

Of all the New Testament translation problems which have been identified and debated in these pages, the most intractable has been the frequency of the Greek term *hoi Ioudaioi* (usually translated “the Jews”) in the Gospel of John. While used neutrally and even positively in some passages, the *Ioudaioi* are most often the opponents of Jesus: according to this Gospel, they attack him verbally (just as he attacks them), seek to kill him, and are ultimately responsible for his death. While *hoi Ioudaioi* can, in certain contexts, be translated “the Jews” or “the Judeans,” there are two serious drawbacks to translating it as “the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel. First, “the Jews” cannot be the “enemies” of Jesus, since Jesus, his mother, and all his “friends” are also Jews (as the evangelist is well aware). Second, it is all too easy for the term to be read or heard today in a way which identifies these *Ioudaioi* with contemporary Jews, thus reinforcing the destructive “teaching of contempt” for which the Christian tradition bears a heavy, centuries-long responsibility.

Abundant recent scholarship on John has reached a near-consensus that these *Ioudaioi* are not so much the historical opponents of Jesus (the way John’s story line depicts them) as they are the (Jewish) opponents of the (Jewish) author of the Gospel and his (Jewish) community of Jesus loyalists, sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 C.E., when competing groups of Jews argued over the shape Judaism should take. The author has retrojected his battle (Who is the real Israel? The true children of Abraham?) and his adversaries into the story of Jesus. This certainly helps toward understanding the animosity which permeates much of the Gospel, and it can help preachers and teachers in placing this document in an appropriate historical context.

But the problem of translation remains. What to do with the *Ioudaioi*? “Judeans” would be legitimate in some passages, but there is no agreement on which ones. “The authorities” avoids the problem, but is not completely accurate, since certainly Nicodemus, probably Joseph of Arimathea, and the “authorities” mentioned in 12:42 are, according to the story, on Jesus’ side.

The most astute suggestion known to me was made a few years ago by Fr. Gerard Sloyan, in his *Commentary on John in the Interpretation series* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). To quote him: “. . . this commentary proposes leaving the Greek term *hoi Ioudaioi* untranslated. . . . This usage will heighten awareness that the term is a calculated piece of obloquy, not a description of an entire people, and that it is directed against persons nowadays unknown. That they were Jews of a certain power class is clear, though exactly which class and where—Judea? a diaspora location?—is not clear” (p. xiv, emphasis added). Writing for preachers, he adds, “This suggestion is reasonable only for the preacher who is consistently with a congregation in and out of season” (*ibid.*). I would urge that translators take the same approach, and then deal with the reader’s initial puzzlement by means of a well-placed note.

To those who might object to the use of a non-English word in the attempt to make a Greek text intelligible to an English-speaking public, Sloyan reminds us that we use

terms like vice versa and Kindergarten constantly. A brief trip to the dictionary further yields: angst, gestalt, lieder, and weltanschauung; adagio, fresco, prima donna, and scherzo; amateur, ambiance, arbitrage, attaché, coup (d'état), détente, ensemble, liaison, protégé, repertoire, risqué; brahmin, karma, mantra, nirvana; I spare the reader Latin and Greek. I cannot resist, however, Magi and praetorium in the Gospels themselves. They are only barely latinized Greek words, hardly English translations.

Again, Sloyan: "This is not. . . a simple question of modern ecumenical conduct [nor of "political correctness": DPE]. It is the profound historical question of not knowing exactly who John's Ioudaioi are" (p. 75). Thus, to preachers: "The first thing to do about the persons subject to condemnation in the Fourth Gospel is to identify them gingerly, if at all. . . . They are certainly not the Jews of any age or place outside the time of John, possibly outside his thought" (p. 82). Finally, hoi Ioudaioi "cannot mean Jewish people simply, since in this narrative [here: 7:1-14] everyone is an ethnic Jew. We are back to our mysterious terminus technicus describing a bloc of opponents [of John] whom the earliest readers of the Gospel would recognize" (p. 86).

To summarize: Sloyan, writing for preachers, argues for leaving the term Ioudaioi untranslated. I would argue that translators, especially those concerned not to treat the Greek text too freely, should do the same. If readers, unused to change, object that if John called Jesus' enemies "the Jews," why can't we? I can only answer, based on Sloyan's proposal argued above: John did not call them "the Jews." He called them hoi Ioudaioi, which cannot mean "the Jews" in this case. The stakes are too high, the possibility of misunderstanding too great. "Ioudaioi," on an English page or in the midst of an English reading, can jolt readers and listeners into an awareness of the problem involved.

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