

# **Translation for Transformation: André Chouraqui and His Unique Contribution to Interfaith Dialogue and Friendship**

(“SACRED TEXTS AND HUMAN CONTEXTS” CONFERENCE 2013,  
HICKEY CENTER FOR INTERFAITH STUDIES AND DIALOGUE,  
NAZARETH COLLEGE, ROCHESTER, NY)

If you mention the name of Natân André Chouraqui (1917-2007) today, even in fairly literate company, you are likely to encounter puzzled or blank looks. Six years after Chouraqui’s death in Jerusalem in July 2007—and, in fact, for many years before that—the name of this remarkable Algerian-French-Israeli Renaissance man, scholar, politician and interfaith pioneer had already begun to fade into forgetfulness on a popular level, and he was often not remembered, even by those who were the most direct beneficiaries of his life’s work. All of which is, I believe, a profound injustice, not merely to a man who was one of the great luminaries and thinkers of the twentieth century, but to someone whose ideas today seem to be, more than ever, timely, relevant, ground-breaking and helpful. André Chouraqui is, I would argue, one of the figures whose contributions and life speak with a unique appropriateness to the theme of this conference, and to the challenging situation of interreligious engagement and dialogue in our modern world. Chouraqui was a man deeply rooted in both sacred texts and human contexts, and he dedicated his life to trying to enable those two realities to speak to one another in life-giving, creative and transformative ways.

André Chouraqui was many things. He was, at various moments in his life, a lawyer and judge, a globe-trotting ambassador for Europe’s post-war Jewish leadership, a member of the French Resistance, a gifted literary translator, a playwright, editor and author, a member of the cabinet of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, twice deputy mayor of Jerusalem, an acclaimed Biblical scholar and translator, an outspoken advocate for interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and a respected commentator on political and religious life, both in Israel and abroad. He was a man whose life spanned, and intersected with, remarkable historical events, including the Second World War and the birth of the State of Israel, the Second Vatican Council, the wars fought by Israel in 1967 and 1973, the Camp David Accords, and the eventual diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel on the part of the Vatican. Not only did he live through them and witness them, but he was, in many cases, an active protagonist in them. He had a front row seat on key aspects of twentieth-century history, and it shaped him, and his vision, profoundly.

Chouraqui was born in 1917 into a devout Sephardic Jewish family that had lived in North Africa for more than 500 years, and that boasted of a long and distinguished pedigree of Jewish community leaders and scholars. Although his first language at home was Arabic, the Chouraqui household was multilingual; his father and grandfather were deeply rooted in the Hebrew prayer-life of their synagogue, in the classic rabbinic texts in Aramaic, and in the ancient Ladino songs of their long-since-expelled Spanish ancestors. His family were

merchants, and most of their employees were local Muslims—and the young André started off attending Catholic schools, and later French republican schools, in which French was the language of instruction. The fact of growing up as a Jew in a French colonial setting in Algeria meant that, necessarily, André’s earliest experiences were of *religious, cultural and linguistic pluralism*, with the corresponding need to build bridges of understanding, whether that meant translating from one language into another, or moving daily between those various worlds, which could be, at times, intensely religious, and at others, strictly secular and almost *anti-religious*. It was a heady blend for a young boy, and Chouraqui recalled how, even in his childhood, his parents encouraged in him a respect and esteem for those of other faiths, and a linguistic and theological curiosity that would mark the rest of his 90 years of life<sup>1</sup>.

After years of a strictly secular (and somewhat anti-religious) education in Algeria and France, Chouraqui had largely abandoned the faith of his youth<sup>2</sup> when, in the mid-1930s, and having graduated in law from the Sorbonne, he enrolled in Paris’s rabbinic seminary. Like many of Europe’s Jews, he was alarmed by the anti-Semitic mood developing in Hitler’s Germany, and its increasingly ominous threats against Jews. Although he had no intention of becoming a rabbi, nevertheless André experienced a renewed sense of solidarity with his Jewish people, and a desire to understand who and what he was as a Jewish man. As Chouraqui later recalled, “It took ... the trauma of the Hitlerian persecution, to pull me back to my Jewish well-springs. Since Hitler wanted to take my life because I was Jewish, at least I wanted to die with my eyes open, knowing what it meant to be Jewish”<sup>3</sup>. He was three years into his studies at the rabbinic seminary when the Nazis closed it and scattered its faculty and students. Even throughout the war years, however, Chouraqui made use of his time in the Resistance to gather other Jewish students—and Jewish professors—together for late-night study sessions in the woods by firelight, which he and his friends called “L’École

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<sup>1</sup> “Dans l’Algérie de ses pères, André Chouraqui a puisé son génie des langues et son rêve insensé de paix entre les trois religions monothéistes. Né à Aïn Temouchent, d’un père viticulteur et négociant, d’ancêtres venus d’Espagne et arabisants, il parle arabe avec ses amis musulmans, français en famille, hébreu à la synagogue. Son rabbin lui apprend la Torah par cœur et en hébreu. Ses camarades de jeu sont musulmans et, quand il lève la tête, il entend les cloches de l’église d’Aïn Temouchent appeler les chrétiens à l’office. « *Trois langues, trois textes sacrés, trois religions, trois cultures trottaient en permanence dans ma tête* », aimait-il à dire à propos de son enfance.” (Henri Tincq, “André Chouraqui,” *Le Monde*, July 11, 2007, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://www.lemonde.fr/imprimer/article/2007/07/11/934280.html>)

<sup>2</sup> “J’étais prêt à envoyer Abderahman, Donnat et Mahdad accompagner mes pauvres rabbins dans les oubliettes religieuses et sémitiques, auxquelles la République genereuse m’arrachait pour me permettre de m’épanouir au grand soleil des idéaux révolutionnaires ... [Je me mis] ... à ne plus penser à l’univers de la Bible, à oublier les Psaumes et Isaïe, à délaisser toute pratique religieuse, sauf à ne pas manger de pain à Pâques et à jeûner pieusement le jour de Kippur. Oui, j’avais insensiblement changé de peuple élu, passant de mon Orient originel à cet Occident dont la France paraissait être la lumière et l’espérance.” (André Chouraqui, *L’Amour fort comme la mort*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990, 122).

