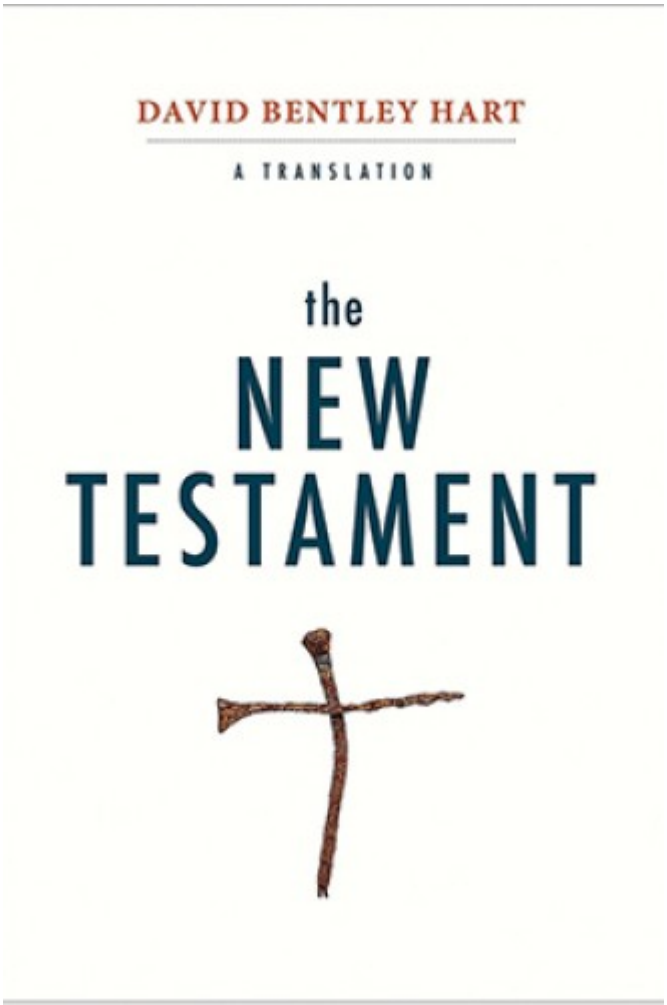
The New Testament in the strange words of David Bentley Hart

Greek and English do not work the same way. So what does it mean to create a literal translation?

by Nicholas Thomas Wright in the January 31, 2018 issue

In Review



The New Testament

A Translation

By David Bentley Hart
Yale University Press

When a theologian of the stature of David Bentley Hart offers a “pitilessly literal translation” of the New Testament that is “not shaped by later theological and doctrinal history” and aims to make “the familiar strange, novel, and perhaps newly compelling,” we are eager to see the result. He promises to bring out the “wildly indiscriminate polyphony” of the writers’ styles and emphases, converging on their “vibrant certainty that history has been invaded by God in Christ in such a way that nothing can stay as it was.”

But his two main claims (to be “literal” and “undogmatic”) are not borne out, and the promise of displaying the strangeness of early Christian life disappears behind different kinds of strangeness. There are indeed some striking passages: we read that Saul had “wreaked such carnage” among the early believers, but was now “marshalling arguments that this man is the Anointed” (Acts 9:21–23). His opponents are people “whose God is their guts” (Phil. 3:19). And so on. But what does *literal* mean?

Greek and English, as Hart knows well, do not work the same way. Pretending that they do produces not literal translation but the kind of thing you get in an interlinear version, as with “the one making me well, that one told me” (John 5:11), or “going and washing, I saw” (John 9:11). Hart frequently translates *houtos* and *ekeinos* as “this one” and “that one,” as in “having received the morsel, that one [i.e., Judas] immediately departed” (John 13:30). The strange English here has nothing to do with a cultural clash between the first Christians and ourselves.

The definite article, or its absence, creates further problems. Hart knows that Greek often uses the article where English does not—for example, with abstract nouns (and so he does not translate *hē agapē* in 1 Corinthians 13 as “the love”). The converse is true, too: Greek often omits the article in cases where the English indefinite article (“a” or “an”) would be misleading. Yet Hart elevates the Greek nonuse of the article into a strict principle of his literal rendition, so that we frequently find mention of “a Holy Spirit.” In Luke 4:1, “Jesus, full of a Holy Spirit . . . was guided in the wilderness by the Spirit.” Sometimes this oddity is compounded by the switching of upper and lower case in quick succession: we have access “in one Spirit” to the Father, but we are “built up in spirit into God’s dwelling place” (Eph. 2:18, 22). Granted, the word *pneuma* was multivalent for Paul and in his context, but the combination of these

two puzzles (capitalization and article) produces neither clarity nor beauty.

