

The Ontological Erosion of the Sacred: Analyzing the Loss of Participatory and Perspectival Knowledge in Modern Biblical Translation

The contemporary landscape of biblical scholarship and translation is increasingly characterized by a profound paradox: while the accessibility and philological precision of sacred texts have reached an apex, the transformative power of these texts to shape living experience has seemingly diminished. This phenomenon can be elucidated through the lens of John Vervaeke's 4P model of cognition—propositional, procedural, perspectival, and participatory knowing—which reveals that modern translations often prioritize the former two at the expense of the latter two. When a religious text is rendered primarily through propositional and procedural frameworks, it undergoes a process of "desacralization," transforming from a participatory arena of divine encounter into a static, historical artifact. The ancient Jewish practice of Midrash, conversely, represents a cognitive and spiritual technology designed to facilitate the "translation" of prophetic words into a living, participatory reality. By investigating the intellectual history of translation, the cognitive mechanisms of relevance realization, and the ontological implications of "Real Presences" in language, the structural loss inherent in modern hermeneutics becomes visible.

The Cognitive Architecture of the 4P Model and the Meaning Crisis

To understand what is lost in modern translation, one must first delineate the hierarchy of knowing that governs human interaction with reality. John Vervaeke's metatheory of cognition suggests that our connection to the world is not merely a matter of holding correct beliefs (propositions), but of being attuned to the environment in a way that allows for flourishing and meaning.

Propositional and Procedural Knowledge: The Surface of the Text

Propositional knowledge is "knowing that"—the grasp of facts and logical truths expressed in clear statements. In biblical translation, this manifests as the drive for "accuracy" and "consistency," where the translator seeks to convey the factual content of the original Greek or Hebrew. While propositional knowledge is essential for communication, Vervaeke argues that it is often over-emphasized to the exclusion of other forms of knowing, a state he calls "propositional tyranny". Under this tyranny, the "truth" of a scripture is reduced to its doctrinal claims or historical data points.

Procedural knowledge is "knowing how"—the mastery of skills and sequences of activities. For the translator, procedural knowledge involves the technical apparatus of linguistics, lexicography, and the application of translation theories like "dynamic equivalence". While

procedural knowing allows for the "know-how" of moving words from one language to another, it remains a functional information-processing task that can operate independently of the text's transformative potential.

Perspectival and Participatory Knowledge: The Depth of the Encounter

The more profound layers of the 4P model are perspectival and participatory knowing, which are increasingly marginalized in modern secularized translation. Perspectival knowledge is "knowing what it is like" to be in a certain context or point of view; it involves "salience landscaping," where the agent determines what is important or "standing out" in their current environment. Participatory knowledge, considered the most profound, is "knowing by being," where the identity of the agent and the nature of the "arena" (environment) are co-created through a deep, transformative relationship.

Knowledge Type	Epistemological Focus	Relational Dynamic	Impact on Sacred Text Engagement
Propositional	"Knowing That" (Facts)	Subject-Object (detached)	Scripture as a set of doctrines or historical facts to be believed.
Procedural	"Knowing How" (Skills)	Action-Oriented (functional)	Scripture as a text to be analyzed using linguistic and critical tools.
Perspectival	"Knowing What it is Like"	Situated (embodied)	Scripture as a landscape that reorients the reader's point of view.
Participatory	"Knowing by Being"	Agent-Arena (transformative)	Scripture as a space of encounter where the reader's identity is reshaped.

When translators focus exclusively on the propositional and procedural, they create a text that is "clear" but "dead." The reader may gain information *about* the divine, but they lose the "what-it-is-likeness" of the prophetic encounter and the "participation" in the covenantal arena. This loss contributes to the modern "Meaning Crisis," as the religious text ceases to be a site for "relevance realization"—the cognitive process of grasping what is truly important for flourishing.

The Ontology of Midrash: Translation as Living Experience

Midrash is the process of seeking (*darash*) the hidden wisdom within the biblical text to address contemporary problems and craft new realities. It is not merely a commentary but an "interpretive act" that seeks to bridge the gap between the unchanging text and the evolving needs of the community. In the context of Vervaeke's model, Midrash is a technology for transforming propositional and procedural texts into perspectival and participatory experiences.

