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Journal of Translation
ISSN 1558-7282 (online)
https://siljot.org

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Journal of Translation 1 (1), 2005: 1–6.
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-HR3V2

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Those Jews…Again…and Again

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Abstract

Two of the most misunderstood words in the New Testament are "the Jews"! Unfortunately, this misperception of historical reality has resulted in merciless persecution and ethnic cleansing of millions of innocent people. Judaism—both during and after the lifetime of Jesus—was a diverse movement, represented in part by those various and varied groups of Jews who were the earliest followers of a Jew named Jesus. Careful attention to both the historical and contextual setting of each occurrence of this phrase in the New Testament will enable the translator to generate both a more accurate and a more sensitive text than the fallacious—and often fatal—perpetuation of a "literal" rendering.

1. Introduction

> If Bible translations like the NRSV can legitimately correct "exclusion" on one level, caused by the patriarchal trappings in the text, they ought to be able to "correct" exclusion on a broader level, so that the text reflects what was essentially an intramural Jewish situation of the early first-century period which the narratives purport to describe and hence provide clear mirrors for Christians today to see their own humanity reflected in those around Jesus, instead of identifying with Jesus and dehumanizing his fellow Jews.[1]

2. 'The Jews' in the Gospels and Acts

Of the 192 times that 'the Jews' appears in the entire New Testament, more than 150 of these are found in the Gospel of John and Acts, both of which date toward the end of the first century. However, before any of these passages are examined, it is worthwhile to note (1) the relatively few times that 'the Sadducees' appears in the New Testament (Matt. 3:7; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 22:23, 34; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6, 7, 8) and (2) the complete *absence* of 'the Sadducees' from the Gospel of John. In all probability this noticeable absence results from the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. and the consequent disappearance of the Sadducees as a force to be reckoned with in Judaism. Moreover, the primary function of the Sadducees in the New Testament is opposing the Pharisees (and Jesus!) over the doctrine of resurrection, while in Acts 5:17 they are described as a Jewish "sect" (as are the Pharisees, in 15:5 and 26:5). Elsewhere in Acts, the Jesus Jewish Community is itself spoken of as a "sect"—of the Nazarenes (24:5), of the Way (24:14), and without further qualification (28:22).

Such observations are of supreme importance. They underscore (1) the *diversity* of Judaism, both during and after the lifetime of Jesus, and (2) some of the *conflicts* both between and within the various Jesus Jewish Communities, as well as between them and Other Jewish Communities toward the end of the century, when the Gospels were taking on their final form.

A few preliminary observations regarding the relation between the actual events and the *recounting* of those events in the Gospels should prove helpful in setting the stage. For example, even a passing remark such as "Let the reader understand!" (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14)—which finds its place among the *oral* instructions of Jesus to his disciples—confirms that the Gospel writers were concerned primarily with the

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[1] James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics of Translation" in *Removing Anti-Judaism from the New Testament*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance, 1998), 43–62.

relevance of their message at the time of the *recounting* of the events. Moreover, teachings regarding such matters as forgiveness within the *church* (Matt. 18:15–17) become relevant only at a date considerably later than the ministry of Jesus. Finally, the unique *theological* framework of each Gospel is a salient reminder that the "historical realities" at the time of *composition* have significant priority over any perceived realities on the part of the modern reader.

According to John 3:25, John the Baptist and his followers—themselves Jews—got into an argument about Jewish ceremonial washing with either another Jewish man or several Jewish men, depending upon the choice of Greek manuscripts. This, together with the observation that Jesus and his followers were also Jews, is enough to affirm unequivocally that in the Gospel of John 'the Jews' should *never* be translated in such a way as to suggest that *all* Jews of that time were involved. (*All* Christians believe X about the form of baptism! *All* Christians believe X about the meaning of the Lord's Supper! *All* Christians believe X about the inspiration of Scripture!) Nowhere is this division among Jews more apparent than in John 20:19: "The disciples were afraid of the Jews." At most, 'the Jews' here means no more than 'the Jewish leaders/ authorities', though when the emotional aspects of the term are taken into consideration, it would be significantly better to translate it 'the Jews as the religious authorities' (leaving 'Jewish' implicit), since that is the term's contextual function, whether viewed from the temporal perspective of the event itself or from that of its final editing.

