

# Translation Errors in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THEIR SACRED SCRIPTURES IN THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

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## Abstract

The English version of the 2001 book from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THEIR SACRED SCRIPTURES IN THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE*, has numerous errors in the translation from the French original. These range from errors of fact to what might be construed as doctrinally misleading statements not intended by the Commission's original text. The article reviews the English and French texts of the book paragraph by paragraph to show the errors and the appropriate corrections for English readers.

*Traduttore, traditore (Translator, betrayer)*  
—old Italian saying

In the year 2001 the Pontifical Biblical Commission published a small book in French, *LE PEUPLE JUIF ET SES SAINTES ÉCRITURES DANS LA BIBLE CHRÉTIENNE*, with a preface by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, dated on the feast of the Ascension of that year. During the following year, the official English translation was published in Boston (Pontifical Biblical Commission [PBC] 2002). The English document deviates significantly in numerous places from the sense of the French original. Some of the minor deviations might be considered legitimate choices of a translator faced with two or even more possible ways of conveying the thought of the original, but many appear to be simply mistakes of translation. A handful of passages, however, actually give something of a doctrinal thrust not at all present in the original French. These last items were the primary concern that stimulated this note, and the lesser mistakes secondary, but all are listed here by the page numbers in the English version given in bold, followed by the page numbers of the French original in italics.

**Page 22, p. 16.** In the Introduction, the English reads:

the New Testament recognizes the authority of the Old Testament as divine revelation, and . . . the New Testament cannot be properly understood apart from the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition which *transmits* it [my emphasis].

The present tense gives the impression that it is contemporary Judaism that today *transmits* the OT to Christianity. The French original, however, is much more accurate in saying: “qui le *trans-*

*mettait*” (my emphasis)—“which transmitted/was transmitting it.”

The French imperfect tense makes it clear that the transmission of the OT by the Jewish tradition to the Christian was a process which was going on in the past, that is presumably from the time of Jesus through the writing of the NT; it does not refer to such a transmission occurring today, as the English erroneously seems to say.

**Page 59, p. 52.** In a paragraph entitled “The unity of God’s plan and the idea of fulfillment,” the English reads:

The Exodus, the primordial experience of Israel’s faith (cf. Dt 6:20–25; 26:5–9), becomes *the symbol of final salvation* [my emphasis].

But the French original reads:

L’Exode, expérience originelle de la foi d’Israël (cf. Dt 6,20–25; 26,5–9), devient *le modèle d’ultérieures expériences de salut* [my emphasis].

While the English is not heretical and carries an integral meaning in itself, it is not the meaning of the French original, which

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should be translated “becomes the model/paradigm/type for later experiences of salvation.” The French does not limit the Exodus to being a merely a symbol of “final salvation.”

**Page 88, p. 81.** The English translation, in describing the status and responsibility of the chosen people, says that they are “to be holy as God is holy” (my emphasis) with n. 104 referring to Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2. But the French original more faithfully renders the sense of the Hebrew text’s *ki* when it reads “pour être saint, car Dieu est saint” (my emphasis) (cf. Berlin & Brettler: 232: “you shall be holy, for I am holy” (my emphasis). The relationship with the divine holiness here is not that of a comparative degree, implied by the English translation, but of analogy as reason for the responsibility.

**Page 98, p. 91.** The English reads: “After the deluge, God tells Noah and his sons that he is going to establish a bond (*b<sup>e</sup>rit* [italics in English text]) between them and all living creatures” (my emphasis). According to this translation, the *b<sup>e</sup>rit* of Gen 9:8–17 is not between God and creation, but between humans and other creatures, a reading certainly not present in Genesis. The French original however, reads correctly: “Après le déluge, Dieu annonce à Noé et à ses fils qu’il va prendre un engagement (*b<sup>e</sup>rit* [italics in original]) envers eux et envers tout être vivant” (my emphasis). The English should read “he is going to make a commitment (*b<sup>e</sup>rit*) to them and to every living creature.” God establishes an obligation for himself towards humans and all other creatures, not some kind of relationship between humans and others.

