Pelletier, Anne-Marie, ed.

*Bibles en Français: Traduction et Tradition: Actes du Colloque des 5-6 décembre 2003*

Studium Notre-Dame de Paris

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This book is a collection of short papers presented at a conference held in Paris in 2003 at a Catholic seminary, the Studium Notre-Dame, on the theme “Translation and Tradition.” These papers articulate notions of theology, cultural tradition, and sacred translation in a French Catholic context. The conference is presented as a discussion paralleling the publication of the Catholic liturgical translation of the Bible into French.

The volume has an original presentation: it offers, along with the scholarly contributions, long quotations from famous authors (Valéry Larbaud, Jerome, Léon Bloy, Paul Claudel) on the Bible and the translation process. The content of the contributions varies: some are historical, theological, and (sometimes) apologetic reflections on the translation of the sacred scriptures, while others are more scholarly articles on specific questions raised by the act of translation. Yet both are written in a distinctively Catholic framework. Almost all the contributors to this book are affiliated either with the Institut Catholique de Paris or to the Studium Notre-Dame.

As I have observed, some articles are more theologically oriented, others more scholarly oriented. The introduction by Anne-Marie Pelletier (9–12) briefly rehearses the history and the problems posed by the act of translation. Placing the volume under the sign of
Babel and Pentecost, she insists on both the inseparability of the notions of translation and interpretation and on their importance in the process of a cultural formation. The papers seem to have been grouped according to the periods with which they deal.

The first group discusses issues related to the translation of both Testaments. Only one article deals with the Hebrew Bible: Olivier Artus makes a valuable contribution to the volume by dealing with the liturgical translation of the book of Numbers, of which several fragments are used in a liturgical context (“Les enjeux exégétiques de la traduction liturgique du livre des Nombres” [25–38]). His paper not only sheds light on the liturgical translation of Numbers but also brings new insights into the problem of the literary unity of the biblical book.

Several papers take the New Testament as their focus of attention. Two of them deal with New Testament texts through the lenses of textual and narrative approaches. Henry de Villefranche, in “Un texte en cache toujours un autre majuscules” (13–23), deals with two major principles of biblical interpretation, namely, intertextuality and the notion of accomplishment. Giving several examples for each principle, de Villefranche clearly aims to legitimate the Christian “canonical” reading of both Testaments. Michel Guéguen focuses on the repetition as literary process in the Bible (“L’art de la répétition biblique: L’exemple de Mc 1, 16-20” [41–50]). Elaborating on biblical scholarship dealing with repetition, Guéguen concentrates on Mark 1:16–20. Although he does not use the theoretical lens of intertextuality, the author discusses the relation between this episode and other call narratives in the Bible. Patrick Faure, dealing with the editorial problems posed by the text of Acts (“Peut-on éditer plusieurs textes d’un même livre biblique? Le cas des Actes des Apôtres” [61–70]) raises important questions about text-editing, translation (e.g., that of the retroversions), and canonicity.

Some of the papers dealing with the New Testament explore the translation process through comparative analysis. For example, Roselyne Dupont-Roc (“De la Septante au Nouveau Testament: Fécondité mutuelle de la traduction et des traditions” [51–60]) deals both with several examples of differences between the LXX and the MT in the book of Psalms and with citations of Psalms in the New Testament. One may regret that although she openly denies viewing the LXX as a praeparatio evangelica, her arguments tend to confirm that she does. For example, by emphasizing some of the choices made by the Greek translators (e.g., Pss 1; 2; 110), she suggests that “de façon subtile, ténue, mais très sûre, la LXX construit la cohérence d’une figure [i.e., Christ]” (55). Olivier de Cagny in his “Les récits de l’institution et les paroles dites avant la communion comparés à leur version dans le Nouveau Testament” (73–83), provides an interesting comparison between the citations of three New Testament passages used in the dialogue before the Eucharist and the original New Testament text. He also provides a synoptic table of the
New Testament texts read in the dialogue before communion and their different French translations both in the Bible and in the prayer books.

