
CHAPTER ONE

**Translating *Jesus* and *the Jews*:
Can We Eradicate the
Anti-Semitism without Also
Erasing the Semitism?**

Leonard Greenspoon

Most readers of the New Testament are, I would imagine, Christians. And for many, if not most, of these readers, the modern-language version of the New Testament they read is, or at least functions as, their New Testament.

In a sense, this is as it should be. After all, the heart of the New Testament, the sayings attributed to Jesus, is translation: Jesus spoke in Aramaic and perhaps a bit of Hebrew; his words are preserved, with very, very few exceptions, only in translation—Greek translation. So it is not completely unexpected that his words can be as easily cited, quoted in a modern language, as they were in ancient languages not his own.

Moreover, and perhaps in part reflecting this distinctive linguistic circumstance, there are relatively few efforts, especially in the modern world, to instruct Christian laity in the languages of the Bible. If my experience is at all representative, it is not unusual for even clerics to have little more than a smattering of proficiency in these languages and to make only occasional use of them in preparing sermons and educational materials for their congregations.

We may, if only briefly, contrast this circumstance with the situation in Judaism, where, for example, even the most nontraditional synagogues continue to house Torah scrolls in Hebrew and to expect their youngsters, in preparing for a bat or bar mitzvah, to have mastery, however halting, over at least a bit of biblical and liturgical Hebrew. Hebrew schools remain a staple of synagogue organization and communal life, and Hebrew expressions

regularly appear in the sermons and pedagogical documents of rabbis. Thus it is that Jewish translations or versions of the Bible, for which there is a history of well over two millennia, are not intended to replace the original text of the Hebrew Bible, but rather to point to it—as is characteristically indicated, among other ways, by having the modern language and the Hebrew on facing pages.¹

This digression, slight as it was, serves to highlight the unique place Scripture in translation occupies for Christians. It also helps to justify the considerable attention given to translations of the New Testament in this essay. Our primary interest is the Jewishness of Jesus, as evidenced in the New Testament. To appreciate this portion of Jesus' personality, if you will, we cannot ignore what the Greek text of the New Testament says. But, for our purposes, these data form the platform upon which we construct our edifice and not the edifice itself.

In short, we will be looking at how translations of the New Testament, specifically English-language translations, portray Jesus' Jewishness. In general, our emphasis is on passages that have, in the opinion of one or more critic, been mishandled so as to separate Jesus from the first-century Jews and the first-century Judaism of which he was authentically a part. Such renderings may have been deliberate and well thought out or random and unconscious—on this point opinions differ. Whatever the case, corrections and improvements have been suggested, and we will also look at and evaluate them. All of this is offered as an exercise that is valuable in itself and moreover as a contribution toward furthering profitable dialogue among faith communities.

We first look at the handling, that is, the rendering, of the proper names of major New Testament figures; specifically Jesus, his family, and his followers. The literary critic and translator Willis Barnstone has emerged as the principal spokesperson in bringing this issue to the fore. He sets out his agenda in this regard forthrightly: to correct one of the great enigmas and distortions of religious and intellectual history, how through the manipulation and intentional falsification of translation, Jesus, in the eyes of Christians and even Jews, ceased to be one of "our guys"; that is, how Jesus, through the translator's deft, authorizing hand, ceased to be a Jew.²

He continues: many translators of the Bible into the vernacular, beginning with the Vulgate, have conducted sectarian, combative missions to change the recognizable identities of people in the Bible. This is distortion of identity by means of translation.³ Elsewhere, he speaks of this process as a "grand identity theft."⁴ By sleight-of-hand translating, only certain figures of the Christian Scriptures remain clearly identifiable as Jews: not John the Baptist, not Mary, not Jesus, nor James and Paul. Even their names are not biblically Jewish.⁵

This makes it possible for Christians to hate Jews, yet not hate Jesus (Yeshua) as a Jew, nor his mother Mary (Miriam) and father Joseph (Yosef), or his followers.⁶ These translators succeeded in creating a book, the New Testament, about Jews in which the main figures, “good Jews,” are not perceived as Jews at all.⁷

As Barnstone observes, the results of this deception (or rather this history of deception) are as shameful as they are predictable: those seen to be Jews are depicted deplorably and always as guilty. Jews, as the enemies of Jesus, must be punished for all generations to come. In the New Testament, all the good people are Christians and the evil ones are Jews.⁸

Moving from general statements to specifics, Barnstone sets forth a number of examples to buttress his case. In this connection, Barnstone observes that in the genealogy of Jesus, Jacob’s Hebrew name *Ya’aqob* is transliterated in the Greek text as *Iakōbos*. To be consistent, English translators use “Jacob,” a name familiar from the Hebrew Bible. Thus, this form is found in English-language versions at Matt. 1:2 and in Luke 3:34.

