

Interview with David Alan Black

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In literary studies, scholars tend to view some texts as more “literary” than others. As Terry Eagleton explains, “The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way it says it. To read like this is to set aside the ‘literariness’ of the work—the fact that it is a poem or play or novel, rather than an account of the incidence of soil erosion in Nebraska. . . . Part of what we mean by a ‘literary’ work is one in which what is said is to be taken in terms of how it is said. It is the kind of writing in which the content is inseparable from the language in which it is presented.”¹ As a biblical scholar, do you find this distinction useful in understanding the Scriptures? Do you see a range of more- and less-literary texts in the Bible?

Yes, I do indeed see a range of literary texts in the New Testament. Here I am speaking, of course, only of the New Testament since that is my field of study. I once recalled Marshall McLuhan famously saying, “The medium is the message.” I do not agree with that statement completely, but I do believe it is partly true. I do not think the medium *is* the message, but I do think the medium is a big part *of* the message. In other words, when we study the New Testament writings, and here I am referring to the original Greek, we must understand that not only *what* is said is important but also *how* it is said is also vitally important. My conviction is based upon 2 Tim 3:16, the famous passage that asserts the inspiration of the Bible. In other words, *pasa graphē theopneustos* means more than just

that the words were inspired by God. It means that everything *written down* in the text is inspired by God. Does this include the words? Of course it does. I believe in verbal plenary inspiration: every word everywhere is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. But I would take it a step further. Not only are the words inspired but also the tense, the voice, the mood, the person, the gender, the number, the case, the source, the word order, the phrase order, the clause order, the discourse structure, the alliteration, the assonance, the paronomasia, the chiasmic structure—all of these are inspired, I am convinced, by God the Holy Spirit, as are the words themselves. Hence, I would agree completely that *what* is said is to be taken into consideration as well as *how* it is said. And so we have a balance between, if you will, the *denotative* level of language and the *connotative* level of language.

What are the costs and/or benefits in thinking of the Bible as a work of literature?

One example that immediately comes to mind is the poetry we find in the New Testament. I had the privilege of being the base translator for the International Standard Version (ISV) New Testament, and one of the things we did was to try and bring across into English not only, again, the denotative level of language but the connotative level of language as well—the literary devices an author uses in order to create impact and appeal or the “hitting” and “drawing” of his or her audience. I became interested in this subject when I was reading a biography of Karl Barth in German (*Karl Barth's Lebenslauf*). One of the interesting things about that book is that when Karl Barth was growing up in Basel, he was often bored in school and so would resort to writing poetry. In the book we have an example of that poetry, and I will give it here in the German:

Ihr liebe Lüte, hört mich an
Ich bruche jetzt nit zur Schuele z'gahn
Sintemal sie mich wand zum Papste han...²

Since I had not seen the English translation of this biography, I was wondering whether the translator would attempt to bring across the German poetry into English poetry. And sure enough, the author did exactly that. Notice the end rhymes in the English translation:

My dearest people, here's my rule
I will no longer go to school

¹ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth's Lebenslauf: nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (München: Kaiser, 1976), 23.

Since now as pope I have my stool...³

This fascinated me. Why would a translator seek to render German poetry by English poetry and not simply by prose? Thus, when I began to translate the International Standard Version—all twenty-seven books—into English, I knew I would have to struggle with the question of whether I should translate Greek poetry into English poetry.

How difficult was it for you to translate Greek poetry of the New Testament into English poetry?

Well, it was not easy, and I am not sure we succeeded. But I do know that a great concern of the process of Bible translation is what I would call the loss of connotative impact, especially in highly literary texts, even though the essential denotative content can be communicated. In rendering poetic language, the task of Bible translators is a particularly difficult one. They recognize the need to convey the essential denotative content of the text, but they are also concerned with the inevitable loss of connotative impact. They know that rhetorical features are just as important as lexical or syntactical features in contributing to meaningfulness, but they also desire not to sacrifice content to style. In translating the ISV, we encountered head on questions of translation equivalence (how accurate is the translation?) and translation acceptability (how much variation will be tolerated?). One also encounters the stubborn fact that the meaning of any utterance is not a single phenomenon but a synthesis of various elements—phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic—the importance of each element varying from one situation or language user to another.

