THE NEW JERUSALEM BIBLE
The New Jerusalem Bible

The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), which was published in 1985, is an updating of the Jerusalem Bible of 1966. The editor of the new edition is Henry Wansbrough, a Roman Catholic monk from Ampleforth Abbey. While both editions are by Roman Catholic translators, they are designed for use by Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. Both editions are “study Bibles” with detailed explanatory notes. The notes in the earlier edition were based largely on the French Bible de Jérusalem of 1956, which was produced by the French Dominican Biblical School in Jerusalem. Two decades of “linguistic, archaeological and theological advances” were believed to warrant a complete revision of the French version in 1973, which in turn has led to demands that the English version be similarly revised.

In 1969 the Jerusalem Bible was authorised for use in the services of the Church of England, becoming the first Roman Catholic translation to be approved for Anglican use since the Reformation. Protestants from other denominations also began to use it, and it was acclaimed as a triumph for the ecumenical movement. Although the Jerusalem Bible notes were characterised by explicit Roman Catholic teaching on doctrinal matters, and by liberalism in matters of historical interpretation, this edition has become respectable even among evangelicals, and evangelical bookshops have promoted it.

The New Jerusalem Bible has in some passages modified the Roman Catholic emphasis of the notes, but at the same time the notes have become far more openly orientated towards liberalism. The toning down of some of the explicitly Roman Catholic interpretations has misled many people into thinking that this version is now fully acceptable for Protestant use. The reviewer in The Times of 4th October, 1985, went so far as to speak of “the elimination of any pro-Catholic bias”. In the following pages we assess the NJB translation and its underlying text, together with examples of liberal bias in the notes, followed by a detailed survey of those notes which continue to reflect erroneous Roman Catholic doctrine.

The Translation

The New Jerusalem Bible translation is made directly from the Greek and Hebrew texts, rather than from the French edition. This is an improvement on the 1966 Jerusalem Bible, which followed the French wording too closely. The translators have aimed at literal accuracy rather than paraphrase, and they have paid attention to the need for Bible translation to attain a certain dignity of style. The layout of the text is designed to make it suitable for liturgical use, as the Jerusalem Bible is widely used at Roman Catholic services of the Mass.

According to the preface, one feature of the translation is its avoidance of “the inbuilt preference of the English language” for using
“masculine” terminology. At some passages this approach can be beneficial: for example, in Mark 7.7 “commandments of men” become “human commandments”, and in the next verse “tradition of men” becomes “human traditions”. However, the over-enthusiastic application of this principle inevitably results in absurdity in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25.1-13), where these women are deprived of their gender and are turned into sexless “wedding attendants”.

Some errors of translation in the NJB have a definite doctrinal significance. One example is found in the treatment of the subject of temptation. In the Lord’s Prayer, “lead us not into temptation” becomes “do not put us to the test” (Matthew 6.13). At Mark 14.38, “watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” becomes “stay awake and pray not to be put to the test”. Similarly at James 1.13, in the NJB, we are told that God “does not put anybody to the test”. Yet at Genesis 22.1 we are told in the NJB that “God put Abraham to the test”, and at James 1.2 that “the testing of your faith produces perseverance”. The Scriptures teach that, while God does not tempt people, He does indeed test their faith, and faith is thereby strengthened. This series of mistranslations is likely to lead people to misunderstand this important truth, and those who use the NJB form of the Lord’s Prayer will find themselves praying for something which is contrary to God’s purpose.

Textual Criticism

In the New Testament, the NJB generally follows the Westcott-Hort school of textual criticism, hence reproducing the usual theological and literary deficiencies of the 3rd-4th century Alexandrian text. It is refreshing, however, to find that the NJB can argue for the retention of an important passage such as Luke 22.43-4, the record of Christ’s agony at Gethsemane, which is omitted by the Alexandrian text but included by the Western text and the majority of Greek manuscripts.

The NJB exhibits a certain degree of textual independence, which shows itself in the selection of readings which belong to the so-called “Western” group of textual witnesses. Examples are found at Acts 1.26, reading “twelve” apostles instead of “eleven”, and at Acts 2.24, reading “the pangs of Hades” instead of “the pangs of death”. These readings are inserted into the NJB translation with the authority of only one Greek manuscript, namely codex Bezae. At the second passage, the reading of codex Bezae is also found in the Latin Vulgate, several Old Latin manuscripts and several Western church fathers. The same readings were found in the 1966 Jerusalem Bible. This kind of textual choice involves an unjustifiable neglect of the consensus of the rest of the Greek manuscript evidence.