“... I was not far from Toynbee’s opinion that the Jew was an archæological survival, a fossil. As for me, I had become, thanks to the secular and republican culture, a son of the French Revolution, a free citizen of a country whose motto, which had become mine, was Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” (André Chouraqui, *A Man in Three Worlds*. Transl. by Kenton Kilmer of *Ce que je crois*. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1979. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984, 76).

<sup>3</sup> Chouraqui, *A Man*, 75.

des prophètes” [The School of the Prophets]<sup>4</sup>. When the war ended, Chouraqui was shattered and disillusioned by his experience of anti-Jewish hatred, and yet inspired by the brotherhood he had experienced in the Resistance, where political or religious allegiances were largely ignored. Could not such a camaraderie exist *apart from* wartime? And what steps would it take, to help Christians begin to think differently—*very* differently—about Jews, to sap anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism of their centuries-old theological power?

Others were asking similar questions, chief among them the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963), with whom Chouraqui had already been in correspondence during the final years of the war<sup>5</sup>. Isaac was one of the organizers of the ground-breaking 1947 conference of Christian and Jewish leaders in Seelisberg, Switzerland, dedicated to uprooting anti-Jewish sentiment from Christian teaching and liturgy. Less than a year later, Chouraqui was, together with Isaac, one of the founders of France’s first *Amitié judéo-chrétienne*, or Jewish-Christian Friendship Society. That commitment to promoting mutually respectful interreligious relations, informed by the best available thinking, would guide Chouraqui’s life for the next five decades.

As someone fascinated by the nuances of languages, who lived comfortably in a plurilingual world, Chouraqui had never been satisfied with the French Biblical and liturgical translations he had grown up with in the synagogue, none of which seemed to him to capture adequately the semantic richness—and literary playfulness—of the Semitic languages as he knew them firsthand. Already in the early 1950s, André had published award-winning French translations of the Song of Songs and the book of Psalms<sup>6</sup>, and several colleagues had urged him to make good on his ambition to prepare a wholesale translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Chouraqui, however, was a busy political and cultural figure with a young family, and so the project was postponed until a quieter time in his life—a time that would come twenty years later, when, having stepped down definitively from elected office, he decided to take up once more a project that had intrigued and inspired him since his youth: a one-man translation of the Jewish Bible into French—but a translation that would be very different from every other available translation, and that would respond to very different goals.

It was 1972 when Chouraqui embarked on his most ambitious and, arguably, his most significant cultural and theological undertaking: a translation, published book by individual book, of the Scriptures of Israel. It would *not*, however, be guided by the canons of traditional French literary translation, which tended to privilege a text characterized by literary elegance, and flowing smoothly. No: Chouraqui’s inspiration would actually come from modern *German* scholarship, and, more specifically, from the unorthodox Bible

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<sup>4</sup> “... un genre de ‘yeshiva’ comme nous disons, une sorte d’école rabbinique, d’école de penseurs, qui a fonctionné depuis le printemps 1943 jusqu’à la Libération et encore deux mois après la Libération. Le chef spirituel de cette école était le philosophe Jacob Gordin ...” (Pierre Bolle, ed., *Le Plateau Vivarais-Lignon: Accueil et résistance, 1939-1946: Actes du colloque du Chambon-sur-Lignon*. Chambon-sur-Lignon: Société d’histoire de la montagne, 1992, 444).

<sup>5</sup> On this correspondence, see: André Chouraqui, *Le destin d’Israël: Correspondances avec Jules Isaac, Jacques Ellul, Jacques Maritain et Marc Chagall; Entretiens avec Paul Claudel* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Nouvelle traduction française par André Chouraqui* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953); *Les Psaumes, traduits et présentés par André Chouraqui* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1956).

translation work of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig who, beginning in the 1920s, had set out to create an alternative German version that would rival the classic German translation of Martin Luther. Unlike previous translators, who had emphasized readability in the vernacular, their approach consciously highlighted the “otherness” of the text, and attempted to reproduce, as far as possible, the structure and flavor of the Hebrew, for readers largely unacquainted with the Jewish Scriptures in their original language, losing as little of the semantic weight of words and expressions as possible—even if this resulted in a kind of artificial “hybrid” German, which was “bent” to conform to Hebrew idioms and a very different worldview<sup>7</sup>.

This was the model that captured Chouraqui’s imagination and, from the outset, he established several guiding principles for his work:

- 1) that, to the maximum degree possible, the same Hebrew word would be translated consistently throughout, to enable non-Hebrew-speakers to discern patterns of word usage that are often important to the Biblical authors’ purposes, but can be muddled by many translators’ preference for varying their word choices according to context;
- 2) that he would tend to avoid terms that had become “theologically sanctified” (or “ossified”), since they often implicitly included a veneer of theological orthodoxy, which narrowed down the range of possible interpretations and sometimes smoothed over irregularities or awkward aspects of the text<sup>8</sup>;
- 3) that he would not hesitate to mine the whole history of the French language for his vocabulary, often drawing on rarefied, technical or obscure terms and nuances, which he believed more closely approximated the meaning of the Hebrew<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, he would not be afraid to coin new, derivative terms, when standard French seemed unable to express some important aspect of the original text;
- 4) that he would try to communicate, in French, key aspects of the etymology of important Hebrew words, and to capture at least something of the word-games and linguistic playfulness that often mark Biblical narrative, but which are generally extremely difficult to reproduce adequately in any other language;
- 5) to prefer more *concrete* renderings to more *abstract* ones, in keeping with his understanding of the distinctive character of Hebraic versus Greek modes of thought.