**Page 143, p. 155.** There is a rather important inaccuracy on this page, when the text speaks of the promise of the land: “In the Abraham traditions, the promise of land will be fulfilled through descendants” (N. 243: Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:4–7, 18–21; 17:6–8; 28:13–14; 35:11–12—my emphasis). But the French original reads: “Dans les traditions relatives à Abraham, la promesse d’une terre vient compléter celle d’une descendance” (my emphasis); that is, “the promise of a land completes/complements/supplements that of a posterity” (HarperCollins Robert: 102). The priority of the promises in the French is reversed in the English. The original conveys that the promise of descendants is the principal element, complemented by that of land, which should here be understood as instrumental for the eventual establishment of the identity of the people, not as some kind of material gift for its own sake. In Genesis 12:1 God simply instructs Abram to go a land to be shown him without any indication that it is to be given to his descendants. Genesis 12: 2–3 promises descendants, but without mention of land. It is not until Genesis 12:7 that the promise of land for Abram’s offspring is made. In short, the English translation has it backwards in implying that the promise of land has priority, with that of descendants only instrumental for the sake of the land promise.

There is a second inaccuracy in the translation of this pas-

sage. The translator’s unmodified use of the noun “land” (that is, some parcel of earth somewhere) does not carry the force of *une terre*, which implies a specific, distinct geographical location as one’s own country. The French original adheres much more closely to the sense of the OT than does the English translation.

**Page 145, p. 137.** There are two slight inaccuracies in translation at the beginning of the third paragraph: “Therefore, to appreciate the ban, three factors must be taken into account in interpretation” (my emphasis). The French reads: “Aussi, pour mieux comprendre cette mention de l’anathème” (my emphasis). First, the English “appreciate” conveys a different, more positive nuance than the French “mieux comprendre” (= “better understand”). Merriam-Webster defines the English:

**1a:** to grasp the nature, worth, quality, or significance of <appreciate the difference between right and wrong> **b:** to value or admire highly <appreciates our work> **c:** to judge with heightened perception or understanding; be fully aware of <must see it to appreciate it> . . . APPRECIATE often connotes sufficient understanding to enjoy or admire a thing’s excellence <appreciates fine wine> (p. 57).

The French conveys more of a neutral or even negative nuance (cf. “comprendre, c’est pardonner” = “to understand is to forgive”), implying something at least apparently bad may have been done. Robert gives the following definitions of “comprendre”:

1° Comprendre le sens d’une chose . . . En termes d’école Comprendre une matière [Understand the meaning of a thing. . . In scholastic terms, understand a subject].

2° Comprendre les causes, les raisons, les motifs de quelque chose . . . Comprendre la rancune d’une personne [Understand the causes, the reasons for, the purposes of something. . . Understand a person’s grudge].

3° Se rendre compte de quelque chose . . . Comprendre la portée d’un acte [Realize something. . . Realize the consequences of an action] (vol. 1, p. 863—my translations).

Secondly, the French original apparently intends to restrict its consideration of what the English calls “the ban” to “cette mention” (this mention) in Deuteronomy, whereas the English implies a much more general sense of it by using simply “the ban” (my italics). So at least here the French original would appear to take an apologetic (as opposed to an appreciative) view of the idea of a hypothetical slaughter of the indigenous population of Canaan, an idea alleged to be popular among the Deuteronomic writers.

**Page 145, p. 137.** There is a curious substitution in place of a translation at the bottom of the page.

The New Testament does not develop much further the theme of the promised land. The flight of Jesus and his parents to Egypt and their return to *the ‘land of promise’* (Mt 2:20–21) clearly retraces the journey of the ancestors [my emphasis].

But the French reads:

La fuite de Jésus et de ses parents en Égypte et le retour en «terre d’Israël» (Mt 2,20–21) reproduisent manifestement l’itinéraire des ancêtres . . . [my emphasis].

The French is the direct translation of the Greek’s “to the land of Israel”—but substitution of “land of promise” (found only in Hebrews 11:9 in the NT) in English appears strange after the preceding sentence, which notes the minimal development in the NT of that very theme.

**Page 158, p. 150.** The English translation gives an interpretation that is both linguistically inaccurate and theologically rather different from the original:

Like a “*revelation*” during the process of photographic development, the person of Jesus and the events concerning him *now appear in the Scriptures with a fullness of meaning* that could not be hitherto perceived [my emphasis].

