

# Interpretation

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David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, xxxv + 577 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

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David Bentley Hart is without question today's most important public Christian intellectual here in the United States. A prolific writer often compared to G. K. Chesterton, his books include the 2010 *Atheist Delusions* (the most trenchant, and scathing, reply to the New Atheists) and the profound 2014 *The Experience of God*. His new translation of the New Testament proves again that he has the rare gift of making old things new in ways that are both deeply scholarly and delightfully provocative. Whether we agree or not with his conclusions (and those interested should read the highly critical review by the prominent New Testament scholar N. T. Wright in *Christian Century* and then Hart's reply on the blog *Eclectic Orthodoxy*), it would be a gross misjudgment not to pay attention.

"This is not a literary translation of the New Testament, much less a rendering for liturgical use.... Again and again, I have elected to produce an almost pitilessly literal translation." After all, he says, "my principal aim is to help awaken readers to mysteries and uncertainties and surprises in the New Testament documents that often lie wholly hidden from view beneath layers of received hermeneutical and theological tradition. And I would hope my translation would succeed, in many places, in making the familiar strange, novel, and perhaps newly compelling" (xvii). Hart's translation is remarkably successful in achieving these goals. For example, Matthew, Mark, and John include frequent tense shifts from the past to the present and back again, something regularly hidden by standard translations, and something that communicates a breathless immediacy to the storytelling. Consider Mark 15:20–24:

And when they had mocked him they stripped off the purple and put his clothing on him. And they lead him away so that they might crucify him. And they press into service a certain passerby coming in from the field, Simon the Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, so that he might carry his cross. And they bring him to the place Golgotha—which, being interpreted, means Skull’s Place. And they gave him wine infused with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucify him, and portion out his garments, casting a lot upon them regarding who would take what. And it was the third hour and they crucified him.

The more typical New International Version keeps everything at a distance in the past tense:

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.

Translating tenses literally, leaving broken phrasing in place (such as the often “maladroit, broken, or impenetrable” Greek of Paul’s letters), and writing bad English (to mirror the “bad Greek” one “finds through the book of Revelation”) allows Hart to “do the police in different voices,” as he says, leaving his reader free to make of the unattributed allusion to Eliot, and to Dickens, what he or she will (xviii, xxiii). Luke feels entirely different from John, which in turn feels entirely different from Mark, and from Revelation. Hart allows us to experience a community driven to record its experiences with the best tools at hand and with the fire of inspiration shining through in spite of themselves.

This is not to say that Hart’s translation does not feel awkward as well as bracing and illuminating. He prefers “Madam” to “Woman” when Jesus addresses a woman as *γυνή*, since the Greek word is a polite term of respect where our “woman” sounds curt. Fair enough, though this means Jesus says to his mother Mary at the wedding feast, “What, Madam, is this to me and you? My hour has not yet arrived,” and to the woman he saves from stoning, “Madam, where are they? Does no one condemn you?” Hart himself suggests that “for many readers” his choice to replace “blessed” with “blissful” for *μακάριος* in order to capture the sense of divine delight of the Greek “will

prove the most insufferable decision” (566–67). “Blessed are the poor in spirit” becomes “How blissful the destitute, abject in spirit.”

Hart has a second purpose in aiming at a “pitilessly literal” translation. Besides searching for ways to reveal the intense individuality of the New Testament authors, he also (perhaps more importantly for him), wants a translation free of “intellectual prejudice,” the kind that shapes one’s translation according to a prior history of interpretation, leading the translator to choose words and phrases that reflect his or her own prior theological commitments. “In the end,” he says, “it may not be entirely possible to write a translation of scripture not shaped by later theological and doctrinal history. Even so, that is what I have attempted” (xvi).

Hart’s translation is prefaced with twenty-five pages of introductory material explaining his interpretive aims and some of the effects the process of translation had on him (such as a “new sense of the utter strangeness of the Christian vision of life in its first dawning” [xxiv]). At the end of the translation, Hart includes a twenty-five page “Concluding Scientific Postscript.” This postscript includes remarks on the authorship of the books of the New Testament (here he follows “the most credible current scholarship” [567], though with the reminder that this “is the work of someone who believes in divine inspiration” [576]), an extensive note on the problems of translation presented by the prologue to John’s Gospel, and a glossary of nineteen words that present important translation problems (at least for Hart).