The process, which began in 1972, would take him more than three years of intense work, during which he frequently retreated to the contemplative stillness of the Catholic Trappist

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<sup>7</sup> On the Buber-Rosenzweig version, see: Mara H. Benjamin, *Rosenzweig’s Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Alan T. Levenson, *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible: How Scholars in Germany, Israel, and America Transformed an Ancient Text*. (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Prophets thus become “les inspirés,” the Psalms become “les Louanges,” angels are “messagers,” etc.

<sup>9</sup> In his New Testament translation, Chouraqui translates “tax-collector” with the Old French term *gabelou*, referring to those who collected the *gabelle*, a particularly hated medieval tax on food and drink.

monastery of Latroun, north-west of Jerusalem. The first of his volumes came off the press in January 1974, and by 1977, the first edition of his entire 26-volume translation was available in print. Almost immediately, it sparked both admiration and detraction. Until his death, Chouraqui continued to re-work and improve his translation, publishing several subsequent revised versions. Until his death, he was a lightning-rod for critics, who panned his admittedly unusual style, and a source of inspiration for those who found a rugged and attractive new freshness in those ancient texts that spoke to them with a more vigorous and compelling voice.

It is possible to get a small taste of Chouraqui's general method by examining just a few verses of his translation, beginning with the very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1. What immediately strikes the French reader is its first word: *Entête*, a term which does not exist (in that form) in French. In French, the expression means, literally, "at the head"—Chouraqui's attempt to reproduce the fact that the original Hebrew expression *Bereishit* is derived from the Hebrew noun *ro'sh*, "head". Whereas others would choose the more colloquial "In the beginning" or "At the start," Chouraqui wanted French readers to realize that, in Hebrew, the term *ro'sh* has a much broader semantic field than in English or French, and is used, in some form or another, nearly 850 times in the Tanakh<sup>10</sup>. Inasmuch as Hebrew has a predilection for using body parts in a more extended way than English or French, Chouraqui wished to highlight that difference for his readership.

A second thing that strikes the French reader is Chouraqui's use of the plural "ciels" (with an *s*) in that same verse. The more normal colloquial term in French is either "ciel" (singular) or the plural "cieux". However, here (as in many other places in his translation), Chouraqui is trying to signal to his reader that there is some linguistic or theological anomaly in the Hebrew which he feels deserves to be grappled with—in this case, the fact that the Hebrew term for heaven, *shamayim* [שָׁמַיִם], is, in fact, a Hebrew *dual* form, a fact that has spurred linguistic and rabbinic commentary for centuries<sup>11</sup>. *Why* should there be a hint of *two* heavens? Chouraqui doesn't want to impose a particular interpretation, but he *does* want his readers to be aware of the issue, and be able to wrestle with possible answers for themselves. Similarly, throughout the text, Chouraqui will use the Hebrew term *Elohîms* (with an *s*) for God, to enable his audience to realize that there is something unusual in the fact that the Hebrew term is plural. Whether one wishes to attribute that to a "plural of majesty" or a

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<sup>10</sup> By comparison, the NRSV uses the English "head" only 447 times in the Old Testament, and the French *Bible de Jérusalem* uses "tête" only 407 times.

<sup>11</sup> Jewish and Christian commentaries have traditionally explained this is a reference to the "earthly/present" city of Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim shel mattah*), and the "heavenly/future" city of Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*)—the Holy City in its eschatological perfection, in the presence of God: "You find that Jerusalem on high is situated directly opposite the earthly Jerusalem. It was because the earthly Jerusalem was exceedingly precious to Him that He fashioned another one on high, as it is said: *Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before me* (Isa. 49:16) ...[The city that the Lord built was] on high, directly opposite the one on earth, and concerning which He vowed that His Shekhinah would not enter the city above until the earthly Jerusalem was erected. How beloved was Israel in the sight of the Holy One, blessed be He!" (Samuel A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes and Indexes*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1995, 648). See also Galatians 4:26 and Hebrews 12:22-23, which develop this dichotomy theologically.

“plural of intensity”—or whether one sees it as a remnant of an early Hebrew worldview, predating monotheism—Chouraqui aims not to hide difficulties in the text, but to expose them so that they can be honestly addressed and reflected on.

When, in verse 2, the universe is said to be a formless void, Chouraqui takes advantage of a felicitous French borrowing from the Hebrew to bridge the two cultures. The earth was “*tohu-et-bohu*,” he says, a particularly brilliant choice, since the French term, meaning “chaos, confusion or commotion,” transliterates and directly reproduces the Hebrew expression [תהו וְבוהוֹ] used here<sup>12</sup>. Chouraqui’s sensitivity to various literary registers of French frequently enables him to choose what the French call “*le mot juste*”—just the perfect word needed in a particular context.

I could provide dozens of examples of the unique and striking ways in which André Chouraqui translates the *Tanakh*. For our purposes, however, these are only a stepping-stone to our larger purpose, which is to explore how Chouraqui’s work is a tool to build bridges and make connections between various faith groups—because that is, explicitly and undeniably, a key contributing factor to his overall project, which is actually larger than merely an innovative and thought-provoking Old Testament translation.

Having completed his translation of the books of the *Tanakh*, Chouraqui did not *stop* there. Instead, he took the revolutionary step of continuing on, initially with a translation of the Christian Scriptures<sup>13</sup> and, eventually, in 1990, his own French translation of the entire *Qur’an*. Having spent more than forty years working in interreligious dialogue, in Europe, in Israel and elsewhere, Chouraqui was convinced of a fundamental *linguistic* unity—rooted in a *theological* unity—linking the three Abrahamic Scriptures, and he believed that the only way to really develop a sensitive and sympathetic grasp of the holy books of Christianity and Islam was to grapple with them “from the inside”—that is, by translating them himself. He is, therefore, quite likely the only person in history to have single-handedly translated the Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scriptures from their original languages, and this fact offered him a uniquely global perspective on what unites—and divides—the various families of Abraham’s children.