Thereafter, however, a divergent form appears, as Barnstone notes: after the genealogy in Matthew, Greek *Iakōbos* becomes “James” in English, when referring to an apostle, a brother of Jesus, or the author of the Letter of James. Why, Barnstone queries, is “James” used to refer to these new Christians? His response: it was done precisely and deliberately so as not to associate any of these individuals named James with Jacob, one of the patriarchal figures of Judaism. In order to keep Jews separate from Christians, Greek *Iakōbos* is Jewish “Jacob” in the Old Testament and Christian “James” in the New.⁹

Barnstone then asks this question: which of Jesus’ associates retains his association with Jews? His answer: only one, the traitor Judas Iscariot. There are others with the Greek name *Ioudas* in the New Testament. But only one of them, Judas Iscariot, is known as Judas—with clear connections to Judah, Jacob’s son. It is Barnstone’s contention that the decision to invent new names for the other Judases (from *Ioudas*)—Judah, Juda, and Jude—lies entirely with the translators of the Greek text, who are, in his words, “as faithful in their religious mission as they are faithless as translators.”¹⁰

For Barnstone, the most inspired and fundamental name change in the New Testament occurs in connection with its main character. His name is not translated from the original Hebrew (Joshua), but rather is represented by making the Greek version of his name sound English or German or Italian. For this process, Barnstone makes use of one of the strongest terms of opprobrium possible: as a result of “the *ethnic* cleansing” of his name through double translation, the name has become absolutely disconnected from its Hebrew original.¹¹

In Luke’s genealogy (3:29), Greek *tou Iēsous* is translated as “Jose” in the King James Version, and other renderings are also found (including Joshua),

but very rarely “Jesus.” The source of this practice is absolutely clear to Barnstone: it is, he writes, as if the translators could not stomach “Jesus as the translation for the ‘Iesous’ who was an Old Testament progenitor of Jesus.” In so doing, such translators insured that no reader of their versions would associate Jesus by name with any Hebrew Bible Jew.¹²

In summarizing the practices of translators and the effects such practices had, Barnstone is unequivocal: in all of these instances, translation faithlessness obeys a higher order of faith, demanding that the translation extirpate all evidence suggestive that Jesus was a Jew or came from an ancient family of Jews. As a result, few think of Jesus as a Jew or of his early followers as Jewish Christians. Jesus has not been accorded the dignity of truthful acceptance of who he was.¹³

Barnstone closes this section of his book, titled “How through False Translation into and from the Bible Jesus Ceased to Be a Jew,” with this “dream”: imagine if the Christian Scriptures were retranslated today, and instead of encountering Jesus and James; Mary, Peter, and Paul, we found Joshua and Jacob; Miryam, Kepha, and Saul.¹⁴

Barnstone has been fortunate enough to live out, as it were, his dream. In several successive projects he has formulated an English-language version that, in his estimation, carries out his goals, one of which, in keeping with the theme of this essay, is to restore probable Hebrew and Aramaic names and so frame the Jewish identity of the main characters, including Yeshua (Jesus), his family, and his followers.¹⁵ The most recent of these is his *Restored New Testament: A New Translation with Commentary, Including the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas*, which appeared in 2009.¹⁶

An examination of this “Restored” New Testament is instructive. At Matt. (*Mattityahu*, in Barnstone) 1:2 and Luke (or *Loukas*) 3:34, Greek *Iakōbos* appears as *Yaakov*. In this, Barnstone appears to be reflecting some of the same concerns as Everett Fox in his *Schocken Bible*.¹⁷ With respect to the other figures named *Iakōbos*, Barnstone has *Yaakov* for the apostle (as at Matt. 4:21, with an explanatory footnote), *Yaakov* for the brother of Jesus (as at Mark [Marcos] 6:3), and *Yaakov* for the eponymous author of the Letter of Yaakov (James). At least in this instance, Barnstone has followed through on his earlier observations.

For Judas Iscariot, Barnstone has *Yehuda of Keriot* or *Yehuda the man of Keriot* in the gospels of Matthew and John. When the name *Ioudas* occurs elsewhere in the Greek of the New Testament, with reference to another individual, *Yehuda* also appears in Barnstone’s version. One example of this is the document usually rendered as the Letter of Jude; in Barnstone it is the Letter of Yehuda (or Judas). In his introduction to this Letter, Barnstone writes, “Scholars agree that ‘Jude’ came into English naming in order to dissociate Judas of this letter from Judas Iscariot. . . . Hence the unparalleled

King James Version translates a common name found in Hebrew and its Greek version eight hundred thirteen times as “Judah,” and thirty-three times as ‘Judas,’ reserved for the Iscariot. In eight hundred thirteen occasions, its version precludes association of other biblical Judases with Judas the betrayer. Hence, today we have the Letter of Jude rather than the Letter of Judas.”¹⁸

