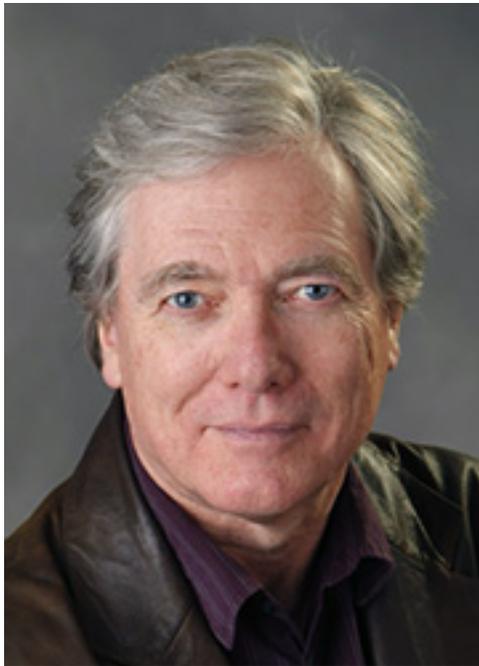


# Lost (and Found) in Translation 2010

A personal note from Art Dewey



A few days ago a graduate student I was tutoring interrupted our conversation over the possible sources in the story of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28 by asking: how did I decide to become a biblical scholar? The question was not some sort of delaying tactic; he was truly curious. I knew he has been wondering about his own future and we had already rehearsed the harsh realities of job prospects for Bible scholars in the present economic climate. I also realized that he was catching glimpses of unexpected horizons as we made our way through various texts. It seemed quite appropriate, then, to bring my own past out of the shadows. Just as Jacob's story did not start at Bethel but extended backwards into a hectic past and stretched into an uncertain future, so each

human story wends its precarious way through time and space.

My story began with being flummoxed. Actually it began about a year before that when I was twelve. I had finally done something right in school and ended up eating rubber chicken at a Kiwanis Club luncheon. My mother wanted to encourage this edging into the academic by declaring that I could have anything I wanted. Since we had little money, certain items were out of the question. I did, however, consider a forbidden thing. And, as I contemplated it, my desire for it grew. Now this was in pre-Vatican II days. What could I ask for that would not cost an arm and a leg but would give my mother pause? Of course! A Bible! Catholics often featured gilt edged Bibles on their coffee tables. But they never opened them except to mark an occasional baptism or wedding. (We didn't even have that kind.) Only Protestants read the Bible and everyone knew where they're going. My request did stop my mother in her tracks. Yet, she swallowed hard and surprised me a few days later with my first Bible.

Without having read the Bible I was already a biblical literalist. I believed that the Truth would make me free. All I had to do was to read the Bible and things would be perfectly clear. So I began eagerly with Genesis and moved on into Exodus with increasing enthusiasm. By the time I got to Leviticus I was talking to myself. I had no idea what was going on. Then the histories of the land of Canaan spilled more than milk and honey in my lap. Repetition, unexplained customs and cruelties, a nagging suspicion that I might be missing some joke (there

must be some humor there, right?), and those names, some running more wildly than the rivers, all this and more kept my mind off the ever-tragic Red Sox (but not for long). The prophets' kaleidoscopic visions were tantalizing but out of my league. Nor did the Wisdom writings sound that wise to an almost-teen. I thought I found relief when I reached the New Testament. Surely here things would get straightened out. But no. Jesus didn't sound at all like what I had imagined him. In fact, he seemed to be speaking out of both sides of his mouth (which he actually seemed to do in Revelation!). I honestly don't even remember what I thought of Paul. He just seemed to go on and on. When I finally finished with the Apocalypse I had wild and crazy images rumbling through my brain. It had taken me about a year of determined slogging. I would finish that book just as I finished so many limping novels and uninspiring biographies (such as Zebulon Pike).

Some would say that this was hardly a promising start for a biblical career. But it was the best thing for a stubborn twelve year old to fling his wit and will so wildly on that mute text. Nothing was resolved. And many questions kept nagging me, although never in some overwhelming way. But they were there, like unseen critters in the woods.

All of those efforts got lost through my college years. Or so I thought. I entered an MDiv program with the intention of doing a joint doctoral program in religion and literature. But then I had lunch with George MacRae. George had taught me in his course on Hebrews. Over the mousaka and Ouzo in a Cambridge Greek restaurant, he asked what I wanted to do with my life. No one had ever asked me this. I told him of my plans. He dismissed them saying that I would never find a position with such a hybrid degree. I then asked him somewhat defensively what I should study. He answered directly: New Testament. George hit a nerve deep within. I never thought a lay person could consider such a career. I countered with various objections, including all the languages I would have to know. But he beat back every one, ending with, "You like languages; it's just a matter of sitting down and learning." That summer I read the letters of Paul in Greek with George. I slowly began not only to understand what Paul meant by pistis (trust) but also to realize how life itself is woven out of a delicate tissue of trust.

All of this seems so long ago. But now, after years of work with Roy Hoover, Lane McGaughey, and Daryl Schmidt to produce *The Authentic Letters of Paul*, I realize that I would have never been part of that exhilarating wrestling with the text without a mother who entrusted a Bible to a naughty twelve year old and a teacher who confided his student with the truth.

(From *Wisdom Notes: Theological Riffs on Life and Living*, 2016)