With the exceptions of Mark 7:5 (which distinguishes between Pharisees and other Jewish groups) and Matt. 28:15 ('this story is still told among the Judeans'), all references to 'the Jews' in the Synoptics occur in the phrase 'king of the Jews' (Matt. 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37; Mark 15:9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37, 38). In this regard, it is important to notice that with the single exception of the angel's promise (Matt. 2:2), each occurrence reflects either the official political charge of insurrection brought against Jesus by the Roman governor Pilate (Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2, 26; Luke 23:3, 38) or the indirect charge by others in the course of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:12, 26; Luke 23:37). Unlike the execution of Stephen by stoning (Acts 7:57–58), which was an official *Jewish* method of execution, Jesus was crucified, which was a *Roman* form of the death penalty reserved for criminals judged to be the most dangerous to the government.

In those passages where 'king of the Jews' is used in the passion narratives, a note such as the following would be advisable:

> **king of the Jews**: The official charge brought against Jesus by Pilate, the Roman governor, was that Jesus was a revolutionary against Roman rule, for which the penalty was death by crucifixion. Death by stoning was the Jewish method of executing fellow Jews for crimes against their religion (Acts 7:57–58).

On the other hand, Matt. 28:15 may legitimately be translated as 'the people of Judea still tell each other this story', because 'the Jews' in the Greek text is equivalent to 'people in the region of Judea' (see Mark 1:5 and John 3:22). In fact, since Judea (epitomized by 'Jerusalem')—as opposed to Galilee (where 'Jews' also lived)—is the center of hostility against Jesus in all four Gospels, it would be more historically correct to translate 'the Jews' as 'the people of Judea', except in those contexts where the phrase is obviously limited to smaller (authoritative) groups of Jews within that region.

Moreover, an overriding translation principle is operative here: **Sensitivity has priority over insensitivity in contexts where a literal translation might well incite prejudice and potential violence against any racial group,** as has resulted from a well-intentioned, but misleading, literal translation of 'the Jews'. In the remainder of this section we will look at several passages from the Gospel of John and Acts where such sensitivity should—and indeed *must*—be given high priority, lest the Bible become its own worst enemy.

John 1:19 ('the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem'): From the mention of 'priests and Levites from Jerusalem', it is clearly implicit that those who sent them would have been Jews, and so 'the Jews' may be translated as 'the religious authorities'.

John 2:18, 20 ('the Jews then said…the Jews then said'): The setting is the Jerusalem temple during 'the Passover of the Jews' (2:13), and since the Jews who verbally attack Jesus are obviously representative of a larger group, which the reader will easily identify as Jews, the two occurrences of the phrase may be translated as 'some of the religious authorities' and 'the authorities replied'.

John 3:1 (‘a man from the Pharisees, Nicodemus his name, a leader of the Jews’): As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was clearly a Jew, so this may be translated as ‘Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and a leader among his people’.

John 3:25 (‘there was an argument between the disciples of John and a Jewish man’ or ‘… some Jewish men’): Since the followers of John the Baptist were themselves Jews, it is possible to translate this as ‘there was an argument between the disciples of John and a fellow Jew’ (or ‘… some other Jews’, if the alternate Greek text is followed).

John 5:1, 10, 15, 16, 18 ([1]‘a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem’, [10]‘the Jews said to the man’, [15]‘The man…told the Jews’, [16]‘the Jews started persecuting Jesus’, [18]‘the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him’): Once again, the setting for the controversy is Jerusalem during a Jewish festival, where *all* the participants, unless otherwise indicated, are clearly Jews, which means that the passage can be both accurately and sensitively translated without explicit mention of them except in v. 1 ([1]‘Jewish festival’, [10]‘the religious authorities’, [15]‘told the authorities’, [16]‘they started making a lot of trouble for Jesus’, [18]‘now the authorities wanted to kill Jesus’).

John 6:4, 41, 52 (‘[2]‘the Passover, the festival of the Jews, [41]‘the Jews began to complain about him’, [52]‘the Jews began to dispute’): Interesting is the observation that in this episode, which centers around the Passover theme, the participants—other than Jesus and his disciples—are identified as ‘a large crowd’ (2, 5), ‘the people’ (14), ‘the crowd that had stayed on the other side’ (22), ‘the crowd’ (24), and otherwise as either ‘they’ or ‘them’. This ambiguity is probably intentional, since the scene takes place in Galilee. It is not until the controversy develops between Jesus and some of the crowd that ‘the Jews’ (a term usually reserved in John for Jesus’ opponents at Jerusalem) appear in the narrative (41, 52). Unfortunately, a literal translation might well suggest that before the Jews arrived, a *non-Jewish* crowd had initially received Jesus without hesitation. Sense and sensitivity would demand that these two verses be translated as ‘the people started grumbling’ and ‘they started arguing’.