As is well known, one of the qualities that chiefly distinguishes great literature from nonliterary writing is the close relationship—indeed the actual fusion—of form and idea. We may sometimes pretend to detach the meaning from the form of a word, but we soon realize that this extracted “meaning” is far less than the total meaning. To be sure, nonliterary writing has significant form, for its diction is part of the meaning. But in poetry the union of form and content is so intimate that it is almost impossible to extract meaning without paying considerable attention to form. The text is not only trying to get information across; it is also making an appeal to its readers. As Eugene Nida notes, “Emotive meanings are not related primarily to language structure but rather to the manner which this structure manifests itself, especially in the actual discourse.”⁴

³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 11.

⁴ Eugene Nida, *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Munich: Fink, 1975), 18.

In other words, translation involves not only analyzing what a person says but also how that person says it. Nida says, “Truly poetic passages should be translated as poetry and if so the format should reflect the way in which poetry in the receptive language is normally printed.”⁵

Can you give us some specific examples of poetry in the ISV?

Here are three examples:

1 Timothy 3:16

In flesh was he revealed to sight,
Kept righteous by the Spirit's might,
Adored by angels singing.
To nations was he manifest,
Believing souls found peace and rest,
Our Lord in heaven reigning!

Titus 1:12

Liars ever,
men of Crete,
Savage brutes
that live to eat.

1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Love is very patient,
Love is very kind,
Love is never envious
Or vaunted up with pride.
Nor is she conceited,
And never is she rude,
Never does she think of self,
Or ever get annoyed.
She never is resentful,
Is never glad with sin,
But always glad to side with truth,
When 'er the truth should win.
She bears up under everything,
Believes the best in all,
There is no limit to her hope,
And never will she fall.

In Dr. Miles's British Literature course at Southeastern, students read Mary Sidney's

⁵ Eugene Nida, “Poetry and the Bible Translator,” *BT* 33 (1982): 332.

“Psalm 52,” an English versification of Psalm 52. The students often struggle with the poem because it’s not a “word-for-word” translation of the Bible. However, Douglas J. Moo argues, “To suggest in our discussion of translations among a general audience that ‘word-for-word’ is a virtue is to mislead people about the nature of language and translation.”⁶ What presuppositions, whether helpful or detrimental, are embedded in the concept of a “word-for-word” translation?

To answer the question, I would start by saying that the denotative level of language is undoubtedly the most important level of language for receptors. That said, there is no need for us to insist on a “word-for-word” translation as being necessarily more accurate than a “thought-for-thought” translation. Probably the ideal would be to combine as much of a literal approach as possible with an approach that does not sacrifice English readability. That, in fact, was the goal of the ISV.

The translation theory behind the ISV was different from theories employed in previous Bible translations. Traditionally, two basic methods of Bible translation have been used. The older method (and for many centuries practically the only method used) has been labeled “literal” or “formal equivalent.” This type of translation allows the readers to identify as fully as possible with the source languages of Scripture and to understand as much as they can of the Bible’s customs, manners of thought, and means of expression.

The other method is termed “idiomatic” or “functional equivalent.” The goal of an idiomatic translation is to achieve the closest natural equivalence in modern language to match the ideas of the original text. Idiomatic translations have little or no concern for maintaining the grammatical forms, sentence structure, and consistency of word usage of the source languages.

All major translations of the Bible fall somewhere on a scale between complete formal equivalence and complete functional equivalence.

Competent Bible translators have always recognized that a strictly literal translation of the words of Scripture can be misleading. For example, “the wicked will not stand in the judgment” might be interpreted as proving that evil people actually would not be judged. Hence literalness is not always equivalent to accuracy.