But the French reads:

A la manière d’un «révélateur» au cours du développement d’une pellicule photographique, la personne de Jésus et les événements qui la concernent *ont fait apparaître dans les Écritures une plénitude de sens* qui, auparavant, ne pouvait pas être perçue [my emphasis].

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Given the number of errors in the English translation, it would appear that the French original should be used in any future scholarly work involving this document.

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A more linguistically accurate rendition would be: “Like a “*developper* [= chemical solution]” . . . the person of Jesus and events . . . *have caused to appear* in the Scriptures a fullness of meaning.” The French “*révélateur*” in a photo development context means: “*Solution . . . qui . . . rend visible l’image latente*” (Robert, vol. 6, p. 4); that is, “a [chemical] solution . . . which . . . brings to light the hidden image/makes the latent picture appear” (my translation).

Theologically, the English translation seems to attribute

the fullness of meaning to the physical person of Jesus and the physical events surrounding him, whereas the French original sees such fullness of meaning within the Scriptures themselves, the appearance of which fullness of meaning is facilitated by the revealing person and events. The preceding sentence in the paragraph speaks of “a potentiality of meaning that is really present in the texts.” It is not Jesus himself who appears in the text, but meaning concerning him.

**Page 158, p. 150.** One finds another slight discrepancy: “the NT fully appropriates the great themes of the theology of Israel in a threefold reference to past, present and future” (my emphasis), implying that the “reference” is made by the NT. But the French reads: “*tous les grands thèmes de la théologie d’Israël, dans leur triple référence*” (my emphasis). In the French, “a” is *leur* (=“their,” that is, the “themes’,” reference). So the phrase should read: “all the great themes of the theology of Israel, in their threefold reference.”

**Page 159 p. 150–51.** The English reads:

Other themes are developed in the context of a particular history: God has spoken . . . The person and work of Christ together with the existence of the Church prolong this history. This opens up for the chosen people wonderful future horizons.

In other words, according to the English translation, the prolongation of (salvation) history is to be found in Christ and the Church. But the French is more open:

La personne et l’oeuvre du Christ ainsi que l’existence de l’Église se situent dans le prolongement [=find place within the prolongation] de cette histoire]. Celle-ci ouvre. . . . [This history opens. . . .]

The French expression is more consistent with the teachings of John Paul II in an allocution of 1997, cited later in this document: “This people has been called and led by God. . . . Their existence then is not a mere natural or cultural happening. . . . It is a supernatural one” (PBC, 216). In other words, Christ and the Church do not have an absolute monopoly on the prolongation of biblical salvation history, but that history englobes at least the Jews also. The prolongation is that of the OT “history,” which provides the context within which the person and work of Christ and the existence of the Church find their place; the prolongation is not, as implied by the English, the effect of Christ and the Church.

**Page 159, p. 150–51.** The completion of the last sentence just referred to also contains two inaccurate and misleading translations

This opens up for the chosen people wonderful future horizons . . . and the *establishment* of an ideal political order (the reign of God, messianism). From the beginning, *a reign universal in its scope*

is envisaged for the blessing given to Abraham [my emphasis].

But the French reads:

Celle-ci ouvre au peuple élu des horizons d'avenir merveilleux . . . *l'avènement* d'un ordre politique idéal (le Règne de Dieu, le messianisme). Dès le début, *un rayonnement universel* est prévu pour la bénédiction d'Abraham [my emphasis].

First, the use of the word “establishment” might seem to imply more human effort than “*l'avènement*,” which carries more of a notion of “arrival, advent, coming,” indicating more clearly the eschatological nature of the anticipated ideal political order. Secondly, but more importantly, in the next sentence the French “*rayonnement*” intends to convey a sense of a universal “spread, radiation, distribution, illumination, shining forth” of Abraham’s blessing, not at all in this sentence a world empire implied by the English “reign,” whether spiritual or political. The English, by using “reign” just after “establishment of an ideal political order (the reign of God),” might almost be taken as a millennialist expectation of a universal Jewish empire.