In accordance with Barnstone’s expressed concerns (see above), the “Old Testament” *Iēsous* of Luke 3:29 is rendered by *Yeshua*, which replicates the name of the New Testament’s main character. Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph, are banished, replaced in Barnstone’s version by *Miryam* and *Yosef* (at Matt. 1:18, these forms are explained in the endnotes). For the apostles (for which Barnstone prefers the term *messengers*, as in *Activities of the Messengers* instead of the traditional Acts of the Apostles), familiar names are “restored” (to use a term of which Barnstone would surely approve): *Shimon Kefa* for Simon Peter; *Andreas* for Andrew; and the brothers *Yaakov* and *Yohanan* and their father *Zavdai* for James and John, sons of Zebedee (Matt. 1:18-21). As illustrated by these last examples, Barnstone is as concerned about originally Greek names (e.g., “Andrew”) as he is about the many names of Semitic origin that have been transmitted in the Greek of the New Testament.

Barnstone’s efforts in this regard are not limited to the proper names of individuals. Especially instructive here is his handling of the term *Pharisees*. His rendering is *Prushim* or *Perushim*, which, as he explains it in his introduction (in a section titled “Should Paul’s Letters Precede the Gospels?”), comes from the Hebrew form meaning “separatist” and “deviant.” Barnstone’s use is intended, among other things, to counteract “the cartoon version of Pharisee as ‘hypocrite’ [which] persists in the dictionary.”¹⁹ For Sadducees, Barnstone uses the term *Tzadokim* (as at Matt. 3:27, with a footnote explaining both terms discussed in this paragraph).

Although we have merely sampled the many changes wrought by Barnstone, it nonetheless seems appropriate at this point to consider whether or not Barnstone’s version is likely to have the effect on readers that he desires.

Prior to an assessment of this issue, we should at least briefly raise a question about a related topic. With regard to proper names, Barnstone considers the changes he enumerates—and, in his version, “corrects”—the result of a concerted, deliberate scheme to de-Judaize all of the positive characters in the New Testament, separating them from their Old Testament forebears and placing them within the new and highly praised category Christians. Is it in fact the case that the names Barnstone highlights are the result of this sort of effort?

In the works I consulted, Barnstone does not provide any detailed support for this characterization of the motivation(s) of many generations

of translators. Even without such analysis, it is difficult for a fair-minded observer to exclude such factors as an impetus, perhaps a primary impetus, for some translators. However, I am wary about implicating all, or even most, translators in such subterfuge. Rather, I suspect that many translators and an even higher percentage of revisers simply replicated these names in the forms that were already well known in their communities and among their intended audiences. Laziness, if that's what this is, is surely no excuse, but it lacks the implications of malice with which Barnstone tends to characterize the entire process of Christian Bible translating.

Even granting that the names Barnstone targets may not be the result of a large-scale conspiracy, they are the ones that appear, in one form or another, in almost every translation of the New Testament. And in this regard, as in several others, Barnstone does present a New Testament that diverges from the familiar. Do these changes construct an environment, if I may use that term, in which users of the New Testament (that is, those who listen to, as well as those who read) can more easily detect the essential Jewishness of Jesus, his family, and his earliest followers? In the absence of any empirical or even anecdotal evidence, it is not prudent to draw many, if any, conclusions in this regard. We are of course permitted, or even encouraged, to hope that Barnstone's approach yields positive results.

Beyond this very tentative observation, we may note three other considerations. First, the changed names that Barnstone presents, especially when they involve major characters such as Jesus, Peter, or Paul, are bound to make some impression on all but the most casual of readers or hearers. However, as a second point, we cannot be at all certain that such readers or hearers will make the connections that Barnstone is looking and hoping for. Since, for many (most?) New Testament readers, the "Old Testament" has ceased to be understood as a "Jewish" work, they may appreciate names such as "Yeshua" and "Miryam" as somehow more authentic, but not necessarily as more Jewish. It is not difficult to imagine comments like this: "That's really interesting. Jesus' name used to be Yeshua, and Mary was Miryam." In this and related ways, Barnstone's version may succeed in teaching history, but it will not be the theological "game-changer" that he seeks.

Finally, we need to take into account how people today encounter—perhaps, interact with—the New Testament. For some, the context is a study group, but the subject matter, unless under some sort of academic leadership, is not likely to center on names, even changed ones. For others, the Bible is something heard at church. Lectionaries or preaching guides based on Barnstone's text might make an impression, even a lasting one, as part of liturgy or a service, but it strikes me as unlikely that Barnstone's version will be widely adopted for such purposes, if at all. Alas, for large numbers, the Bible

has simply become an assemblage of verses, either read rather mechanically one-a-day or sampled randomly via smart phone or computer.