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<sup>12</sup> “Tohu-bohu: Nom que les livres hébraïques donnent au Chaos primitif, à l’état confus des éléments qui précéda la création. Il se dit figurément et familièrement d’une Grande confusion, d’un grand tumulte ou d’un bruyant conflit d’opinions, de paroles.” (*Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 8th ed. [1932-35], “Dictionnaires d’autrefois” project, accessed April 22, 2013; <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=tohu-bohu>) This Hebrew expression is a particularly challenging one, and has been variously understood by translators, commentators and scholars: Robert Alter (*Genesis*, 1997) suggests “welter and waste”; Everett Fox (*The Five Books of Moses*, ) has “wild and waste”; the NRSV has “a formless void”; the New English Translation as “without shape and empty,” and the French *Bible de Jérusalem* has “vide et vague”.

<sup>13</sup> This made Chouraqui one of a very small handful of Jews in history to have translated all or part of the Christian Scriptures. On this, see: Murray Watson, *Translation for Transformation: André Chouraqui and His Translation of the Gospels*. Ph.D. diss. Trinity College, Dublin, 2010, especially Chapter 3, “Chouraqui’s Intellectual Antecedents: Hebrew and ‘Hebraized’ Versions of the New Testament”.

I am, unfortunately, entirely illiterate as regards Arabic, and therefore unable to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of Chouraqui's French version of the Qur'an<sup>14</sup>. Although I will mention one or two relevant aspects of his Qur'anic translation, I will primarily limit my comments to the way in which his translation of the Christian Scriptures—the New Testament—intends to foster a deeper, more respectful relationship between Judaism and Christianity. For one of Chouraqui's stated goals was to help *Christians* re-discover just how Jewish their New Testament was, and to enable modern *Jews* to realize just how Jewish the New Testament was, so that it could conceivably become a bridge for conversation and enlightenment between those faiths, rather than the barrier (or polemical "club") it had traditionally been<sup>15</sup>. Chouraqui was one of a number of twentieth-century scholars (many of them Jewish) who sought to re-insert Jesus into the history of first-century Judaism<sup>16</sup>.

The same basic principles and goals undergird Chouraqui's New Testament as did his work with the Hebrew Scriptures, and many of the same methods and wordings are applied. Fundamental to Chouraqui's work—especially on the Gospels—is his firm belief that Jesus was Jewish, and that early Christianity can only be properly understood within its Jewish matrix. He draws here on several decades of work by Jewish and Christian scholars of the historical Jesus, and his own extensive study of ancient Judaism and Christianity. Today, that instinct is largely considered axiomatic in New Testament study<sup>17</sup>, but for an Israeli Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> One of the Amazon.fr reviews of Chouraqui's Qur'an translation states: "The translator is one of those rare people who makes use of his profound knowledge of Semitic roots, which generally are identical, or very similar, in both Arabic and Hebrew. Furthermore, his translation shows that Mr. Chouraqui is not only familiar with the *tafsir* (the external commentary) but also the *ta'wil* (the internal commentary) of the sacred books. For example, in the first Sura, he correctly translates 'alamin' (plural!) with the French plural ('des univers'), allowing the profound 'vertical' meaning to shine through. He translates 'Er-Rahman' as 'le Matriciant' and 'Er-Rahim' as 'le Matriciel,' highlighting the feminine quality of these Names, derived from the root Ra-Ha-Mim, a complement to 'Rabb'. For those who are interested and capable of understanding the multiple layers of meaning in such a text, this is an excellent translation. This translation is less well-suited for those who adhere to the theological dogmas of Kalam, or to the literal schools of thought, as in other traditions." (My translation from the French original, online at: [http://www.amazon.fr/review/RQI7I9YKNE38L/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=2221069641&linkCode=&nodeID=&tag=](http://www.amazon.fr/review/RQI7I9YKNE38L/ref=cm_cr_pr_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=2221069641&linkCode=&nodeID=&tag=))

For significant reviews of Chouraqui's Qur'anic translation, see:

Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa, "De l'hébraïsation moderne du Coran: À propos de la traduction du Coran par A. Chouraqui," *Arabica* 42 (1995), 107-26;

Jacques Gilliot, "Le Coran: Trois traductions récentes," *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992), 159-77.

<sup>15</sup> "Ma grâce, si vous voulez, c'est d'avoir exprimé un double mouvement, celui du retour de l'Église à ses sources hébraïques et, du côté des juifs, celui de l'insertion dans l'histoire du peuple juif de l'histoire de Jésus. La convergence de ces deux courants de pensée, qui sont centraux, d'une part chez les juifs, d'autre part chez les chrétiens, par leur confluence a provoqué ma traduction du Nouveau Testament." (André Chouraqui, *Retour aux racines: Entretiens avec Jacques Deschanel*. Paris: Centurion, 1981, 131).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the comments of Rabbi Lewis Browne, in his collection of Jewish literature, *The Wisdom of Israel*: "The New Testament has a place in this anthology because it obviously contains much wisdom, and this wisdom is unmistakably Hebraic. Those who uttered it were all born in Israel, and so were virtually all those who recorded it. The fact that they were generally regarded as dissidents, and that their teachings were eventually branded heresies, does not in the least reflect on the essential Jewishness of the spirit animating their lives and words." (New York: Random House, 1945; Modern Library edition, 1956, 147). See also: Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> "I would suggest that one definite gain that must be incorporated [from the Third Quest for the historical Jesus] is ... the true and thorough Jewishness of Jesus. From the Council of Chalcedon onwards, the touchstone of genuine

scholar in the 1970s, this was still a fairly novel approach, which raised eyebrows on the part of his scholarly colleagues.