More space is offered to the paper given by the well-known French scholar Marguerite Harl (“La Bible en Sorbonne. Des Pères grecs à la Septante: Le témoignage d’une expérience” [95–118]). Her presentation is in the first part a summary of the book she is currently writing on her experience of teaching the LXX and the church fathers at the Sorbonne. One should be reminded here that the reconciliation between the teaching of religious literature and free-thinking at a university level in France owes much to the pioneering work of Madame Harl. The paper is largely autobiographic, but it will be of interest to anyone eager to know more about the rise of the study of Christian texts in the context of the second half of twentieth-century France. It is a pleasure to read these pages on Madame Harl’s unique career, encounters, and work. In the second part, she provides general reflections on the study of the LXX and on the translation process.

The papers that follow concentrate on more contemporary issues. Recent French translations of the Bible are usefully compared by the Belgian Jean-Marie Auwers (“Baptême ou plongée? Les traductions de la Bible et le langage théologique” [119–36]). He salutes attempts to provide fresh, less theologically connotated translations but also points to the countermeanings to which such translations of the New Testament can lead. An appendix provides exercises of comparison between different French translations. Emmanuel Boudet, in his “Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction catholique de la Bible?” (139–56) attempts to define the role of contemporary bishops to preserve the unity of the Catholic tradition in the editions of the Bible after Vatican II. He mainly deals with the reception of the editions and the translations of the Bible by the Catholic Church. The “évêque auxiliaire” of Paris (Pierre d’Ornellas, “Traduction, œuvre culturelle ou œuvre de tradition de la foi?” [157–72]) also participated in the conference. In his essay he reflects on the translation process and its specificities as a “sacred” translation. He also articulates the notions of cultural tradition, faith, and ecclesiastical purposes. Emphasizing the “enrichissement” and the “appauvrissement” that are, according to him, innate to the translation process, he argues that the Catholic translation of the scriptures is a benefit from divine providence, an act of faith that even strengthens the faith of the translators.

A third section of the book is devoted to medieval exegesis. A longer and rich paper on Aquinas is provided by Antoine Guggenheim (“Saint-Thomas et la pluralité des sens et des traductions de l’Écriture Sainte” [173–94]). It focuses on Aquinas’s perception, presentation, and use of the multiple translations of the sacred scriptures he knew. It explicates Aquinas’s acceptance of the plurality of the sacred text and, through this, his conception of the different hermeneutical levels of biblical interpretation. It is followed by Eric de Moulins-Beaufort’s reflections on some passages of de Lubac’s Exégèse
médiévale dealing with sacred translations (“Traduction et exégèse spirituelle: Réflexions sur la structure d’Exégèse médiévale” [195–209]). Through its discussion of de Lubac, the article sheds light on the evolution of the notion of littera (as literal meaning) during the Middle Ages. It insists on the multiplicity of the letter of the Scriptures.

The book finishes on the same key themes that ushered in the volume, Babel and Pentecost. Patrice Sicard (“‘Sous l’invocation de Saint-Jérôme’: Les dimensions de l’acte de traduction/transmission dans la tradition théologique et spirituelle” [213–46]) examines the multiple theological dimensions of the translation process, including its mystical dimension, by extending the notion of translation to theological concepts and other forms of transmission (e.g., pictural representation). This paper is very dense and hardly lets itself be summarized. One of the many important questions it raises is that of the status of the translator of the scriptures: To what extent should the latter be considered inspired? This question is tackled both historically and theologically. His answer is to see them as “potentially inspired.”

This volume will be of particular use to those who are interested in Catholic history and theology, as well as in reflections and regulations on the translation of the scriptures. From a scholarly point of view, one may regret that the discussions occasionally lack references to scholarly debates. Nevertheless, this book offers an interesting source of reflections on the act of sacred translation.