John 7:1, 11, 13, 15, 35 ([2]‘the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him’, [11]‘the Jews were looking for him at the festival’, [13]‘for fear of the Jews’, [15]‘the Jews were astonished’, [35]‘the Jews said to each other’): Of itself, John 7:1 is a valuable commentary on the Jews in the Gospel of John: “After this, Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him.” Here the Jews are explicitly linked to *Judea* in contrast with *Galilee*, making the following translation plausible: ‘the religious authorities (in Jerusalem) wanted to kill him’. The remaining occurrences of ‘the Jews’ in John 7 may be translated similarly: [11]‘the authorities looked for Jesus’, [13]‘the people were afraid of the authorities’, [15]‘the authorities were surprised’, [35]‘the people asked each other’.

John 8:22, 31, 48, 52, 57 ([22]‘the Jews said’, [31]‘Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him’, [48]‘the Jews answered’, [52]‘the Jews said’, [57]‘the Jews said’): The setting is Jerusalem, and since the Jews seem more confused than hostile, each of these occurrences may be rendered as ‘the people’.

John 9:18, 22 ([18]‘the Jews did not believe’, [22]‘they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed’): Here the Jews are contrasted with the rest of the people, and so the passage may be translated as ‘the religious authorities would not believe’ and ‘they were afraid of the authorities. The authorities had already agreed …’.

John 10:19, 24, 31, 33 ([19]‘the Jews were divided’, [24]‘the Jews gathered around him’, [31]‘the Jews took up stones’, [33]‘the Jews answered’): In v. 19 the Jews are suddenly mentioned, without any specific point of reference, though the Pharisees are mentioned in 9:40, followed by an ambiguous ‘them’ in 10:6. Since this verse speaks of a *division* among the Jews, the best solution would be to assume that all four occurrences in this chapter relate to a larger group, which may be designated ‘the people’ or ‘some of the people’ (31).

John 11:8, 19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 54, 55 ([8]‘the Jews were…trying to stone you’, [19]‘many of the Jews had come to Martha’, [31]‘the Jews who were with her’, [33]‘the Jews who came with her’, [36]‘the Jews said’, [45]‘the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary’, [54]‘openly among the Jews’, [55]‘the Passover of the Jews…many went up…to Jerusalem’): This passage is intriguing, because in v. 8 the disciples—who are themselves Jews—inform Jesus that the Jews are trying to stone him. Then in vv. 19–45 ‘the Jews’ apparently refers to friends of Martha and Mary, while ‘the Jews’ in v. 54 is clearly inclusive of local Jews generally and so means ‘in

public'. Accordingly, the following proposals are appropriate: In light of v. 7 ('Now we will go back to Judea'), v. 8 may be translated 'the authorities there want to stone you', while 'the people' is valid for all that follows, including v. 55, which may be translated as 'Many of the people who lived out in the country had come to Jerusalem'. A note at v. 8 may be helpful, for example, "**stone you**: The Jewish method of executing fellow Jews for crimes against their religion (Acts 7:57–58)."

John 12:9, 11 ([9]'the great crowd of the Jew', [11] 'the Jews were deserting'): A generic rendering is best: 'A lot of people came when they heard that Jesus was there…many of the people were turning from them' ('them" = the chief priests of v. 10).

John 13:33 ('as I said to the Jews, so I now say to you'): Here Jesus addresses his disciples, all of whom were Jews, and indicates that he is telling them exactly what he told the Jews. This may be translated as 'I tell you just as I told the people'.

John 18:14, 20, 31, 36, 38 ([14]'Caiaphas…who had advised the Jews', [20]'where all the Jews come together', [31]'the Jews replied', [36]'keep me from being handed over to the Jews', [38]'he [Pilate] went out to the Jews'): Most readers won't realize that Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, was appointed to his position by Pilate, the *Roman* governor. Since the text explicitly mentions that Jesus was taken to the high priest (v. 13), even the uninitiated reader will quickly realize that the *Jewish* high priest is intended. So v. 14 may be translated: This was the same Caiaphas who had told the religious authorities, "It is better if one person dies for the people." In the remainder of the verses, except 36, the Jews are the Jewish people in general—as the context makes abundantly clear—and so may be translated as follows: [20']where all of our people come together' [31']the crowd replied', [36']keep me from being handed over to the authorities', [38']Pilate went back out and said …' (contextually sufficient for 'back out to the Jews').