To help make this point, Chouraqui's method relies heavily on his project to "re-Semiticize" the Scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths, highlighting in various ways *their linguistic, cultural and geographic rootedness in the Middle East*, which is—in Chouraqui's view—one of the fundamental underlying commonalities among Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but one who has sometimes been neglected in the past, and needs to be recovered, if these three faiths are to understand themselves as essentially connected. The Hebrew, Christian and Muslim Scriptures draw upon, and presuppose, a worldview that they largely share in common, and which can—if appreciated—serve as a basis for dialogue and mutual enrichment<sup>18</sup>.

How does he accomplish this? In a number of ways.

He chooses, for example, to re-Semiticize the personal names of key New Testament figures. Jesus is now *Iéshoua'*, much closer to the original Hebrew than "Jesus," a Latinized form of a Greek translation of an originally Hebrew name (*Yeshua' → Iêsous → Iesus → Jesus*). Similarly, John the Baptist becomes *Yochanan the Immerser*; Simon Peter is *Shim'on Pétros*, James son of Zebedee is *Ia'acob ben Zabdi*, the Virgin Mary is *Miriam*, Elijah is *Éliyahou* and Solomon is *Shelomo*. A parallel process has been applied to place-names, rendering Bethlehem once more as *Beit-Lèhèm*, Samaria as *Shromrôn*, Galilee as the *Galil* and Magdala as *Migdal*<sup>19</sup>. The very strangeness of the names when a Christian first encounters them in Chouraqui's version is a salutary reminder that these events took place in a very

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Christian faith in Christ has been the formula 'truly divine and truly human'. Yet it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that, in defense of the 'truly divine,' the 'truly human' has sometimes been obscured or swallowed up in a sort of crypto-monophysitism. What the third quest can supply as an aid to regaining the Chalcedonian balance is the firm *basso continuo* of 'truly Jewish' as the concrete, historical expression and underpinning of the theological 'truly human'. To speak in Johannine terms: when the Word became flesh, the Word did not simply take on an all-purpose, generic, one-size-fits-all human nature. Such a view would not take seriously the radical historicity of both human existence and divine revelation. The Word became truly flesh insofar as the Word became truly Jewish. No true Jewishness, no true humanity. Hence, contrary to the charge that the high christology of orthodox Christianity necessarily leads to a covert theological anti-Semitism, I think that a proper understanding of the Chalcedonian formula, illuminated by the third quest, necessarily leads to a ringing affirmation of the Jewishness of the flesh the Word assumed. Even if the third quest has no other impact on contemporary christology, the emphatic reaffirmation of the Jewishness of Jesus will make the whole enterprise worthwhile. Something lasting will have been gained." (John P. Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 [1999], 486).

<sup>18</sup> "Toute lecture du Nouveau Testament, y compris du corpus paulinien, souligne bien l'unité de l'univers spirituel et culturel des Hébreux, efface des frontières que les rivalités religieuses, aggravées par les grandes tragédies de l'histoire, avaient édifiées entre le monde juif et le monde chrétien. Restitué à son contexte historique et à son substrat sémitique, le Nouveau Testament, sans rien prendre de sa substance théologique, prend tout le relief d'une irrésistible authenticité." (André Chouraqui, *Un pacte neuf*, 1979, Préface ; <http://nachouraqui.tripod.com/id61.htm>) One of the obvious challenges to Chouraqui's approach is that the texts he is treating cover more than 2500 years of history; to what degree can one really posit a largely identical social or cultural situation over such an enormous timespan, and in such different contexts? Is this "unity" not a largely artificial (and somewhat idealized) construct, not necessarily reflecting the historical realities involved?

<sup>19</sup> The Sadducees and the Pharisees are, likewise, returned to their more Hebraic names, as the *Sadouqîm* and *Peroushîm*. Perhaps by using these forms, Chouraqui hoped to sidestep some of the opprobrium these names had acquired in the minds of many Christians, for whom "Sadducees and Pharisees" is often understood as shorthand for "the enemies of Jesus".



different cultural and religious world, where we as moderns are largely strangers, and where we may need to adjust our sensitivities and expectations to avoid imposing a modern Western worldview on what was, essentially, an Oriental world 2000 years ago. It also challenges us to think more deeply about the *meaning* behind those names, which is often obscured in traditional English and French translations, but which is often significant in the biblical tradition and subsequent interpretations. Chouraqui wants his readers to root themselves in a shared historical and cultural space, and these names will obviously sound very familiar to Jewish readers, especially in Israel. It is a way of subtly but effectively breaking down psychological barriers—and it draws on solid modern scholarship to make important historical and theological points.

Chouraqui seeks to thoroughly root his Gospels in their time and place, and this sometimes leads to jarring translations for those familiar with more traditional Biblical versions. For example, the usual “the lilies of the field” [τὰ κρίνα τοῦ ἀγροῦ] in Matthew 6:28 is rendered by Chouraqui as “les amaryllis des champs” (the amaryllises of the field). This reflects both his knowledge (as a longtime Israeli citizen) that lilies, at least those flowers classified botanically as lilies, simply do not *grow* wild in Israel, but are found only in cultivated gardens, and his awareness that many modern translators have chosen a less-than-specific term—perhaps “flowers of the field”—to translate the Greek *krinon*, because of the obvious difficulty in equating modern flora with 2000-year-old allusions<sup>20</sup>.