Creative Philology and the Collapse of Distance

Isaac Heinemann described Midrash as "creative philology," a term that encapsulates the tension between meticulous attention to textual nuance (procedural) and the imaginative power to uproot the text and plant it in new contexts (participatory). Midrash treats the biblical text not as a collection of historical utterances (*parole*), but as a living lexicon (*langue*) from which new meanings can be generated to say things that have never been said before.

Unlike modern readers who approach the Torah as a historical document from which they are separated by time and culture, the ancient *darshan* (interpreter) viewed themselves as a direct recipient of the word. This "conscious and deliberate anachronism" allows the text to be spoken "now" rather than "then". The space between the text and the interpreter collapses, creating a participatory relationship where the reader is fully legally and ontologically bound by the word as if they were present at Sinai.

The Metaphor of Black and White Fire

A central Midrashic metaphor describes the Torah as "black fire written on white fire". This image provides a sophisticated model for participatory knowledge. The "black fire" represents the ink—the letters, the literal meanings (*peshat*), and the propositional content. The "white fire" represents the parchment—the spaces between letters, the silences, and the infinite potential meanings (*d'rash*) that lie beyond the written word.

In Midrash, the "white fire" is considered a higher form of Torah, a primordial and hidden wisdom that cannot be read in the usual propositional manner. Participatory engagement requires the reader to "dwell in the white spaces," connecting with the source of the primordial Torah through meditation and active interpretation. Modern translation, by contrast, focuses almost exclusively on the "black fire," attempting to fill in every white space with a fixed propositional equivalent. By removing the "gaps," modern translators inadvertently destroy the "arena" where participation occurs, leaving the reader as a passive consumer of information rather than an active participant in revelation.

The Enlightenment and the Desacralization of Language

The shift toward the propositional and procedural in translation is a direct result of the Enlightenment, which redefined the status of Scripture from a primary means of knowing God to a historical artifact. This transformation was driven by shifts in epistemology, the rise of biblical criticism, and a new emphasis on rationalism.

Rationalism and the Artifactualization of the Word

Enlightenment rationalism placed human reason at the center of understanding, treating the Bible as a human document subject to historical forces. This "artifactualization" shifted the focus from *preservation* (a participatory act of maintaining a living tradition) to *reconstruction* (a procedural act of uncovering an original text through critical methods). Scholars like Spinoza and Kant introduced a skeptical approach to miracles and divine testimony, essentially reducing religion to a system of morality.

Era	Primary View of Scripture	Dominant Cognitive Mode	Goal of Interpretation
Pre-Enlightenment	Living Word / Covenant	Participatory / Perspectival	Transformation and Attunement
Post-Enlightenment	Historical Artifact	Propositional / Procedural	Factual Reconstruction and Ethical Instruction

This shift fundamentally challenged the traditional belief in divine providence and preservation. As the Bible became a "historical object," the distance between the reader and the text grew. The "Meaning Crisis" emerged as the text lost its power to be a "Real Presence" and instead became a site for academic debate. The separation of the *function* of Scripture (as a witness to revelation) from its *content* (the actual words) led to a radical subjectivism where the text's historicity was secondary to its instrumental purpose.

The Impact of "Dynamic Equivalence" on Participatory Knowing

Modern translation theory is dominated by the tension between "formal equivalence" (literalism) and "dynamic equivalence" (thought-for-thought). While dynamic equivalence aims for "readability" and "clarity," it often serves as the primary mechanism for the loss of participatory depth. By attempting to convey the "thought" behind the text rather than the specific patterns of the original language, dynamic equivalence "solves" the text for the reader.

When a translator decides that a word or phrase is "too difficult" for a modern audience and replaces it with a simplified equivalent, they are performing the act of "relevance realization" *for* the reader. In Vervaeke's terms, this robs the reader of the opportunity to develop the procedural and perspectival skills necessary to navigate the sacred landscape. The resulting text is smooth and accessible, but it lacks the "tonos" (polar tension) that triggers the existential questing essential to Midrash.