Of course, I may be unduly pessimistic or cynical about the ability of a version of the Bible to effect change, especially widespread change. Such a charge would almost certainly be leveled against me by David H. Stern, the translator of the *Jewish New Testament*, a product of Jewish New Testament Publications, based in Jerusalem. Stern, a well-known “messianic” Jew, later expanded his reach to include the Old Testament in the *Complete Jewish Bible*.²⁰ In my experience, works like Stern’s do not often figure in scholarly analyses. Certainly, neither he nor his version has the weight that we are accustomed to attribute to Barnstone and his translations.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake, perhaps a serious one, simply to dismiss Stern’s efforts. For one thing, they are widely available. Of greater significance for our purposes, his text incorporates many of the same changes that Barnstone proposed and adopted. For example, the names of two of the Gospels in Stern’s edition are given in Semitic forms: *Mattityahu* and *Yochanan*, where Barnstone has *Mattityahu* and *Yohanan*. Arguably, Stern has done the better job of reflecting the presumed original name of the author of the fourth Gospel. On the other hand, he leaves untouched the originally Greek names, Mark and Luke, who are, for Barnstone and his readers, Markos and Loukas.

Throughout Stern’s edition the main character is Yeshua, his mother is Miryam, and his father is Yosef, exactly as in Barnstone. Also like Barnstone, Stern has Ya’akov in Jesus’ (Yeshua’s) genealogy, as the name of one of Jesus’ brothers and apostles, and as the author of a Letter. Again, we might observe that Stern’s representation is slightly more accurate than Barnstone’s, with Yaakov. Shim’on Kefa and Zavdai are found in Stern’s version of Matthew 4, but for Barnstone’s Andreas, Stern’s readers must make do with the traditional Andrew. For Pharisees and Sadducees, Stern’s *P’rushim* and *Tz’dukim* are quite close to Barnstone’s language.

This is not to say that the experience of reading Stern’s “Jewish” New Testament is the same as perusing Barnstone’s “restored” text. Barnstone seeks to present a fully literary rendering that exposes the often poetical qualities of the Greek that are largely, if not entirely, absent from the mostly pedestrian versions of modern times. Stern has no such aspirations. But they are, as it were, united in their efforts to bring to the fore the essential Jewishness of Jesus and his environment. In fact, the subtitle of Stern’s work is *A Translation of the New Testament That Expresses Its Jewishness*. So, Stern observes in his introduction, the New Testament is in fact a very Jewish book.²¹ Much of what is in the New Testament can be comprehended only within its Jewish context.²² Unlike Barnstone, Stern does not believe that the translators of the New Testament were or are themselves antisemites;

rather, they have absorbed substantial elements of anti-Semitic theology and thereby produced anti-Jewish translations.²³

Further, Stern writes, the *Jewish New Testament* brings out the New Testament's Jewishness in three somewhat overlapping ways. Especially relevant for this essay are the changes he groups under a single description as cosmetic (or superficial). Such cosmetic changes from the usual renderings are, he continues, the most frequent and obvious: names like Jesus, John, and James, and terms like *baptism* (replaced by *immersion*; for example, at Mark 1:4 in Stern's edition we meet Jochanan the Immerser; in Barnstone, it is Johanan the Dipper) and *apostle* (replaced by *emissary*). Although any one of these changes is superficial, the sheer quantity of them produces a true and genuine effect that is not superficial.²⁴

So far, so good, I suppose. But Stern goes further: his version also draws on "Jewish English," which is defined here as "Hebrew and Yiddish expressions which English-speaking Jews incorporate into everyday speech." With at least some degree of reflection, Stern acknowledges that some readers may find this aspect of the translation anachronistic. Nonetheless, the translator appeals for tolerance of the inclusion of such elements as, for example, *tsuris* instead of troubles and to do *tzedakah* instead of to give to charity.²⁵

I consider myself among the most tolerant of readers and researchers. However, I have no sympathy for Stern's practice here: simply put, to place Yiddish expressions in Jesus' mouth is not just anachronistic, it is bizarre. Whether it works for Stern's target audience, consisting I suppose of members of "Messianic Judaism" and those with at least some sympathy toward their point of view, I do not know. But, unlike the "restoration" of names, I can see no serious point to this aspect of Stern's edition.

Although in this essay I chose to discuss issues relating to proper names first, there is another aspect of New Testament translation that has, over the past decades, come up with greater frequency in regard to Jesus' Jewishness or, perhaps more broadly, Jews and Jesus. This issue of translation arises from a feature of the Gospel of John and, to a lesser extent, of the Acts of the Apostles. As characterized by Barnstone, who is far from unique in this perspective, John is the most fiercely anti-Jewish Gospel in its pattern of engendering hatred for those whom John identifies as Jews, and the word *Jew*, meaning "enemy," appears on almost every page of the Gospel. People who are allied with Jesus are simply people. Those who are kin, friends, or disciples of Jesus have ceased to be addressed as Jews. The word is used as an epithet to malign enemies of the Christ, particularly those who do not accept his divinity. Thus is created a Jesus whom an overwhelming number of Christians perceive as a gentile among gentile friends and Jewish enemies, a Christian in the land of Israel.²⁶

Not unexpectedly, there are a number of exegetes, generally grouped among the more conservative biblical interpreters, who would deny that the author of the Gospel of John was himself anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. But there is no one, or virtually no one, who would deny that John's language, however it was initially intended, became a major rhetorical weapon in the mouths of generations of individuals and groups opposed to Jews and Judaism—and the impetus for “real” weapons in the hands of such opponents on lamentably numerous occasions.