Liberalism in the Notes

The 1966 Jerusalem Bible already displayed many instances of "liberal" interpretation, undermining the historical accuracy of the biblical records. In the NJB notes, this kind of interpretation becomes much more frequent and more explicit.

Matthew 8.28: where Matthew refers to two demon-possessed persons, while only one is referred to in Mark and Luke, the NJB comments that "the doubling of persons appears to be characteristic of Matthew's style", with the implication that Matthew's additional narrative detail is simply a result of literary invention.

Matthew 14.13ff: concerning Matthew's separate record of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Feeding of the Four Thousand, the NJB remarks that "this duplication, certainly very ancient, presents the same incident according to two different traditions". A similar note appears at Luke 9.10. The suggestion here is that the gospel account of two separate miracles is unhistorical, and that Christ never actually spoke the words which are attributed to Him at Matthew 16.9-10, referring to these miracles as separate events.

Matthew 17.27: the NJB comments that "this miraculous find of a precious object in a fish's mouth, which is not essential to the episode, has several parallels in Jewish and Greek folk-lore", implying that this event did not actually take place but was derived from popular legend.

Matthew 19.9: regarding Jesus' teaching on divorce, the NJB suggests that probably "one of the last editors of Matthew" added the exceptive clause (on fornication) in response to a rabbinic problem, so that "in this case we would have here an ecclesiastical decision of temporary and local application". The implication here is that Matthew’s account interweaves the teaching of the early church with the teaching of Jesus, attributing to Jesus some words which He did not speak.

Matthew 26.68: the NJB comments that "Matthew's editing is awkward", inviting the conclusion that Matthew's presentation of his account was imperfect.

Mark 2.27: regarding Jesus' teaching that the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath, the NJB states that "this verse, lacking in Matthew and Luke, must have been added by Mark when the new spirit of Christianity had already reduced the importance of the sabbath obligation", with the implication that Jesus did not actually say the words which Mark attributes to Him.

Luke 1.46: on the Magnificat, the NJB notes that "Luke must have found this canticle in the circles of the 'Poor', where it was perhaps attributed to the Daughter of Zion. He found it suitable to bring into his prose narrative and put on the lips of Mary", thus suggesting that Mary did not use the words which Luke records her as saying.
Luke 1.67: on the Benedictus, the NJB similarly notes that “like the Magnificat, this canticle is a poem which Luke has drawn from elsewhere to put on Zechariah’s lips”, suggesting that Zechariah did not actually use those words.

Luke 2.29: on the Nunc Dimittis, the NJB this time notes that “unlike Magnificat and Benedictus this canticle seems to have been written by Luke himself, using especially texts from Isaiah”, implying that Luke’s account of Simeon’s words was simply fictitious.

Luke 9.32: on the account of the Transfiguration, the NJB suggests that the “irresistible sleep of the disciples, occurring only in Luke, recalls that of Gethsemane, which is more natural and from which it could be derived”, meaning that this part of Luke’s account of the Transfiguration is unhistorical.

Luke 22.63: concerning the details of the men who mocked at Jesus, the NJB declares that “on all these points Luke’s account may well be more historical than those of Matthew and Mark”.

Acts 1.19: the NJB comments that in this account the manner of Judas’ death “mirrors the death of many a criminal in folk legends”, implying that the recorded details in Acts were not literally true.

The twelve notes just listed are found in the NJB but were lacking in the 1966 Jerusalem Bible. In these passages the NJB has generally followed the 1973 French edition, thus reproducing the increased liberalism of that edition compared with the French edition of 1956.

Another feature of the NJB notes is their insistence that during Jesus’ earthly life His disciples did not truly acknowledge His divinity. The note on Matthew 4.3, for example, suggests that the disciples did not address Him as the Son of God, and that the gospel passages which record the disciples’ use of this phrase probably reflect “a later stage in the faith’s development”. At Matthew 26.64 the NJB claims that “it is only in the apostolic preaching after Pentecost that Jesus’ disciples explicitly acknowledge him as Messiah”, a note which is absent from the 1966 edition. According to the gospels, the disciples recognise Jesus as the Messiah and, as such, Jesus accepts their worship. The NJB undermines these important testimonies to Christ’s deity.

In the Old Testament the NJB questions the historical veracity of many passages. At Genesis 5.1, for example, which lists the descendants of Adam, we are told by the NJB that “neither history nor chronology is to be looked for here. The names are the fossilised remains of ancient traditions”. The notes on the Pentateuch throughout reproduce the “findings” of higher criticism, tending to represent the biblical account as a patchwork of conflicting traditions. The book of Daniel is attributed to the 2nd century BC and is said to contain a number of historical mistakes. The book of Jonah is represented as fiction, designed “to amuse and instruct”, and not to be
interpreted as history. This approach to the Old Testament writings was also found in the Jerusalem Bible of 1966.

