of Biblical Translation in Antiquity,” in *Studies in the Septuagint: Origins, Revisions, and Interpretations*, ed. Sidney Jellicoe (New York: KTAV, 1974).

[29](#). John Ahern, “Vulgar Eloquence,” *NY Times Review of Books* (January 1, 1995).

[30](#). See Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, p. 181.

[31](#). Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, p. 195.

[32](#). William Griffin, “In Praise of Paraphrase,” *Books and*

Culture 8, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2002).

[33](#). George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 112.

[34](#). Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Presbyterian Press, 1990), pp. 43-44.

[35](#). Quoted in Joseph F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 188-202.

[36](#). J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. ix.