Among those who disagree with Barnstone on the intent of the author of the Gospel of John is Barclay Newman, who is best known as the editor-in-chief of the Contemporary English Version (CEV).²⁷ Newman is thoroughly convinced that it was never the intention of any New Testament writer to perpetuate anti-Jewish sentiments. And, he firmly states, the goal of the CEV translation was a faithful rendering of the *intent* of the Greek text. Nothing more, nothing less.²⁸

The Greek term that has traditionally been translated “the Jews” is *hoi Ioudaioi*. According to statistics presented by David Burke, this expression occurs one hundred ninety-two times in the entire New Testament, more than one hundred fifty of which are in John and Acts. Especially in those books the term carries an inherent bias: the opponents are systematically, broadly, and negatively cast, by this bias, as “the Jews.”²⁹

If it is correct to render *hoi Ioudaioi* with “the Jews” and if this rendering has currency within over four hundred years of English-language versions, why should translators not retain this expression? As Burke sees it, the problem with “the Jews” deals primarily with the implications the term presents to “poorly informed modern readers.” The modern reader, he writes, is not equipped to be able to sort out that “the Jews” as opponents are in fact just other Jews who did not accept Jesus' identity as Messiah—whether these are individuals, groups, local leaders, religious or political authorities, or the like. Given the way the overall picture is painted, it is very difficult for modern readers to think this through in terms of such ambiguities.³⁰

Or, as Newman puts it, in many New Testament passages (especially in Acts and John) where the phrase “the Jews” occurs, a literal rendering has historically resulted in arousing negative reactions that were not intended by the authors. The cumulative impact of a literal rendering of “the Jews” in negative contexts signals something significantly different to readers today than was originally intended by New Testament writers. It is exegetically inaccurate to retain this inclusive phrase when not every Jew is intended.³¹

It is not simply a matter of exegetical accuracy or inaccuracy. As we observed above, the Gospel of John, as translated into many languages, served as a proof text for the eternal enmity between Jews and Christians. The

term *the Jews*, particularly with the definite article in English, carries wide-sweeping implications that would cover all Jews of Jesus' time (or worse, all Jews of all time). Because these New Testament passages provide "fuel" for continuing contemporary expressions of anti-Jewish hatred, the question of how to translate this term (and related expressions) is a critical one.³²

Both Barclay Newman and David Burke are closely associated with the American Bible Society. It is clear, on the basis of the statements provided here (as well as many others), that Burke shares Newman's concerns and is in complete agreement with Newman's, and CEV's, resolution or solution: throughout most of the New Testament, "the Jews" is best understood to mean "the other Jews" or "some of the Jews" or "a few of the Jews" or "the Jewish leaders" or "some of the Jewish leaders" or "a few of the Jewish leaders." And it is on the basis of this understanding that the phrase is to be translated. Never does it refer to the nation as a whole of that time; even less does it refer to all Jews of all times.

A truly faithful translation of the New Testament, Newman contends, requires that the translator constantly seek ways in which false impressions may be minimized and hatred overcome. As a result of the CEV's basic concern to produce a faithful and stylistically appropriate translation of the meaning of the Greek text, the CEV contains fewer passages in which the phrase "the Jews" can be wrongfully understood as a reference to the entirety of the Jewish community, past or present.³³

David Burke has collected the data that most clearly demonstrate the thoroughgoing manner in which the CEV has carried out Newman's directive. The CEV is the most sensitive English-language version when it comes to nuancing its renderings of *hoi Ioudaioi*;³⁴ an earlier translation brought out by the American Bible Society, Today's English Version (also known as the Good News Bible), already exhibited a considerable degree of such sensitivity, with its handling of *hoi Ioudaioi* becoming ever more nuanced in successive editions.³⁵ It was a surprise, at least to me, to learn that the Living Bible also came out rather well on this issue; moreover, its earlier advances have largely been followed by the New Living Translation or NLT and in many places improved.³⁶

In order for readers of this essay to make their own assessment as to the effects on this strategy, I have reproduced below John 7:15 in three English-language versions. The first, the New American Standard Bible (NASB), was selected because of its close adherence to the Greek. Second is the NLT; third, the CEV (I have put the key phrases in bold type for emphasis):

NASB

John 7:1 And after these things Jesus was walking in Galilee; for He was unwilling to walk in Judea, because **the Jews** were seeking to kill Him.