The Authority of the Pope

The NJB notes contain many examples of Roman Catholic teachings. Prominent among these is the doctrine of the “primacy of Peter”, claiming that Peter was chief among the Apostles and that the Pope is Peter’s successor. The NJB note at Matthew 16.19 states that “Peter has the keys. It is his function, therefore, to open or close to all who would come to the kingdom of Heaven through the Christian community . . . Of the household of God Peter is controller . . . In that capacity he is to exercise the disciplinary power of admitting or excluding those he thinks fit; he will also, in his administration of the community, make necessary doctrinal and juridical decisions. The verdicts he delivers and the pronouncements he makes will be ratified by God in heaven. Catholic exegetes maintain that these enduring promises hold good not only for Peter himself but also for Peter’s successors. This inference, not explicitly drawn in the text, is considered legitimate . . .” This note represents an assertion of the Pope’s right to exert absolute control over the Church, and to decide matters of doctrine and law.

The same note in the NJB goes on to refer to Luke 22.31ff and John 21.15ff as teaching that Peter is to be head over the Church after the death of Jesus, and also the head of the apostolic group. Turning to Luke 22.32 we are told by the NJB note that in this verse Peter is given “a function in directing faith with regard to the other apostles” and that here “his primacy within the apostolic college is affirmed more clearly than in Matthew 16.17-19”. At John 21.17 the NJB note says that “to the triple profession of love by Peter Jesus replies with a triple investiture. He entrusts to Peter the care of ruling the flock in his name”. These NJB notes in Luke and John correspond with the notes in the 1973 French edition, but are absent from the 1966 Jerusalem Bible. The new edition, far from eliminating pro-Catholic bias, here represents a reinforcement of papal authority.

A further example of the NJB’s anxiety to find evidence for the primacy of Peter is found in the note to Acts 5.10, which rather unconvincingly asserts that the purpose of the story of Ananias and Sapphira is “probably to show Peter’s prophetic authority in the community”. This note is not found in the 1966 and 1973 editions.

The Mass

Roman Catholics believe that the Lord’s Supper, which they call the Mass (or the Eucharist), is a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead, and that the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the literal body and blood of Christ and offered by the priest upon the altar. This teaching is found in the NJB note on Genesis 14.18, mentioning the patristic interpretation of the bread and wine offered
by Melchizedek as "an image of the Eucharist and even a foreshadowing of the Eucharistic sacrifice". The 1966 Jerusalem Bible and the 1973 French edition added that this interpretation "has been received into the Canon of the Mass".

At Exodus 12, a note in the NJB says that the Jewish Passover is "an anticipation of the Christian Easter: the lamb of God, Christ, is sacrificed (the cross) and eaten (the Last Supper) within the framework of the Jewish Passover (Holy Week)". The 1966 Jerusalem Bible and the 1973 French edition added that "the mystical re-enactment of this redemptive act becomes the central feature of the Christian liturgy, organised round the Mass which is at once sacrifice and sacrificial meal".

While the NJB has to some extent toned down the statements of the 1966 edition at these passages, this has to be balanced against the insertion of a new note in the NJB at 1 Corinthians 10.21, asserting that "for Paul, the Eucharist can clearly be regarded as a sacrificial meal". This teaching, that in the Lord's Supper the flesh and blood of Christ are literally sacrificed and eaten, is repugnant to both Scripture and reason, and was described by the Protestant Reformers as a blasphemous fable.

**Priestly Absolution**

The traditional Roman Catholic teaching is that priests or ministers possess the power to forgive sins. This comes over clearly in the notes to the 1966 Jerusalem Bible and the 1973 French edition at Matthew 9.8, suggesting that "Matthew is probably thinking of the Church's ministers who received this power [to forgive sins] from Christ", and at Matthew 18.18, saying that "one of the powers conferred on Peter [i.e. to forgive sins] is here conferred on the Church's ministers, to whom this discourse is primarily addressed". The NJB modifies such statements by adding at Matthew 9.8 that the power of forgiveness "is entrusted to the community", and in the note at Matthew 18.18 the NJB substitutes "One of the powers conferred on Peter is here conferred also on the community". A comparable note occurs at Mark 2.5. It has become fashionable in Roman Catholic writings to lay an increased emphasis on the role of the "Christian community", but the implication remains that it is the priest who will grant forgiveness on the Christian community's behalf.