In order to reflect the ambiguity of John’s prologue, he leaves *λόγος* untranslated, and includes three different forms of the word “god” (GOD, GOD, and god) in order to reflect the presence or absence of the definite article. Hart’s prologue is not pleasing English, but it does convey the complexity of the Greek and hence makes it impossible for the reader to think a translation into English is straightforward (which is Hart’s point, of course).

The glossary complicates Hart’s translation in more interesting ways, since it reveals his own “intellectual prejudices.” For example, his dissatisfaction with much of the western theological branch of Christianity (Hart himself is Orthodox), especially Calvinist forms of Protestantism, is obvious, as is his insistence that material wealth is much harder to square with Christian holiness than many modern Christians seem to think. For example, the first and longest entry, *αἰώνιος*, usually translated as “eternal” or “everlasting,” becomes “of” or “in” either “that Age” or “the Age” (543). This is justified by Hart’s careful explanation of the ambiguity of the Greek, but it

also matters for theological reasons, since removing the “eternal” and “everlasting” sense of the word makes it difficult if not impossible to argue that the New Testament explicitly supports the everlasting torment of the reprobate. Hart has universalist inclinations, and ensures that his translation allows this position. Whereas the King James Version translates Matthew 25:46 as “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal,” Hart writes “And these will go to the chastening of that Age, but the just to the life of that Age.” According to Revelation 14:11, in Hart’s translation, “And the smoke of their torment rises for ages of ages, and the ones who make obeisance to the beast and its image have no rest day and night, as does anyone who might receive the impress of its name.” Hart adds a footnote after “ages of ages”:

εἰς αἰῶνας αἰῶνων (*eis aiōnas aiōnōn*). Everywhere else in Revelation, when John is speaking of final or everlasting things, he employs the standard phrase εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰῶνων (*eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*), with the definite articles: “unto *the* ages of *the* ages.” Here alone the articles are omitted, perhaps producing a weaker and more indefinite formula, one that might be read as meaning “for a very long time.”

When it comes to Christianity and wealth, rather than make the text appear more open to various interpretation, Hart’s translation choices emphasize the rejection of material goods and the divine happiness this makes possible. We have already seen that he prefers English words that emphasize abject poverty—“destitute” rather than “poor” for πτωχοί—and a translation of μακάριος that when combined with “destitute” yields a jarring combination of material impoverishment and divine joy: “Blissful are the destitute, abject in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). This also affects grammatical construals. The Revised Standard Version translates Luke 18:25–26 as “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’” Rather than leave the referent of “who” somewhat vague, Hart instead says, “For it is easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.’ And those hearing this said, ‘Can any of them then be saved?’” Lest the reader miss the point, he adds a footnote: “καὶ τίς δύναται σωθῆναι (*kai tis dynatai sōthēnai*): often translated as ‘Who then can be saved?’ or ‘Can anyone then be saved?’ but I take the import (specifically as regards the τίς) to be ‘Can any [rich man] then be saved?’”

These are not exactly criticisms. After all, adding the footnote about the rich men not only emphasizes Hart’s preferred understanding of the passage,

but also alerts the reader to the complexity of the passage, and of course to the possibility that here Hart is making a mistake.

My one real criticism is that the notes, tremendously helpful and enlightening, are nevertheless so sparse. Matthew's Gospel includes only twenty-four, many of them very brief. I wish that Hart had taken Robert Alter's translations with commentary of the books of the Hebrew Bible as his model. Alter's editions change the way a reader experiences the Old Testament—text is set in a standard typeface, with only one column per page, on standard-weight paper, and with a commentary that addresses important textual difficulties and the literary as well as theological implications of the text. The physical experience of reading Hart's translation is similar to reading Alter's, but Hart's commentary provided in the notes is woefully sparse, even though what Hart does provide proves he would be a worthy rival for Alter (consider for example Hart's series of comments spread across the New Testament that draw attention to the texts that Christian tradition has put together in its development of the character of Satan).

But it is high praise indeed if a reader's main criticism is a wish that the author had done even more. David Bentley Hart's *New Testament* is, quite simply, a revelation.