John 7:2 Now the feast of **the Jews**, the Feast of Booths, was at hand.

John 7:3 His brothers therefore said to Him, “Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing.

John 7:4 “For no one does anything in secret, when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.”

John 7:5 For not even His brothers were believing in Him.

John 7:6 Jesus therefore said to them, “My time is not yet at hand, but your time is always opportune.

John 7:7 “The world cannot hate you; but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil.

John 7:8 “Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come.”

John 7:9 And having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee.

John 7:10 But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as it were, in secret.

John 7:11 **The Jews** therefore were seeking Him at the feast, and were saying, “Where is He?”

John 7:12 And there was much grumbling among the multitudes concerning Him; some were saying, “He is a good man”; others were saying, “No, on the contrary, He leads the multitude astray.”

John 7:13 Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of **the Jews**.

John 7:14 But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and began to teach.

John 7:15 **The Jews** therefore were marveling, saying, “How has this man become learned, having never been educated?”

NLT

John 7:1 After this, Jesus stayed in Galilee, going from village to village. He wanted to stay out of Judea where **the Jewish leaders** were plotting his death.

John 7:2 But soon it was time for the Festival of Shelters,

John 7:3 and Jesus’ brothers urged him to go to Judea for the celebration. “Go where your followers can see your miracles!” they scoffed.

John 7:4 “You can’t become a public figure if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, prove it to the world!”

John 7:5 For even his brothers didn’t believe in him.

John 7:6 Jesus replied, “Now is not the right time for me to go. But you can go anytime, and it will make no difference.

John 7:7 “The world can’t hate you, but it does hate me because I accuse it of sin and evil.

John 7:8 “You go on. I am not yet ready to go to this festival, because my time has not yet come.”

John 7:9 So Jesus remained in Galilee.

John 7:10 But after his brothers had left for the festival, Jesus also went, though secretly, staying out of public view.

John 7:11 **The Jewish leaders** tried to find him at the festival and kept asking if anyone had seen him.

John 7:12 There was a lot of discussion about him among the crowds. Some said, "He's a wonderful man," while others said, "He's nothing but a fraud, deceiving the people."

John 7:13 But no one had the courage to speak favorably about him in public, for they were afraid of getting in trouble with **the Jewish leaders**.

John 7:14 Then, midway through the festival, Jesus went up to the Temple and began to teach.

John 7:15 **The Jewish leaders** were surprised when they heard him. "How does he know so much when he hasn't studied everything we've studied?" they asked.

CEV

John 7:1 Jesus decided to leave Judea and to start going through Galilee because **the Jewish leaders** wanted to kill him.

John 7:2 It was almost time for the Festival of Shelters,

John 7:3 and Jesus' brothers said to him, "Why don't you go to Judea? Then your disciples can see what you are doing.

John 7:4 "No one does anything in secret, if they want others to know about them. So let the world know what you are doing!"

John 7:5 Even Jesus' own brothers had not yet become his followers.

John 7:6 Jesus answered, "My time hasn't yet come, but your time is always here.

John 7:7 "The people of this world cannot hate you. They hate me, because I tell them that they do evil things.

John 7:8 "Go on to the festival. My time hasn't yet come, and I am not going."

John 7:9 Jesus said this and stayed on in Galilee.

John 7:10 After Jesus' brothers had gone to the festival, he went secretly, without telling anyone.

John 7:11 During the festival **the Jewish leaders** looked for Jesus and asked, "Where is he?"

John 7:12 The crowds even got into an argument about him. Some were saying, "Jesus is a good man," while others were saying, "He is lying to everyone."

John 7:13 But the people were afraid of **their leaders**, and none of them talked in public about him.

John 7:14 When the festival was about half over, Jesus went into the temple and started teaching.

John 7:15 **The leaders** were surprised and said, “How does this man know so much? He has never been taught!”

Well-known New Testament scholar James Sanders is sympathetic to the approach taken by the CEV and the NLT. Further, he observes that the NRSV, which frequently abandoned the Hebrew and Greek texts in order to sponsor inclusive translations of words and phrases dealing with human gender, is quite literal in translating *hoi Ioudaioi* and even followed KJV in adding “the Jews” in English where it does not occur in Greek (Acts 23:30).³⁷ Sanders would go further than the CEV in connection with the expression “scribes and Pharisees,” which, he notes, has become a pejorative term because of the Gospels and has been used in Christian propaganda or apologetics against so-called “Jewish legalism.” The CEV translates “Pharisees” literally in all of its occurrences, but twice nuances “scribes” with “teachers of the law.” Sanders’s contention is that we might translate “scribes” as “Scripture scholars” and “Pharisees” as “religious experts,” context permitting.³⁸