On the other hand, the limitations of idiomatic translations are also obvious. Such translations frequently tend to cast the words of Scripture into new molds that convey the ideas in a significantly different spirit or emphasis. An example is the NIV’s rendering of the Greek *paidia* in John 21:5 as “friends” instead of “children.” Idiomatic translations have, in a

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *We Still Don’t Get It: Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years After James Barr* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 10.

sense, a commentary built into them; they represent a choice made by the translators as to what the *translators* think a passage means. For that reason, an idiomatic translation is easier to read but less reliable for careful study.

I believe a good translation will steer a careful course between word-for-word translation and interpretation under the guise of translating. In other words, a good translation will be both *reliable* and *readable*. The best translation, then, is one that is both accurate and idiomatic at the same time. It will make every effort to reproduce the culture and exact meaning of the text without sacrificing readability. In the ISV, we called this type of translation “literal-idiomatic.”

In the sixteenth century, when the Reformation was well underway, there was a flurry of English Psalm versifications like Mary Sidney’s that scholars like Kathleen Swaim have argued “performed the cultural work and public service of making the Psalms accessible to readers of vernacular languages in simple memorable forms.”⁷ What, if any, are the benefits to readers of such versified translations in the twenty-first century?

Three observations are in order here. First, a small difference in sound quality may be very important. Second, I reiterate that one’s perception of the emotional qualities of sounds is conditioned by the meanings of the words that carry the sounds. Finally, the most important point is this: the analysis of poetic form is not an end in itself. There is little value in determining that a stanza has a pair rhythmic clausulae or that a passage has used alliteration of certain sounds or that it has employed this or that figure of speech if one does not go on to collect these separate observations into some kind of comprehensive account of the text’s meaning. To do that, one must be sensitive to certain aspects of the *context* of poetry.

This brings us to the important point that the literal meaning a poem may convey and the poem itself are separate things operating at different levels of meaning. One may say, “I am falling asleep” and expect to be understood. But in Tennyson’s line, “To sleep I give my powers away;/my will is bondsman to the dark,” the fact of sleep is not as important as the feelings associated with it. Tennyson treats the subject not as information but as felt experience—the feeling of helplessness and subjection to something beyond one’s control. Stated in prose, the main idea of Tennyson’s line is simple. The poem, however, says much more than this, for Tennyson skillfully opens up an area of unstated possibilities by quietly attaching feelings to the inevitability of sleep by means of such figures of speech as personification and metaphor.

⁷ Kathleen M. Swaim, “Contextualizing Mary Sidney’s Psalms,” *Christianity and Literature* 48.3 (Spring 1999): 254.

Because poetry is marked by many of these characteristics, it can go a long way toward exchanging functions with prose without ever losing its identity as poetry. Hence, poetry may be factual and still be poetry. The Latin poet Horace once said that poetry has the function of teaching as well as delighting—it is both sweet and useful (*dulce et utile*). Indeed, once one turns to the poetry of the New Testament, one is likely to find that most of it has a moral quality. It seeks not merely to express a view of something but to suggest the kind of behavior appropriate to that view. The *Carmen Christi* (Song of Christ) of Phil 2:6–11 is one of the best-known illustrations of such poetry. The poem reminds us that everyday activities are to be controlled by the mind of Christ and not by personal ambition, thus illustrating Paul’s ethical injunctions in 2:1–4:

In God’s own form existed he,
And shared with God equality,
Deemed nothing needed grasping.
Instead, poured out in emptiness,
A servant’s form did he possess,
A mortal man becoming.
In human form he chose to be,
And lived in all humility,
Death on a cross obeying
Now lifted up by God to heaven,
A name above all others given,
This matchless name possessing.
And so, when Jesus’s name is called,
The knees of everyone will fall,
Where’er they are residing.
Then every tongue with one accord,
Will say that Jesus Christ is Lord,
While God the Father praising.

In your own work on New Testament translation, you have rendered Greek verse into conventional English forms (e.g., using iambic pentameter). What was your rationale for this approach, and how did it affect the translation process?