Chouraqui is well aware of a longstanding scholarly struggle with the Gospels: the fact that they have been preserved for us only in Greek, but that Jesus and most of his earliest followers would have spoken a Semitic language (probably both Hebrew and Aramaic, with Chouraqui presuming Hebrew as the more predominant language). Hence, to the degree that the Greek accurately records the *ipsissima verba Iesu* (the very words of the historical Jesus), it is helpful (and sometimes necessary) to speculate on what Semitic concept, word or phrase undergirds the Greek text. Since the New Testament draws heavily on the language and thought-world of the Old (both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint), it is often easy to discover a fairly precise equation between the Greek and Hebrew, and Chouraqui exploits these equations to unify the vocabulary of his translation. In other places, he is content, on the basis of his in-depth knowledge of Semitic languages, to speculate about what the Greek might mean, if retroverted into Hebrew.

Two revealing examples of these principles at work can be found in Chouraqui’s translation of the Beatitudes, and in his rendering of references to God’s mercy and compassion.

Traditionally, each line of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke has begun with a phrase such as “Blessed are the poor” or “Happy are the poor”—in French, “Bienheureux les pauvres” or

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<sup>20</sup> “What flower (or flowers) κρίνα denotes (κρίνον occurs over twenty times in the LXX, most often for *šošanna*; for the rabbinic *qērinon*, a loanword, see Jastrow, s.v.) is uncertain ... If it is the purple anemone, the image of Solomon’s purple robes could be in mind ... Other possibilities include the gladiolus, the crocus, some variety of poppy, the white Madonna lily, or Galilean flowers in general. This last option is now widely favoured; Jesus was speaking not of one particular flower, but of the several beautiful flowers which bloom in abundance between January and May.” (W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC. Vol. 1, 654).

“Heureux les pauvres”<sup>21</sup>. Chouraqui recognizes the structure as a perfectly good Hebrew phrase, “Happy the one who...” or “Happy those who...”, based on the Hebrew macarism *Ashrei ha-ish asher...* Chouraqui, with his distinctive (and almost obsessive) focus on Semitic etymology, argues that the expression *Ashrei* is itself derived from the Hebrew root *yashar*, implying an unobstructed movement straight ahead, toward a fixed goal<sup>22</sup>. It is, Chouraqui suggests, not so much a *promise* as it is a term of *congratulations* and *encouragement*, implying that those described in the Beatitudes are “on the right track,” and are to be supported in their often difficult journey toward God’s reign. Chouraqui’s translation of *ashrei* is “En marche!”—roughly the equivalent of our colloquial English “Up and at ‘em!” or “Keep moving!” The Greek-American literary and theological scholar Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis says:

The Hebrew “subtext” of the Gospel ... adds a valuable dimension to the meaning of *μακάριος*. The Jewish translator of the New Testament André Chouraqui suggests that the Hebrew equivalent אֲשֵׁרֵי (*ashrei*) indicates the thrill of the wayfarer who is about to reach his goal, in other words, the joy of the pilgrim who never halts in his movement toward the sanctuary of the heavenly homeland where God his Father awaits him. Chouraqui therefore translates *μακάριος* as “underway” or “forward”, thus keynoting movement toward the good goal and the rejoicing that fills the pilgrim at being sure that he will reach God by this road and no other.<sup>23</sup>

As another French author puts it: “These are the ones that Jesus addresses first and foremost ... to assure them that ... the trials that these beaten-down brothers are experiencing can be transformed into ... real victories ... It is possible not to resign oneself [to a situation], but to get back up and set out again on the journey.”<sup>24</sup>

As such, Chouraqui would argue that it is a consoling and dynamic expression, to a much greater degree than Christians have often assumed and taught, and his translation has captured the imagination of many French readers and Biblical commentators in the last four decades<sup>25</sup>. While “en marche” has by no means become a mainstream French translation, nevertheless it has provoked many readers to consider other possible nuances of those most familiar New Testament lines—and that is precisely as Chouraqui would want it.

<sup>21</sup> In Greek: *Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί*

<sup>22</sup> “C’est une exclamation à peu près intraduisible, qui veut dire : « Marcher d’un pas ferme sur une route sans obstacle. Debout et *en marche* ! » Vous comprenez, il voulait nous encourager.” (André Chouraqui, *Procès à Jérusalem*. Paris: Cerf, 1980, 100).

“*‘ashrei*,” qui est une exclamation au pluriel construit, d’une racine *‘ashar*, qui implique, none pas l’idée d’un vague bonheur hédoniste, mais celle d’une rectitude, *iashar*, celle d’un homme qui va droit vers YHWH.” (André Chouraqui, *Un pacte neuf*. Turnhout (Belgium): Brépols, 1984. Note to Matthew 5:6)

<sup>23</sup> Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996, 185.

<sup>24</sup> “... [C]’est à eux que [Jésus] s’adresse en priorité ... pour leur assurer que ... les épreuves que ces frères meurtris connaissent, peuvent être transformées ... en ... de victoires réelles. Il est possible de ne pas se résigner, mais de se relever et de reprendre la route, cf. la traduction (malgré tout bien fantaisiste!) de Chouraqui: « En marche! »” (Alphonse Maillot, *Histoire d’eaux et d’autres*. Lyon: Olivétan, 2007, 8)

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Louis Schweitzer, *Les béatitudes ou l’hymne à la joie: Carême protestant 2004 sur France Culture* (Lyon: Les Bergers et les Mages, 2004, 17).

One of the more interesting of Chouraqui's translations—and one which carries over into his Qur'anic translation, is his manner of capturing the idea of the *mercy* or *compassion* of God, a central theme in all three Abrahamic Scriptures.

As every beginning Hebrew student comes to realize, the term in Hebrew for that mercy or compassion is *rachamim*, a plural form derived from the Hebrew noun *rechem*, for a mother's womb—and thus, crudely put, the “wombliness” of God. Mercy and compassion are expressed by means of a strikingly feminine and maternal image, which can provide a valuable counterbalance to more “masculine” images and titles. Chouraqui was certainly not oblivious to that linkage, which he sought to communicate as something important, striking and distinctively Semitic.