**Pages 159–60, p. 151.** In the context of noting the discontinuity or “ruptures” between Christian and Jewish valuations of whole tracts of the Law and its prescriptions, the English has an awkward and misleading translation: “the radical replacement in the New Testament was already adumbrated in the Old Testament and so constitutes a potentially legitimate reading.” But the French actually says: “le déplacement radical d’accents réalisé dans le Nouveau Testament était amorcé déjà dans l’Ancien Testament et en constitue ainsi une lecture potentielle légitime.” A better English rendition might be: “the radical shift of emphases [for example, on cultic, dietary, purity prescriptions] accomplished in the NT had already begun in the OT, and so constitutes a legitimate potential reading of it.”

This sentence in the erroneous English translation prompted a very negative critique by R. E. Murphy in his review of the document:

The legitimacy is not in question [Murphy read “potentially legitimate reading” instead of the real sense of the French “legitimate potential reading], but the adumbration, or foreshadowing, is. This term is a favorite metaphor of Christian tradition, but it is open to arbitrary contacts between the Testaments (tithing, anyone?). Literary expressions and religious institutions are not shadows. They have a meaning and importance all their own that deserve skilled and balanced interpretation. This terminology is unhappy. The text is conceived as casting a shadow forward to a meaning that is arrived at retrospectively ([section] 21), looking backward. . . . Potentially legitimate, yes, but “adumbrated”? The document strives to slide around this by means of “progress-

sion” ([section] 65): “Discontinuity on certain points is only the negative side of what is positively called progression.” The progress is all one-sided, however, and the treatment in [section] 65 merely summarizes the continuity or progression displayed in the treatment of “fundamental themes.”

But the Commission document neither used nor intended the “foreshadowing” idea. The French word “*amorcer*” means “to begin, to initiate, to start.” What was initiated was the “radical shift of emphases,” not “radical replacement” at this point. While Murphy’s broader critique may be justified, it should not have been based on this poorly translated sentence.

**Page 161, p. 152–53.** Dealing with the progression from OT to NT (the positive side of discontinuity), the English reads:

The New Testament takes for granted that the election of Israel, the people of the covenant, is irrevocable: it preserves intact its prerogatives (Rm 9:4) and its priority status in history, in the offer of salvation (Acts 13:23) and in the Word of God (13:46).

By its triple parallel use of the preposition “in,” the English seems to give an on-going three-fold priority (*a.* “in history”; *b.* “in the offer of salvation”; *c.* “in the Word of God”) to the people of Israel even after the Christ-event, as though that people were the center of the world’s historical process.

The French, however, has a somewhat different meaning:

*celui-ci conserve intactes ses prérogatives (Rm 9,24) et son statut prioritaire, dans l'histoire, par rapport à l'offre du salut (Ac 13,23) et de la Parole de Dieu (13,46).*

The clause should read in English: “it preserves intact its prerogatives and its priority status in history, with respect to the offer of salvation and of the Word of God.” Israel’s *prerogatives and its priority status* are, in the French original, limited just to the historical *offer* of salvation and to the historical *offer* of the Word of God. In other words, Israel was simply on the historical scene first with regard to these two offers from God.

**Page 161, p. 153.** The English reads: “As a *people* of the new covenant, the Church” (my emphasis) implying that there might be more than one such people of the new covenant. The French begins the sentence with “*Peuple de la nouvelle alliance, l'Église.*” The French appositive structure would be better translated “As *the people* of the new covenant,” since there are no other such peoples besides the Church.

**Page 161, p. 153.** Farther along on the same page, the translator renders the French “*Cela dit*” (= “That said” = “Given the above”) as “That is to say” (French: *c'est-à-dire*). There is indeed a different nuance given to what follows. The French “*cela dit*” is adversative, whereas the English “that is to say” conveys equivalency. But equivalency makes no sense here,

since the preceding sentence refers only to the grafting of the nations on the good olive tree which is ancient (*ancien*) Israel, and the succeeding sentence speaks of the Church’s consciousness of a universal horizon, just the opposite of the inward-turned Israel.

**Page 162** p. 153. On the next page, “les proscrits” is translated as the “oppressed,” but the real sense is more the “outlaw, exile” such as criminals, lepers, harlots, tax-collectors, refugees (HarperCollins Robert: p. 412).

**Page 162**, p. 153. In the next sentence the English seems to identify *the single key* for reading all of history: “The hope placed in the royal house of David . . . becomes *the* essential key for the reading of history” (my emphasis). But the French more modestly says that “L’espérance . . . redevient *une* clé de lecture essentielle de l’histoire”—that is, hope becomes anew just one such key, albeit essential.