I would say that poetry communicates *in many ways at once*. The various levels of meaning interact with each other and may reinforce or counteract each other to produce a net effect that is greater than the impact that the several components have when taken separately. In short, a work of art must be taken as a whole; it is an inseparable fusion—a complete flowing together—of idea and form. In a broad sense, then, New Testament poetry is both productive and theoretical, irrational and rational. This contrast, in Aristotelian terms, constitutes the difference between “making”

and “doing,” for poetry is essentially a creative art, the end of which is not simply practical action but also beauty itself. I felt that if we could carry over this creative reality from Greek into English, using whatever literary devices were available to us in the receptor language, then our project would be a success.

What unique challenges, if any, does the translator of Scripture face when translating poetry?

Poetry—to be poetry—must have appeal to the reader’s imagination and powers of observation. Herein lies a defense of the so-called reader-response critic, whose work is not primarily an analysis but a description of experiences of certain highly developed sensibilities in contact with the work of literature. The chief value of literary criticism is, after all, not in supplying final verdicts but in affording certain aesthetic sensibilities that will equip one with a suppleness of mind for an effective individual analysis. This principle applies even in the field of traditional grammatical historical exegesis, where critics are exceedingly careful (as they should be) to pay due attention to matters historical and theological. Of course, the study of form and style as factors in biblical exegesis has little more than begun and is beset by peculiar difficulties. But when the facts are known, biblical scholars will find still another field for the application of principles of biblical interpretation.

How would you summarize your own philosophy of translation?

Imagination, like all human faculties, may be either active or passive. Effective poetic analysis goes beyond mere passive observation and allows itself to be led eagerly along by the imagination in perceiving meanings and relationships that lie beneath the surface. An activated imagination was what once caused my five-year-old son, as we were waiting for a traffic light to turn green, to speak of God’s controlling the traffic signals by means of buttons and wires connecting heaven to earth. The deduction was incorrect, of course, but the story works by illustrating the power of true imaginative vision, in which the result is flashed upon the inward eye, not arrived at by logic or ingenuity. It is precisely this tendency to approach the poetic text as if it were prose—and thus overlook its essential nature—that worries the literary critic of the Bible. It is probable that all the New Testament writings contain at least traces of poetry, and the more such poetry is recognized as being present, the more difficult the problem becomes. In order to isolate poetry in the context of a biblical text, we need a sensitivity that will enable us to recognize different aspects of poetic language. To employ a well-known analogy, magicians do not expect their audiences to actually see ladies sawed in half. The feature that

makes the magician's performance more than simple detection is the audience's knowledge that it is a trick.

Likewise, what makes poetry so intriguing is knowing that it is poetry, though of course one's satisfaction depends not merely on one's ability to perceive the presence of poetry but also on one's ability to perceive how the "trick is done." Translators who can do both participate in the text to the fullest extent possible, giving full rein to both their imagination and their analytical intelligence. To them, poetry reveals an amazing amount of information since behind each poem is an author who put everything into the poem he or she sees and put it there for a reason.

Given your years of expert work in the classroom, what formulations and explanations of these subjects (translation, genre, literariness, etc.) have you found consistently resonate with students?

My approach to exegesis may be characterized as analytical, in the modern tradition of a "close reading" or *explication de texte*. But the chronic problem facing all theories of reader's response criticism is that they rarely explain *why* poetry is there. In my classes, I attempt to focus on the question *To what end does one study poetry?* My answer has been to suggest that New Testament poetry is not just an objective form of language *per se* but a special use of language and that by its very nature New Testament poetry demands the attention of the translator. It seems to me, then, that the real test of poetry is the test of translation. To "carry over" (trans-late) from one language to another—as impossible as that may seem—is therefore a worthy and noble task for any translator.

It follows, therefore, that another basic truth must be admitted: not only is poetry an art of language, but also the words the poet uses are characteristically enriched by human associations, affecting words through their involvement with the mundane affairs of humane experience. This process of enrichment explains why poets rarely create new words but are quite content to draw their vocabulary from the same sources used by everyone else. "Poetry is not a special kind of language," notes Charles Wheeler.⁸ "It is, rather, a special way in which language is used." In order to see what qualities poetry possesses, it is thus necessary to see how poetry (and prose) is related to language as a whole.