With reference to the CEV and the NLT, I think that it is fair to assess the former as mainstream in its theological orientation and its intended audience, with the latter (the NLT) appealing to a more theologically conservative base, as can be seen by the affiliations of its translators and publisher. Both of these versions, especially the CEV, have been the beneficiary of Irvin J. Borowsky, a philanthropist and founder of the Philadelphia-based American Interfaith Institute. Although some bloggers have made much—all of it negative—of Borowsky’s Jewish faith, insinuating that he has been propelled by his Judaism to dilute the truth of the New Testament, no one has successfully demonstrated how he has been able to seduce a broad range of Christian leaders spanning the CEV and the NLT, among others.³⁹

Beyond questions of marketing and the not unexpected sniping from the far right, there are substantive objections to the approach taken by the CEV and the NLT. Characteristic of what I would term mainstream criticism are the remarks and observations by Joseph Blenkinsopp, who says the intention behind the CEV is fully understandable, even if some of its translations are questionable. But can the New Testament be purged of anti-Judaic sentiment by changing the way in which *hoi Ioudaioi* is translated?

For Blenkinsopp, there are many instances in the CEV where the task of translator is confused with that of commentator. The task of translation, he asserts, is to render a text as faithfully as possible, not to massage or coerce it into saying what we want it to say, however praiseworthy our intentions may be. Anti-Jewish attitudes in the New Testament should not be sanitized, but they should be explained. Blenkinsopp concludes, “I am under no illusion that explanation by itself will prevent people from abusive appeal to these early Christian texts. . . . But we do not remedy the situation by retranslating

the texts to make them say what their authors had no intention of saying—and in fact did not say.”⁴⁰ In short, we must render the text as it is, warts and all. Giving the text a face-lift is commentary and thus belongs in the notes. Or so Blenkinsopp avers.

Barnstone is at least as critical as Blenkinsopp. As part of his criticism, Barnstone notes another possible weakness of the CEV/NLT approach; namely, that in removing the “Jews” as Jesus’ opponents, we also remove Jesus from Judaism. Or, in Barnstone’s words, a number of new versions have changed the word *Jew* to *opponent*, *Judaeian*, or some euphemism. Such changes are inaccurate to the New Testament texts as we have them and actually reinforce a much more significant misconception, namely that Yeshua and his family and followers were somehow not Jews.⁴¹ Returning to a familiar theme, Barnstone continues that such a misconception—whereby the central figures of the New Testament lose their Jewish identity, in a “grand identity theft”—is already perpetrated through the “tradition” of using in translation largely Greek names for the Hebrew and Aramaic names of these NT figures.⁴²

As Barnstone notes in passing, some translators have adopted, or urged the adoption of, the rendering *Judaeian* for *hoi Ioudaioi*, giving the term a primary designation of geography (essentially *Judaeian* as opposed to *Galilean*) rather than religion. Another option, proposed by Gerald Sloyan, among others, is to leave *hoi Ioudaioi* untranslated, especially in public settings and in preaching. He believes that this untranslated Greek heightens awareness of the tendency to make inaccurate assumptions about Jews and Judaism.⁴³

I find myself torn, and not for the first time, by the various proposals made by translators and commentators concerning the most appropriate rendering for *hoi Ioudaioi*. At one level, and this the broadest, it raises substantive and substantial questions about the nature of translation—all translation. Because, I suspect, all translators (even subversive ones) want to be thought of as faithful, we are brought forthrightly to differing understanding of what “faithful” means and to whom/to what a translator should be faithful. Is it to what the text says? What the text means? How the text has traditionally been understood in our community? How an intended audience is likely to perceive our words? Of course, the possibilities are almost endless.

Within this endlessness lies despair, but perhaps also a way (or, better, ways) out. If it is the case that a translation can be understood as more or less faithful, then we can choose to allow for these multiple valences—provided that a given translator clarifies what it is that he or she is faithful to. Along these lines, we can also choose to follow Sloyan, at least in his appreciation of the fact that different audiences may have their valid needs best met by different versions. This would, of course, go beyond the question of transliteration.

When it comes to the best way to educate Bible readers about concerns with the traditional rendering, “the Jews,” the issue is sometimes, as we saw above, framed as a feud between translators-as-translators and translators-as-interpreters. But this does not seem to be the most productive way to look at this issue. All translation, as we know is, to a greater or lesser degree, interpretation. When the issue is as highly charged as this one, we can easily forget that our approach to this one phrase should be consistent with the approach we take in general.

Again, I do not pretend to have “the” answer, but I do have a relevant observation, in the form of a query: if we want readers to pick up on a point that we consider of central importance, will we more likely get their attention in the text itself or in the notes and annotations? It is not difficult to discern, even in the way I phrased this question, that I do not find marginal or bottom-of-the-page notations to be beneficial purveyors of knowledge. Not only do the frequency and contents of notes vary considerably in the printed editions of Bible translations, but electronic versions typically dispense with notes altogether. This observation, assuming that it is accurate, does not permit translators simply to enlarge their texts through the insertion of all sorts of interpretive materials (something of this sort did, I suspect, happen in the earlier Targums); at the same time, it should caution translators and editors against the tendency to refrain from making tough decisions about the text under the allusion that all “problems” can be dealt with in the notes.