On the other hand, in the following sentence, the English diminishes the force of the French in reading “the New Testament *extends* the process of symbolization already begun in the Old Testament” for “le Nouveau Testament *pousse beaucoup plus loin* un processus de symbolisation” (my emphases). The sense of the French, “pushes much further, extends considerably further,” will become more important for the Church as time goes by for understanding the relationship between the two testaments.

**Page 164**, p. 156. The English gives an erroneous understanding of the intention of the French original: “but most see [the origin of the Essenes] as *a reaction to the changing attitude to the Temple*” (my emphasis). The French says: “la plupart la voient plutôt *dans une opposition à un changement de situation concernant le Temple*” (my emphasis); that is, “most see it [as occurring] in opposition to a change in the [political] situation of the Temple.”

**Page 165**, p. 157. An inexact English translation comes out as an error of fact: “the discoveries . . . of about 800 scrolls and fragments at Qumran.” The French reads “la découverte . . . de rouleaux et de fragments d’environ 800 manuscrits à Qumran”—“the discovery [not discoveries] . . . of scrolls and fragments of about 800 manuscripts.” There were tens of thousands of fragments of some 800 scrolls, not merely a cumulative 800 scrolls and fragments together as the English seems to say.

**Page 175**, p. 167. A part of the original French is omitted from the English translation:

Les invectives et les accusations lancées contre les scribes et pharisiens . . . qu’en milieu hellénistique. *Elles ont, par ailleurs, comme chez les prophètes, un aspect d’appel à la conversion. Lues dans la communauté chrétienne, elles mettent en garde les chrétiens eux-mêmes* [missing portion italicized].

So the English should read:

The invectives and accusations *have, moreover, as among the prophets, an aspect of appeal to conversion. Read within the Christian community, they put Christians themselves on guard. . . .*

**P 181**, p.173. There are two inexact translations in this paragraph concerning the Gospel of Mark:

The betrayal of *Jesus* offers them a suitable opportunity (14:10–11). The arrest, followed by condemnation *and death*, is therefore the work of the nation’s leaders [my emphasis].

But the French says: “La trahison de *Judas* leur offre . . . l’arrestation, puis la *condemnation à mort* . . .” (my emphasis). Besides the substitution of “Jesus” for “Judas,” it is the *condemnation to death*, not the execution itself that is laid at the feet of the leaders.

**Page 188**, p 179. The English misquotes both the French and the Greek of the NT in a reference to Luke 23:13: “includes ‘chief priests, leaders of *the* people’” (my emphasis). The French reads “se composait des grands prêtres, des chefs *et du* people,” and the Greek also includes the definite article “the” before each category. It should read “*the* chief priests, *the* leaders, *and the* people.” While there is a movement in the Commission’s text to exonerate the Jewish people from guilt for the condemnation of Jesus and emphasize that of the leaders, this sentence in itself cannot be read for that purpose.

**Page 199**, p. 191. The English speaks of Paul’s “*afflictions and sufferings*” which “forced him to search for a solution” to the unbelief of his fellow Jews. But the French speaks of “son *affection et sa souffrance*” (my emphasis). Not just his own sufferings, but Paul’s love for his compatriots drove him.

**Page 214**, p. 204. We read: “The new covenant foretold by Jeremiah and established in the blood of Jesus has *come through* the covenant between God and Israel, surpassing the Sinai covenant” (my emphasis). But the French says: “La nouvelle alliance . . . *est venue parfaire le projet d’alliance* entre Dieu et Israël, en dépassant l’alliance du Sinai” (my emphasis). The English should therefore read: “The new covenant . . . has come to perfect the covenantal project/plan/relationship between God and Israel.” In the French the sense is one of perfecting, completing, bringing to a successful accomplishment the long-term *project* or plan of God, of which the Sinai covenant is only one partial, temporary stage. The English seems to see the Sinai covenant as only an instrumental conveyor belt; the French implies more an integral stage of the plan with its own validity, albeit now surpassed.

Given the number of errors in the English translation, it would appear that the French original should be used in any future scholarly work involving this document.

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