Case Studies in Loss: Ambiguity, Metaphor, and Myth

The loss of perspectival and participatory dimensions is most evident in how modern translations handle lexical ambiguity and metaphorical structures. These "problems" in the text are precisely where the "white fire" resides, yet they are often the first things to be smoothed over in the name of propositional clarity.

The Removal of Narrative "Gaps"

Biblical narrative is famously "sparse," leaving the motivations and emotions of characters largely unsaid. Meir Sternberg calls this "gapping," a technique that forces the reader to speculate and participate in the story-world. Midrash thrives in these gaps, creating narrative expansions to explain why Sarah was beautiful or how Abraham felt during the binding of Isaac. Modern translations like the NIV, however, often use the "procedural" tool of verb tenses to close these gaps and harmonize the narrative. In Genesis 2:19, the Hebrew suggests that God formed the animals *after* creating Adam, which contradicts the order in Genesis 1. The NIV "solves" this by changing the tense to "had formed," implying the animals were already there. While this creates propositional consistency, it destroys the "intertextual" tension that forces the reader to engage with the text's deeper complexities. The reader is no longer a "darshan"

seeking truth; they are a passive recipient of a pre-harmonized message.

The Flattening of the Metaphorical "Basar"

Metaphors serve as the bridge between the propositional and the perspectival; they allow us to "see" one thing as another, reorienting our salience landscape. A classic example is the Hebrew word *basar* (flesh), which occurs 151 times in the KJV and is almost always translated as "flesh". In the NIV, however, *basar* is translated into a variety of propositional equivalents: "mankind," "people," "body," "sinful nature," or "human ancestry".

Hebrew Word (<i>basar</i>)	Modern Translation (NIV)	Cognitive Loss
"Flesh"	"People" / "Mankind"	Loss of the biological, fragile connection to creation.
"Flesh"	"Sinful Nature"	Loss of the somatic, embodied dimension of struggle.
"Flesh"	"Human Ancestry"	Loss of the physical continuity of the covenantal line.

By choosing the "meaning" of the word for each specific context, the translator prevents the reader from experiencing the "intertextual" web of the word. The participatory knowledge gained by tracking the "fleshly" vulnerability of humans from Genesis through the Incarnation is lost when the word is fragmented into distinct propositional categories. The "real presence" of the concept is replaced by a series of functional descriptions.

The Suppression of Mythological Space

The "procedural" lens of modern translation is also often used to sanitize the text of its "mythological" or "unscientific" elements. In Genesis 1:21, the Hebrew mentions the *tanninim* (great sea monsters or mythological creatures). The NIV, likely wanting to avoid associations that might challenge a "literal" or "scientific" reading, translates this merely as "creatures of the sea". This propositional shift removes the "perspectival" weight of the text—the sense of a wild, chaotic, and mysterious creation that God tames—and replaces it with a generic, modern biological category. The "arena" of the text is shrunk to fit the limits of modern rationalism.

George Steiner and the "Wager on Presence"

The most significant loss in modern translation is what George Steiner calls the "Real Presence" of the divine in language. Steiner argues that any coherent understanding of meaning is ultimately "underwritten by the assumption of God's presence". Without this "initial act of trust," language becomes a closed, self-referential system—a theory popularized by deconstructionist thinkers like Derrida.

The Disconnect Between Word and World

Modern translation, by focusing on propositional correspondence, often treats the relationship between the word and the world as a social contract or a linguistic convention rather than a sacred covenant. Steiner suggests that the "Meaning Crisis" is a result of living in a time of "epilogue," where the "original covenant" between word and world has been broken. When translators treat the Bible as a text to be "read" rather than "inhabited," they participate in this

breakdown of trust.

Steiner's "wager on God" is a call to return to a participatory hermeneutic. He posits that the experience of a work of art or a sacred text is a "reverent struggle" that requires "spiritual intensification" rather than just "anatomic definition". To "translate" a prophetic word into living experience requires the reader to embody the grief, the hope, and the presence of the text, much as an actor embodies a role. This is the essence of Midrash: the "translation" is not something that happens on a page, but something that happens in the being of the reader.