Poetry is but the artful use of language, though no radical separation between prose and poetry is possible. In the translation of prose, what is more important than verbatim rendering, and what is frequently more possible to attain, is an accurate reproduction of the author's thoughts.

⁸ Charles Wheeler, *The Design of Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1966), 6.

Poetry, however, is like a spoiled child that constantly asserts itself, incessantly shouting, "Look at me! Here I am!" Prose may be stated (and translated) in many different ways; poetry is not an alternative way of saying something but the only way. In other words, the systems by which messages are encoded and conveyed also influence what can be conveyed in them—not as much as Marshall McLuhan claimed, perhaps, but nevertheless in real and important ways. Poetic texts are therefore produced and interpreted through the mediation of poetic devices as well as through language itself.

Let me try to be more precise, now, in situating poetic interpretation among the other approaches to biblical exegesis. As I alluded to above, today there are advocates of both author-oriented and reader-oriented criticism. E. D. Hirsch, the principal advocate of author-oriented criticism, has argued—in my view persuasively—that one cannot speak of a determinate interpretation unless postulating an authorial intention that governs that interpretation.⁹ Hirsch's approach assumes—again, in my view correctly—that the author of a literary text is by definition superior to the reader and that the burden of the reader is to recover the author's intention. This approach has many obvious strengths. But it is clear that the weaknesses in this approach—and this is where the reader-oriented criticism are most vocal—lie in the fact that students are not necessarily adequate readers. Sadly, author-oriented criticism often leads to a rigid sort of authoritarianism that stifles the student's creative impulses and makes reading (and interpretation) a chore. Yet surely in the science of biblical interpretation there must be some middle ground between the anarchy of interpretive variation inherent within reader-response criticism and the law-and-order authoritarianism that characterizes author-oriented criticism. To be sure, biblical texts must be understood as the product of a person (or persons), at a given point in human history, in a given form of discourse. The analyst is thus entitled to speculate about this or that grammatical possibility or about this or that historical setting. However, it seems to me that it is relevant for biblical interpretation to emphasize the text *as a text*, within the legitimate limits imposed by historical-grammatical exegesis. Poetic texts work differently than prose, as the reader-oriented critics have demonstrated very well, but like prose are dominated by language codes and conventions (as the author-oriented critics are quick to point out).

In my classes, I have my students read through my book *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry* to get an overview of the ten steps of exegesis. My approach essentially follows the traditional historical-grammatical

⁹ E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

method. Students engage in several types of analysis—textual, lexical, syntactical, structural, theological, homiletical, etc. But one of my ten steps is literary analysis—a field that is often overlooked in New Testament exegesis classes. This is a grave mistake in my view. The rhetorical level of language is a very significant level of language for readers. To ignore it is to risk overlooking an important dimension of meaning in the text.

Conclusion

This interview began with certain fundamental questions about the nature of New Testament poetry, to which I have tried to supply answers of a purely introductory fashion. I noted that poetry is a special way of using language, within the context of other uses of language. I also noted the qualities of language that poetry brings into being. The result is an admittedly overly condensed discussion that minimizes the pragmatic dimensions of New Testament poetry and concentrates instead on the task of developing insight into it. We are thus, by this inevitably roundabout way, back to the question with which this interview began.

Because poetry and prose employ language so differently, it is no wonder that poetry and prose tend to repel each other. If what I have argued is correct, however, then one may no longer be content to focus on the extrinsic character of prose to the neglect of the intrinsic character of poetry. One must now think of language in poetry as having something to say *beyond* the denotative meaning of words, however difficult this connotative meaning may be to discern—and translate. But then, with full attention to the texture as well as the import of what one reads, one comes to share in the achievement of the poet, discovering that even texts supposedly familiar appear fresh and new. In the collaborative act between writer and reader, the nuances that were otherwise only potential come into full being, and the mere physical form of the Word awakens into the reality of a poem.