John 19:7, 12, 14, 20, 21, 31, 38, 40; 20:19 ([7]'the Jews answered', [12]'the Jews cried out', [14]'he said to the Jews', [20]'the Jews read this inscription', [21]'the chief priest of the Jews said', [31]'the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross', [38]'because of the fear of the Jews', [40]'the burial custom of the Jews', [20:19]for fear of the Jews'): In vv. 7–14, the Jews make up the crowd gathered outside Pilate's judicial hall and in each of these instances 'the Jews' may be translated as 'the crowd', because Pilate's words in 18:39 imply a Jewish audience: "I usually set a prisoner free for you at Passover." Although the translation of 'the Jews' in v. 20 as 'the people' finds less support than in the other verses under consideration, it is always better to err in the direction of inclusion than otherwise. And 'the chief priests' is certainly contextually sufficient for 'the chief priests of the Jews' (19:21). In vv. 31 and 40, since it is only Jewish customs being described, no harm can be done by translating 'the Jews' literally. In 19:38 (which is similar to the previously discussed 20:19), 'the Jews' may be translated as 'the religious authorities'.

Acts 9:22–23 ('the Jews who lived in Damascus…the Jews plotted to kill him'): Since 'the Jews' of v. 23 refers back to the same term in v. 22, they may be translated as 'the Jewish people in Damascus…some of them made plans to kill Paul'.

Acts 14:19 ('Jews came from Antioch and Iconium'): It is obvious that not all of the Jews would have come, and so the phrase may be translated as 'some Jewish leaders from Antioch and Iconium came'.

Acts 17:5, 13 ([5]'the Jews became jealous', [13]'the Jews of Thessalonica'): Here again, not *all* of the Jews would have been involved, and so this may be translated as 'the Jewish leaders became jealous' and 'the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica'.

Acts 18:12, 14 ([12]'the Jews made a united attack on Paul', [14]'Gallio said to the Jews'): As so often in the New Testament, 'the Jews' is used in the same fashion as expressions involving 'all' in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., '*all* the city went out'). These verses may be translated as 'some of the Jewish leaders got together and grabbed Paul' and 'Gallio said to them …'.

Acts 19:33; 20:3, 19; 21:11 ([33]'whom the Jews had pushed forward', [20:3]'a plot was made against him by the Jews', [19]'the plots of the Jews', [21:11]'the Jews in Jerusalem'): The same rule applies as in 18:12. Translate 'the Jews' in 19:33 as 'several of the Jewish leaders'; in 20:3 as 'several of the Jewish leaders'; in 20:19 as 'some of the Jewish leaders'; in 21:11 as 'the religious authorities in Jerusalem'.

Acts 21:20, 21 ([20]'thousands of believers there among the Jews', [21]'all the Jews living among the Gentiles'): Paul is in Jerusalem to address the Jesus Jewish Community, and according to v. 19 'Paul greeted them and told them how God had used him to help the Gentiles'. This context allows for the following: [20]'many tens of thousands of our people have become followers', [21]'those who live among the Gentiles'. Not only is this contextually accurate, it is much more appropriate in English for the apostle to use a first person form ('our') when speaking of his own people.

Acts 21:27; 22:30 ([27]'the Jews from Asia', [22:30]'wanted to find out what Paul was being accused of by the Jews'): Once again it is abundantly obvious that not all Jews are included. Translate 21:27 as 'some of the Jewish people from Asia' and 22:30 as 'wanted to know the real reason why the Jewish leaders had brought charges against Paul'.

Acts 23:12, 13, 20 ([12]'the Jews joined in a conspiracy', [13]'there were more than forty', [20]'the Jews have agreed to ask you'): In v. 13 'the Jews' are qualified by 'more than forty of them'; so it is advisable to combine vv. 12 and 13 and translate as 'more than forty Jewish men got together'. When the young man informs the Roman commander of the plot (23:20), the reader already knows that the conspirators are Jews, and so all that is necessary here is 'some men are planning to ask you …'.

Acts 23:27 ('this man was seized by the Jews'): In the commander's letter to Felix, he would certainly *not* state that *all* Jews had attacked Paul. Translate some Jews grabbed this man.

Acts 24:5, 27 ([5]'all the Jews throughout the world', [27]'he wanted to grant the Jews a favor'): Tertullus, the Jewish lawyer, is bringing charges against Paul in the court of Felix, and in so doing mentions 'all the Jews throughout the world', which is more fittingly translated 'our people all over the world'. Moreover, the only persons whom Felix really desired to placate at the moment were the Jewish leaders, who had brought charges against Paul.

Acts 25:7 ('the Jews who had gone down from Jerusalem'): Since the reference is to 'those in authority' (25:5), this could be translated as either 'the leaders from Jerusalem' or 'the authorities from Jerusalem'.