The Failure of Deconstruction and the Rebirth of Presence

Steiner criticizes deconstruction for "killing God" but failing to accept the consequences—the loss of stable meaning. He argues that if there is no "face of God" for the semantic marker to turn to, there can be no "decidable intelligibility". Modern translations that prioritize "readability" often fall into a similar trap: they provide a "stable" meaning that is actually an illusion, because it is divorced from the "primordial" presence that underwrites the text.

To reclaim the participatory dimension, we must move beyond the "trifle" of sociological and linguistic debate and return to the "ineffable" core of the word. This involves a "re-creative" process where the translator is not a "courier" of a dead message, but a "king" (or a prophet) who makes the word new in the present.

Cognitive Science and the Retrieval of Wisdom

The 4P model suggests that the ultimate goal of interacting with a sacred text is the cultivation of "wisdom". Vervaeke defines wisdom as a "cognitive style" characterized by the ability to engage in the "relevance realization" needed to flourish. This process is fundamentally participatory and perspectival; it involves the "transformation" of the student's character so that they can "order things rightly" towards union with the divine.

Wisdom as Participatory Knowledge

In the Thomistic and Midrashic traditions, virtue and knowledge are not "content to be mastered," but "participatory knowledge of God to embody". Propositional knowledge about virtue is only the starting point; the "real thing itself" is the practice of attention and the formation of character. Modern translations that reduce the Bible to a "moral handbook" (the propositional lens) fail to facilitate this transformation because they bypass the procedural and perspectival "ecology of practices" needed to cultivate a free, self-determining agent.

Stage of Wisdom	4P Dimension	Translation Goal
Instruction	Propositional	Clear communication of truths.
Practice	Procedural	Training in interpretative skills.
Attunement	Perspectival	Orienting the self to the sacred landscape.
Union / Flow	Participatory	Ontological transformation and "Real Presence."

A participatory approach to translation would prioritize "wisdom" over "readability". It would leave the "snicker factor" and the "alien" syntax of the original text intact to remind the reader that they are entering a different "arena". It would encourage the "active interpretation" of the

"white fire" rather than providing pre-packaged answers.

The Future of Translation: Beyond the Meaning Crisis

As the "Meaning Crisis" continues to deepen, the need for a retrieval of the participatory dimension of sacred texts becomes urgent. This requires a new philosophy of translation that recognizes the limitations of the propositional and procedural lens.

The Re-Sacralization of the Reader

The future of translation may lie in "Optimal Equivalence"—not as a linguistic middle ground between literal and dynamic, but as a cognitive bridge between information and wisdom. This approach would seek to be "doctrinally faithful" and "linguistically clear" while also providing the "devotional depth" needed for participatory engagement. It would require translators to be not just scholars, but "witnesses" who "watch their language in the presence of God".

Midrash provides the blueprint for this "re-sacralization". It teaches us that the text is not a "historical object" to be studied, but a "Tree of Life" that brings forth fruit in old age. The "miracle" of the text is not something that happened in the past, but something that "shines" in the present through the participatory act of interpretation.

Conclusion: The Return to the White Fire

The loss of the perspectival and participatory dimensions in modern translation is not merely a linguistic "difficulty"; it is an ontological crisis. When we focus only on the "black fire" of propositions and procedures, we create a Bible that is "accessible" but "absent". We lose the "what-it-is-likeness" of the prophetic encounter and the "participation" in the divine arena. To find our way out of the "Meaning Crisis," we must return to the "white fire" of the Torah. We must learn to "dwell in the silences" and the "gaps," using our own living experience to "translate" the prophetic word. We must move beyond "knowing that" the Bible is true and begin "knowing through being" in a world where the word is once again a "Real Presence". Only then can the translation of the sacred text achieve its true purpose: the transformation of the self and the world through a participatory encounter with the living God.

In mathematical terms, the "Relevance" (R) of a sacred text can be modeled as a function of the four cognitive dimensions (K_{prop} , K_{proc} , K_{pers} , K_{part}):

Where $d\omega$ represents the infinitesimal transformation of the "agent" within the "arena." Modern translation models that maximize K_{prop} and K_{proc} while minimizing K_{pers} and K_{part} effectively collapse the integral, leading to a "meaning" that is mathematically present but ontologically empty. The retrieval of Midrashic "creative philology" expands the integral once more, allowing for the "relevance realization" that constitutes true wisdom.

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