

Murray Watson
Restoring the Gospels' Jewish Voice

(New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2023), paperback, xxxvi+182 pp.

JEAN DUHAIME

jean.duhaime@umontreal.ca

Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec H3T 1J4, Canada

This book by Murray Watson, as noted in Yehezkel Landau's Foreword, is a fitting testimony to the life and the legacy of scholar, politician, and lawyer André Chouraqui (1917-2007). He was, Landau writes, "an extraordinary man of deep conviction, inordinate compassion, and unparalleled devotion to peacebuilding through interfaith understanding" (xxv). For Chouraqui, one way to promote understanding among the Abrahamic faiths was to produce translations of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an which would bring to light their common background in the languages and cultures of Ancient Israel.

The book is divided in two sections. In the first one, "Translation for Transformation," Watson introduces the reader to the historical context and methodology of Chouraqui's translation before providing a close reading of his "distinctive linguistic strategies" (5). As a translator, Chouraqui used a "formal-equivalence model," i.e. a model that favors "the structure and linguistic roots of the original, over easy vernacular readability" (4).

Moreover, in the case of the New Testament, Chouraqui attempted to rediscover the Hebrew or the Aramaic behind the Greek words "and the exact thought they are expressing" (quoting Chouraqui [22]). He could therefore translate consistently key terms from of the Old and New testaments, thus showing their unity and allowing Christians to hear the voice of Jesus as the voice of "*a Jewish individual speaking a Semitic language*" (22, emphasis in original). People and places are given their Semitic names (*Yeshua* for Jesus, *Mitzrayims* for Egypt, etc.), the etymology of which often conveys something about the character or the mission of a biblical figure otherwise lost in translation (26).

The translation of selected key terms of the Gospels are analyzed to show how Chouraqui attempted to avoid French terms which, over the centuries, "became divorced from their original meaning or were overly Christianized" (36). Hence, Chouraqui's rendering of the Greek *hierus* (Hebr. *kohen*) is not "priest," which could bring to mind the later Catholic clergy, but "desservant," more clearly linked to liturgical service. The Greek "*prophetes*" (Hebr. *nabi*) is translated with "inspired one" rather than "prophet." The phrase "*to pneuma hagion*" becomes "the

sacred breath” instead of “the Holy Spirit.” These choices are critically discussed and assessed.

Watson also draws attention to Chouraqui's rendering of a few linguistic particularities of Biblical Hebrew. Plural or dual forms found in proper names are represented by the addition of a final “s”, like in *Mitzrayims* or *Yerushalayims*, the later being a possible reference to the two Jerusalems, the earthly and the heavenly ones (66-69). Chouraqui also “generally favors the reproduction of cognates forms” (“they trembled a great trembling” [Mark 4:41]), generally avoided by translators following a dynamic-equivalence model. In the New Testament, he often translates “imperative futures as the command that is intended” (“Cry out his name: Yeshua!” in Matthew 1:21, instead of “You will name him Jesus” in NET Bible [74]). Though some have criticized these choices, Chouraqui's Bible has been popular for over five decades, demonstrating that “it is a version whose raw power and ‘decalcified’ phrasings revive the Bible,” concludes Watson (77).

Watson next turns to Chouraqui's life. In Section 2, “Une Vie Très Pleine [A Very Full Life],” Watson characterizes Chouraqui as “a man of three worlds,” whose life combined in a single person the Sephardic Jewish culture of his childhood in North Africa, the French culture of his higher education, and the Hebrew-speaking culture in which he was immersed after his immigration in Israel in 1958. Raised by parents “quite liberal in their outlook toward both Christians and Muslims,” the young Jew was taught to appreciate other cultures and religions (88). Chouraqui received both a religious and secular education, studying law at the Sorbonne but also the Hebrew Bible and Jewish literature at France's rabbinical seminary. Involved in the French Resistance during the war, he worked side by side with Catholics, Protestants, communists, and atheists, dreaming of universal brotherhood (104). After the war, he became deputy general secretary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and took part in the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, created by Jules Isaac in 1948.

After his *aliyah*, Chouraqui was appointed by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion as Advisor for the Integration of Ethnic Communities, serving until 1964. Deputy mayor of Jerusalem from 1965 to 1973, he made repeated efforts to encourage peaceful coexistence and even collaboration between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Jerusalem. Once he stepped down from elected office, he dedicated himself to his translation of the Bible, the first edition of which was a twenty-six volume set (*La Bible*, 1974-1977). It was followed by the ten large volumes of *L'univers de la Bible* (1982-1985), which included this translation along with “extensive editorial notes” to explain it and to provide archeological, historical, and cultural information (125). Chouraqui's French version of the Qur'an was published at the end of 1990. During these years, he also wrote three autobiographies and a few other books, including an essay promoting the development of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican (published a year before the actual agreement in 1993). He died peacefully in Jerusalem on July 9, 2007.

The Epilogue consists of a short assessment of Chouraqui's legacy, a man who, for his entire adult life, “tried to find ways for three of the world's great monotheistic faiths...to view one another differently, beyond the clichés and stereotypes of

their past” (137). Watson underscores three aspects of Chouraqui’s biblical translation: “his respectfully iconoclastic mode of translation” which offers new and refreshing renderings; “his efforts to highlight the linguistic roots...of many common biblical terms” and other linguistic characteristics of biblical Hebrew; and “his emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus as a necessary ‘interpretative key’ for the Gospels” (138). Applying similar principles to the Qur’an, Chouraqui provided Jews, Christians, and Muslims with the opportunity to discover “a shared language rooted in their history and their Scriptures,” a way to “find in their inspired texts the tools for building a hopeful and respectful future” (142).

The book also includes a Chronology of André Chouraqui’s Life (xi-xvii), an Afterword by Chouraqui’s colleague Eugene J. Fischer (143-45), a useful Glossary (147-52), and a Bibliography (169-82). The Notes, gathered at the end (153-67), contain not only references to the works cited but occasionally important information such as an explanation of Chouraqui’s rendering of the Tetragrammaton (164 n. 79).

With this book, Watson has provided a very helpful introduction to Chouraqui’s “remarkable and provocative” biblical translation (xxx), including its main features and the principles on which it was based. It is still published in France. Watson also presents Chouraqui’s “very full life” (xxxix) and the unique personal and cultural experiences which made such an achievement possible. In the Preface, Watson states that, since he has discovered them, he has found Chouraqui’s biblical translation and his work as an interfaith leader “richly inspirational” and that he will do his best “to convince the reader of the same” (xxxvi). He succeeded in a short but quite efficient way!