Acts 26:2, 3, 7, 21 ([2]'all the accusations of the Jews', [3]'all the customs and controversies of the Jews', [7]'our twelve tribes…accused by Jews', [21]'the Jews seized me'): Paul shifts from a third person reference, 'the Jews', to a first person reference, 'our tribes', which would be unnatural in English. Paul's statement in v. 2 is more forceful when translated as 'all the charges that my own people have brought against me'; in v. 3 as 'our religious customs and the beliefs that divide us'; in v. 7 as 'our twelve tribes…some of their leaders have brought charges'. Since the temple in Jerusalem is the point of reference, v. 21 may be faithfully translated as 'some men grabbed me in the temple'.

Acts 28:19 ('the Jews objected'): In light of v. 17, which reads literally 'the first of the Jews', it is logical to translate v. 19 as' the Jewish leaders disagreed'.

2. 'The Jews' in the Letters of Paul

There are only a few places in the letters of Paul where 'the Jews' may be misleading to someone who does not realize Paul's deep pride in his Jewish heritage (as seen in 2 Cor. 11:21–25 and Phil. 3:4–6) and his profound love for his own people: 'Dear friends, my greatest wish and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved' (Rom. 10:1). However, from a few scattered verses (2 Cor. 11:24; Gal. 2:13–15; 1 Thess. 2:14), a reader might gather that the Jews as a race were Paul's most dreaded enemies. It is true that Paul faced hostility from certain segments of the Jewish Community, and even of the Jesus Jewish Community, including the Apostle Peter, whose Christology was apparently not radical enough to suit Paul (Gal. 2:11–18). Add to this the fact that Paul's door to the Gentiles was most often through the synagogue, it is surprising that even greater conflicts with the Jews are not reflected in his writings.

Unfortunately, when the Gospels, Acts, and a few of Paul's letters are placed side-by-side in a Bible, the whole becomes much more than the sum of the individual parts, and the unknowing reader assumes that vicious giant-sized vermin collectively called 'the Jews' are standing at every corner to prevent the spread of the gospel. Little does this reader grasp that quite often Jews belonged to the Jesus Jewish Community, which itself was experiencing a time of self-definition, as it still is today, both between and within

denominations! Without apology, the conscientious Bible translator should exercise every legitimate technique in order to destroy the false notion that the Jews are "Christ killers." For the most part, all this requires is leaving 'the Jews' implicit, rather than explicit in the text.

2 Cor. 11:24 ('from the Jews forty lashes minus one'): Actually, Paul's words convey deeper pathos if translated 'Five times my own people gave me thirty-nine lashes with a whip.'

Gal. 2:12–13 ('certain people came from James…of the circumcision faction.... The other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy'): Does the average reader gather that those who came from James were Jewish believers, as indeed 'the other Jews' were, and that the real bone of contention was how to properly define the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile believers as regards the demands of the Law of Moses? Some of this will become clear if the relevant portions of these two verses are translated as 'He [Peter] used to eat with Gentile followers of the Lord until James sent some Jewish followers. Peter was afraid of the Jews and stopped eating with Gentiles. He and the others hid their true feelings.'

1 Thess. 2:14 ('as they did from the Jews'): Whereas the Jews referred to in Galatians were insiders, these in 1 Thess. 2:14 were outsiders. Here Paul is comparing the suffering brought on the Thessalonian believers by non-believing Gentiles with the suffering earlier brought on believing Jews by non-believing Jews. As with 2 Cor. 11:4, a shift to an inclusive form is significantly more effective in English: 'My friends, you did just like God's churches in Judea and like the other followers of Christ Jesus there. You were mistreated by your own people in the same way that they were mistreated by their people.'

3. 'The Jews' in Revelation

Rev. 2:9; 3:9 ('who say that they are Jews'; 'who say that they are Jews'): The real thrust here is not so much a claim on the part of these people to be Jewish as to be the people of God *because* they were Jew*s*. The clause may therefore be translated as 'who claim to be God's people'. It is possible to accompany the translation with a note such as the following: "*God's people*: Literally 'Jews.' These people claimed to be God's people because they were Jews."

4. Epilogue

In my most recent read-through of the Gospels and Acts, I have concluded that even 'the Jews' may well be a less than truly literal translation of the Greek phrase *'oi ioudaioi*. Instead it means 'those *other* Jews', referring to those who were not followers of Jesus at that time. In my judgment, such an understanding best accords with the linguistic, literary, and historical context of these documents, and validates the translation of this phrase in most of its occurrences as '(some of the) religious authorities' without specific allusion to their Jewishness.