In French, the more common terms for the womb are “ventre” or “entrailles”. But Chouraqui has chosen a rarer, more unusual term: *matrices*, which captures masterfully both the idea of the “matrix” out of which human life emerges, but also subtly conjures up the maternal connection through its incorporation of much of the Latin *mater*, “mother”. However, to provide the necessary range of parts of speech, Chouraqui needed to create derivative neologisms, convinced that the Greek semantic clusters beginning with οἰκτίρ- and σπλαγχν- are rendering the Hebrew *rachamim* and its cognates (*rachum*, *rachamani*, etc). He thus crafts a new French verb, *matricier* (=to act with compassion and mercy), and a corresponding adjective, *matriciel* (=characterized by compassion and mercy). And so the Beatitude blessing the merciful, who shall obtain mercy, is, for Chouraqui, “En marche, les matriciels! Oui, ils seront matriciels!” and the command to be merciful to others, as God has been merciful to oneself (Luke 6:36) is “Be *matriciels*, just as your father is *matriciel*”. It is no coincidence that, in Chouraqui's translation of the divine self-revelation in Exodus 34:6, the compassionate God is there described as “Él *matriciel*”. For him, Jesus is clearly speaking out of the faith-experience of his own Jewish people, who had known God's mercy and compassion throughout their long history. The *Greek* concept is merely a translation of the same *Hebrew* concept, and so deserves to be translated in the same way, to highlight that the content of Jesus' central teachings is often just a re-statement, nuancing or expansion of what is already implicit in the *Tanakh*. There is newness, certainly, but there is also a great deal of continuity and similarity, and improving Jewish-Christian relations demands that this be acknowledged.

And it is also here that Chouraqui's three-part interfaith project is most clearly visible in his rendering of the Muslim Scriptures. The *Bismillah*, invoking God as the Merciful and Compassionate One, occurs at the beginning of every *sura* of the Qur'an except the ninth. In the Arabic, God is spoken of as *er-Rachman* and *er-Rachim*, two terms both rooted—like the Hebrew—in the word for “womb” (in Arabic, *racham*). English translations of the Qur'an translate those names variously:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful (Khalifa<sup>26</sup>, Yusuf Ali<sup>27</sup>)

<sup>26</sup> Rashad Khalifa, *Quran: The Final Scripture (Authorized English Version)*. Tucson, AZ: Islamic Productions, 1981; <http://www.quranbrowser.org>

<sup>27</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. London: Islamic Computing Centre; <http://www.quranbrowser.org>

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful (Pickthall<sup>28</sup>, Shakir<sup>29</sup>)

In the name of God, Merciful to all, Compassionate to each! (Khalidi<sup>30</sup>)

None of these translations, however, seems to make an effort to capture the undeniable etymological connection between the two words *Rachman* and *Rachim*. Chouraqui, using the same translation he had previously used for his Old and New Testament versions, says “Au nom d’Allah, le Matriciant, le Matriciel”—that is, God, who *actively has compassion* on humanity, and who *is himself characterized by compassion*, or, arguably, *who is Compassion itself*. Chouraqui’s keen sensitivity to the linguistic roots of Semitic expressions yields a translation that is novel and thought-provoking—and that perhaps opens up layers of meaning inherent in the original terms, that have often not been exploited or considered because of the limits imposed by more “orthodox” readings. In a similar vein, he chooses to title his version of the Islamic Scriptures, not simply “The Qur’an,” but “L’Appel”—“The Call,” since in many Semitic languages, the root letters *q-r-* express the idea of calling out to someone (almost shouting!)—in this case, *God* passionately calling out to *humanity*, to communicate the final and definitive revelation of God’s will, according to which humanity will be judged. While *L’Appel* is an intriguing suggestion, it has not escaped criticism from other scholars, who argue that the root *q-r-* does not have this specific sense in Arabic<sup>31</sup>.

Chouraqui’s methodology has won many devotees, both among scholars and the French reading public, who have found in his wordings a powerful newness in ancient texts that many religious people believed they already essentially understood. He has shaken up traditional readings and interpretations, and has opened up the biblical and qur’anic texts in a way that is simultaneously inviting and perplexing. His approach, perhaps best described by the French adjective *déroutant* (unsettling, puzzling, disconcerting), has been variously described by its critics as naïve, eccentric, clunky, inelegant, unreadable, and obsessive to the point of losing scholarly objectivity. There is no doubt that he frequently causes his readers

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*. London: Islamic Computing Centre; <http://www.quranbrowser.org>

<sup>29</sup> M.H. Shakir, *The Quran*. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., 1995; <http://www.quranbrowser.org>

<sup>30</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *The Qur’an: A New Translation*. New York: Viking, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Arij Roest Croellius has written: “The very first words of the Qur’ān, as received by Muḥammad, are—after the *bismillāh* —:

Recite in the name of your Lord who created,

Created man from a blood-clot,

Recite, and your Lord is the Most Generous. (96,1-3).

The correct interpretation of this imperative *iqra’* is ... important for the understanding of the development of the qur’anic representation of revelation.

The original meaning of the root QR’, in Semitic languages, is ‘to call.’ This sense, which still exists in Hebraic and Aramaic, is not known in Arabic. ‘To call’ or ‘to proclaim,’ therefore, cannot be the right translation of *qara’a*. This interpretation, proposed by Hirschfeld, and of late again by Blachère, has been sufficiently criticised by Noldeke.