To return once more to the specifics of “the Jews,” I would ask readers of this essay to consider their own reaction(s) to the three versions of John 7:1-15 that I included above. Is there a marked difference in the perception of this passage when read in the “literal” NASB as opposed to the “nuanced” NLT or CEV? If there is, is the difference more in the way “the Jews” are portrayed or in the manner in which Jesus is seen as apart from/as part of the Judaism of his day? Perhaps it’s both; or neither. Moreover, even if readers of this article find little, if any, substantive difference between these three versions, can they nonetheless imagine an audience among whom such differences might be perceived and for whom such differences might matter?

This essay began by stressing the crucial importance of scriptural translation within the Christian context. It is probably worth adding one additional point to what was said above: Christian translations of the Bible continue to appear with some frequency, especially those versions aimed at conservative and/or evangelical Protestants. There is no reason to expect any diminution in the number of future new/revised/improved editions; in addition, the advertising and marketing of Bible translations are likely only to increase with new formats becoming available on an almost daily basis. With this in mind, I affirm the value of submitting such versions to the type of analysis we have applied here.

We looked at a select number of English-language translations of the New Testament with a primary emphasis on how they rendered proper names and/or how they represented the phrase *hoi Ioudaioi*. In particular, we were interested in changes from traditional renderings that aimed at restoring Jesus to his historically (and, we might add, theologically) correct position as a first-century-CE Jew within a first-century-CE Jewish community. The translators and editors whose work we carefully examined were all motivated, or at least claimed to be motivated, by a sincere desire not only to correct misunderstandings about Jesus, but to counter the disastrous effects such misunderstandings have had on Jewish-Christian relations over the past two thousand years.

Thus it is that, in the view of these translators and editors, very large changes can be effected by what might appear, at first glance, to be relatively small changes. In describing and evaluating these modern-language texts, I have attempted to apply a variety of criteria that, in my view, are relevant. Nonetheless, we do not have, to my knowledge, anything even approaching a systematic study of how actual individuals or groups of individuals have reacted to, or interacted with, these versions.

We do, on the one hand, have some bitter denunciations of the CEV and NLT on the part of what I would term far-right bloggers. Their criticisms cover the issues we've raised in this essay, but they also go beyond them. On the other hand, we can find a good deal of promotional material, compliments of their respective publishers, attesting to the wide audience appeal of the CEV and the NLT. Such endorsements typically cover a range of issues, in which the rendering of *hoi Ioudaioi* may play little if any role.

This is not at all unexpected. For example, among the major "selling points" of the CEV is that it avoids the use of technical or difficult-to-understand "Bible English," in favor of words, phrases, and grammatical structures that can be understood by a person with an average reading level. So, the "ark of the covenant" becomes "the sacred chest"; alas, Noah's ark sinks, in my view, as (simply) "the boat." Because the CEV is intended to be spoken as much as, if not more than, it is read, words that might cause confusion in this regard are not used. Among those specifically mentioned are "synagogue" and "manger." Moreover, the CEV's Old Testament, unlike its New Testament, is in my view decidedly not "Jewish-friendly." Capitalizing the first letter of the word *spirit* (thus, "Spirit") is in line with a Trinitarian reading of Hebrew Scripture, and use of the term *virgin* (rather than the more lexically and contextually correct "young woman") at Isa. 7:14 is evidence of reliance on the text of the New Testament (in this instance, Matt. 1:23). In short, a full evaluation of the CEV must take into account all of the goals that its editors and sponsors had in mind. The same surely holds true for the NLT.

This essay may be the first in which Barnstone and Stern receive, as it were, equal billing. For this, I do not apologize. At the same time, I hasten to add that a full reckoning of these editions must take into account far more than we have had the opportunity to discuss here. For Barnstone, there is the issue of poetry; for Stern, the appeals to “Messianic Judaism.” To state the obvious: simply because they both find traditional English renderings of proper names to be wrong, dangerously wrong, and they both resolve this matter by “restoring” the names to their Semitic (and, in the case of Barnstone, also their ancient Greek) forms does not make these translations equivalent in any other ways.

Having made these and myriad other observations and set up abundant caveats, I finally address the question that is implicit in this essay: are these efforts, as commendable as they are, worth the effort? My response, based as much on my hopes as on my research, is “yes.” These versions of the New Testament can indeed bring knowledge and, of perhaps greater importance, sensitivity to Christian audiences. They may also enable Jews to read the New Testament in greater numbers and with enhanced interest. And, finally, these translations may provide something of the common ground so often lacking when Jews and Christians attempt to discern shared values as well as different emphases. If these editions, as imperfect as each is, enable and enhance positive relations between and among faith communities, then, yes, it’s all been worth it.