The use of obsolete English words (“climes” for regions, “chaplet” for crown, “alee” as a nautical term, and so on) offers a different sort of strangeness. Jacob’s well has become a “font” (John 4:6). “You are God’s tilth” will mean nothing to most readers, and anyone hearing “one such as was rapt up all the way” will think of parcels, or perhaps overcoats, not heavenly journeys (1 Cor. 3:9, 2 Cor. 12:2). There’s also the occasional glaring error—such as the omission of “not” in Romans 8:12, where Hart’s version makes the mindboggling claim that “we are debtors to the flesh.”

Hart’s determination to resist “later theological and doctrinal history” in shaping his translation is fueled by his judgment that Augustine and his 16th-century successors were wrong not only in their reading of Adam’s sin in Romans 5:12 but in their entire soteriology—everything from predestination to justification by faith to repentance to the division between heaven and hell. In short, the “magisterial Protestant tradition” that generated contemporary American Bible translation is “demonstrably wrong.”

Hart speaks with heavy sarcasm of those “who are doctrinally or emotionally committed to the idea of eternal torment for the unelect.” His own dogmatic commitments are clear in his reading of the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16. The tale turns on the assumption that the rich man and the beggar find themselves in radically different postmortem locations. But Hart insists that both Dives and Lazarus are in Hades, with Lazarus in a pleasant part of Hades called “the Vale of Abraham” (appealing to a metaphorical meaning of *kolpos*, which normally refers to someone’s lap or the equivalent folds of their clothes), so that Dives sees Abraham far off “and Lazarus in his vales.”

But this reading makes no sense, partly because Hart has ignored the well-known ancient Jewish idiom of Abraham’s bosom, and more particularly because his own dogma supersedes the text. The rest of Hart’s book explains why: one of his major agenda is to shut off all possibility of a standard Western view of hell and of the ultimate separation of righteous and wicked.

Hart is, of course, welcome to his own magnificent anti-Augustinian rhetoric, fueled by disdain for complacent forms of heaven-and-hell teaching. I have myself argued against that tradition at key points. But all of this affects the translation.

One could write reams on the puzzle of *dikaiosynē* (traditionally, “righteousness”) and its cognates, but Hart’s struggles at this point reveal deep problems. He

regularly offers “make righteous” or “prove righteous” for “justify.” And bewilderingly, he switches between “justice,” “uprightness,” “vindication,” and “righteousness” in Romans and Galatians, while screening out two vital points: the *covenant relation* of God and his people and the *declaration* that this people is “in the right.”

All this comes together in the difficult but frequent language about “the Age” (*aiōn*), with its regular adjective *aiōnios/on* (often translated “eternal”). Hart is welcome to advocate universalism, but to make the New Testament teach it is hard work. When punishment (as for the unforgivable sin in Mark 3:29) is said to be “aeonian,” Hart’s rendering “answerable for a transgression in the Age” (or, in the footnote, “an age-long transgression”) appears to suggest a long purgation rather than a final punishment.

Then there is the story of the sheep and the goats, which ends with the latter going into “aeonian punishment” and the former into “aeonian life.” For Hart, this phrase reads “these will go to the chastening of that Age, but the just to the life of that Age.” His footnoted explanation claims that *kolasis*, “chastening,” means disciplinary punishment rather than final retribution, so that “aeonian” indicates the time before the ultimate Last Day when discipline will have had its purgative effect. Will the “aeonian life” likewise be temporary? And is this really the point of the parable?

My point here is not that I disagree with Hart’s theology, which as he stresses is shared by some Greek Fathers. My point is that we still need—and I do not think Hart has yet found—good ways of expressing the Jewish and early Christian two-Ages doctrine in clear English. Indeed, Hart himself only concedes that Jewish two-Ages context after suggesting several others. He regularly translates *eis ton aiōna* with “throughout the Age” but with a footnote suggesting “unto the Age [to come]” or something similar.

I was reminded more than once of a particular medieval edition of the Old Testament which, displaying Hebrew, Latin, and Greek in parallel columns, was likened by one monk to Christ between two thieves—the traitorous Jew and the heretic Greek. Hart switches this image around: Greek theology is central and the Western tradition is the enemy, from the Augustine he dislikes to the comfortable modern Protestants he dislikes even more. As for the Jewish setting of early Christianity—a key part of Christianity’s early “strangeness”—Hart discounts it altogether. Paul’s scriptural tales may look like Israel’s history but are simply

homespun allegories. The new covenant is “not of scripture but of spirit; for scripture slays but spirit makes alive.” And “we slave in newness of spirit and not in scripture’s obsolescence” (Rom. 7:6). Hart’s conviction that “scripture” is a literal translation of the Greek *gramma*, like much of his translation, is as idiosyncratic as it is bold.

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