With the apparition of scripture in the ancient Near-Eastern cultures, the verb acquired a new meaning: the reading or recitation from a written text. In the cultural language, the words *qeryāna* (Aramaic) and *miqrā’* and *qerī’ā* (Hebrew) were used with the technical meaning of ‘Scripture reading,’ indicating not only the act of reading, but also the part of Scripture to be read. This usage certainly has influenced the qur’anic language ... *Qara’a*, therefore, in the qur’anic language, means ‘to recite according to a given exemplar,’ ‘to reproduce in spoken words an original text.’ This exemplar can be words heard and kept by memory, or words preserved in writing. Thus the meaning ‘to read’ is included, and also—exceptionally—found in the Qur’ān.” (Arij A. Roest Croellius, *The Word in the Experience of Revelation in Qur’an and Hindu Scriptures*. Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1974, 144-46).

to “stumble,” to stop and ponder why he has chosen a particular (and often unexpected) term<sup>32</sup>. What they discover is that there is nothing arbitrary or capricious about what he has done; on the contrary, there is almost always a deep logic and consistency which reflect Chouraqui’s overall philosophy about the interconnectedness of the Abrahamic religions, and his distinctive translational methodology and purpose.

While individual aspects of Chouraqui’s overall project, and his concrete choices, can all be criticized, what is beyond denying is the brilliance and breadth of the man himself, and the vision that could inspire an individual to embark on an undertaking as daunting as the translation of three faiths’ foundational texts, in three very different languages. It is a corpus that yields remarkable intellectual, linguistic and religious insights to the patient seeker, and that cannot fail to astonish, inform and inspire those who make the effort to follow where Chouraqui leads. While his translations may be more challenging than would be appropriate in a bedside Bible, his work makes a stimulating point of comparison, when set alongside more mainstream French versions, such as the *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible [TOB]*, the *Bible de Jérusalem*, or the *Bible en français courant*. Nearly forty years of use has highlighted some areas where revision or correction might be appropriate, in the light of more recent scholarship, but Chouraqui’s version is in no sense “dated”; on the contrary, the growing dialogue between Christians and Jews, and the triologue between Jews, Christians and Muslims (especially in France), have demonstrated how far ahead of his time Chouraqui was, and what lasting value there is in his contributions. English readers who have become enamored with the work of biblical translators like Robert Alter or Everett Fox have some sense of why Chouraqui’s ruggedly literal translation is important, as an alternative (some would say “fringe”) version that un.masks aspects of the beauty and richness of the biblical languages for those who do not personally have access to them<sup>33</sup>. And, despite all of the criticisms made of Chouraqui for excessive literalism, for questionable retroversions and for a slavishly “Semitic” approach, there is no denying the growing scholarly interest in his work, in terms of colloquia and papers, and the recently formed “Friends of André Chouraqui” is working diligently to share his work with new audiences who have not previously been familiar with it.

Chouraqui’s translations are monumental, both in themselves but also because of the larger vision which inspired them: a conscious attempt to bring together Abraham’s sons and daughters in shared reflection and study of the books they look to as inspired. Chouraqui, who had witnessed first-hand some of the more horrific and violent events of the twentieth century, was not ignorant of the challenges his enterprise faced. He chose, however, not to be

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<sup>32</sup> Some editions of Chouraqui’s translations have included explanatory notes or glosses, the most extensive being the commentary found in his 10-volume *L’Univers de la Bible* (Paris: Éditions Lidis, 1982-85).

<sup>33</sup> “Tout le monde ne peut pas profiter de la version de Chouraqui, réservée à une élite intellectuelle et culturelle.” (Laurent Gagnebin, *Le Secret*. Paris: Van Dieren, 2007, 71). Jean Bacon speaks of “... la Bible de A. Chouraqui, dont les écarts de traduction sont peu familiers aux lecteurs occidentaux plus enclins à la raison que portés par l’imaginaire et l’imagerie proche-orientale.” (*Les cultures à la rescousse de la foi: Traité de l’inculturation*. Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2001, 148).

For a good review of why Fox’s (and, by extension, Chouraqui’s) translation is helpful and worthwhile, see: Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Getting the message,” *The Jerusalem Report*. March 21, 1996, accessed May 1, 2013, <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi/docview/218741581?accountid=15115>

a *prisoner* of them, and to use his considerable scholarly, political and personal gifts to work, slowly but surely, for a greater *rapprochement* among the three faiths which serve a single God, and which claim Abraham as their common patriarch. His translations are open to legitimate critique, and his hopes may be judged naïve, unrealistic or Pollyanna-ish. Our changing world, however, has demonstrated that there is no *real* alternative to dialogue, unless we wish to resign ourselves to an unending “clash of civilizations,” to use Samuel Huntington’s term. André Chouraqui fervently believed that sacred texts could provide a necessary bridge to understanding, discovery and conversation ... could highlight commonality rather than difference ... could lead their readers incrementally closer to the *shalom* or *salaam* or *eirēnē* that they proclaim as God’s will. Today, as interfaith conversations multiply with each passing year, Chouraqui’s landmark editions of the Tanakh, the New Testament and the Qur’an hold, I believe, significant potential to help overcome stereotypes and prejudice, to promote renewed interest in religious texts, and to inspire a younger generation of translators and religious scholars who can appreciate and learn from his legacy, and can perhaps attempt something similar in an English context.

Rarely have biblical translators also been interfaith activists. Rarely have editions of the Scriptures been deliberately imagined as a point of positive contact between faiths, and a source of reconciliation and renewal. To that degree, André Chouraqui accomplished something new and almost revolutionary in his decades working with the Abrahamic holy books, and marked out a challenging and provocative path for the adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Six years after his death, André Chouraqui continues to challenge us to translate differently, to communicate differently, and to think differently. His life was a unique confluence of history, culture, politics and religion, coming together at just the right time, in just the right circumstances. It was a life of passionate commitment—as a scholar and as a human being—to peace, unity, friendship and dialogue. And it is thus a life from which we have much to be inspired by, and much to learn.

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