Whichever edition is followed, these notes are a distortion of the Scriptural truth that sins which are committed against God are to be forgiven by God alone. The sinner must ultimately seek forgiveness, not from a minister or the Christian community, but from God Himself. The power of the Christian minister is not to grant forgiveness, but to declare the forgiveness which God Himself provides through the shed blood of His Son. The NJB note at Matthew 9.8 diverts attention away from Jesus Christ who, through His
incarnation as man, and the perfect sacrifice which He offered, was alone able to accomplish the eternal forgiveness of human sin.

Purgatory

In Roman Catholic teaching, the forgiveness of sins removes the sinner's guilt but does not release the sinner from undergoing the punishment which his sin deserves. It is said, therefore, that Christians who have not paid this debt of punishment must go to Purgatory when they die, in order to undergo punishment and purification for a period of time before they are considered fit to enter heaven. This in turn leads to the practice of praying for the dead, and celebrating Mass on their behalf, so as to reduce the period of their suffering. The NJB openly refers to this teaching in a note on 1 Corinthians 3.15, commenting that “Purgatory is not directly envisaged here, but this text is one of those on the basis of which the Church has made this doctrine explicit”.

A further reference is found at 2 Maccabees 12.44-5 (part of the Apocrypha), where the NJB comments that “this text expresses the conviction that prayer and expiatory sacrifice are efficacious for the remission of sins for the dead... This marks a new and important stage in Jewish theology”. The 1966 Jerusalem Bible was somewhat more explicit here, referring to an “intermediate state where the souls of the dead are purified, and assisted in the process by the prayers of the living; i.e. purgatory”. It is relevant to observe here that the NJB, being a Roman Catholic Bible, includes the Apocryphal books and regards them as equally authoritative to the other books. A reformed understanding of Scripture, however, leads to the recognition that the books of the Apocrypha are not divinely inspired and are not a reliable basis for Christian doctrine, and that the Roman Catholic teaching concerning Purgatory is a denial of the perfect and complete forgiveness for sins which is made available through Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross.

Baptismal Regeneration and Extreme Unction

The Roman Catholic church claims that the Baptismal ceremony literally cleanses people from original sin, and makes them Christians and children of God and members of the church. There is a variety of views in the various Protestant denominations on the subject of baptism, but general agreement that excessive claims about the power of baptism tend to undermine the need for a genuine spiritual conversion. The Roman Catholic teaching on baptism is reflected in the NJB note at 1 Peter 3.21, that “the baptism by which a person is reborn can have no limits to its efficacy”, and at Romans 6.12 the NJB note states that “baptism has destroyed human sin”.

When a person is in danger of death through sickness, Roman Catholic priests administer to him “the sacrament of holy unction”
which is held to be a means of procuring the final remission of his sins. The NJB note at James 5.14 refers to this practice, mentioning that in this verse “the Church has seen the earliest form of the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick”. The 1966 Jerusalem Bible and the 1973 French edition add that this teaching was endorsed by the Council of Trent. The danger of this teaching is that it encourages reliance upon an outward ceremonial act instead of a direct personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Celibacy

In Roman Catholicism, priests are strictly forbidden to marry, and communities of monks and nuns are founded upon vows of perpetual celibacy. In accordance with this teaching, the 1966 Jerusalem Bible note at 1 Corinthians 7.1 boldly asserts that, according to Paul, “virginity is a higher calling than marriage, and spiritually more profitable”. The omission of this statement in the NJB is certainly an improvement. However, a similar teaching still remains in the note on Matthew 19.12, stating that “Christ invites to perpetual continence as an expression of total consecration to the kingdom of God”. The implication is that the unmarried state of Roman Catholic nuns, monks and priests represents the ideal form of Christian service. The wording of Matthew 19.12 itself does not justify such an interpretation, and it is clear that monasticism and the celibate priesthood have had evil consequences in the lives of many who make such a commitment.

The “perpetual virginity” of Mary

The Roman Catholic cult of the virgin Mary has many ingredients, of which a number are found in the NJB. Part of the Marian system of doctrine is that she remained for ever a virgin, and not only before the birth of Jesus. According to the NJB note at Matthew 1.25 the perpetual virginity of Mary, though not asserted in this verse, is nevertheless “assumed by the remainder of the Gospel and by the tradition of the Church”. This teaching is in fact wholly derived from later tradition and has no foundation in Scripture. The wording of the underlying Greek text at Matthew 1.25, that Joseph did not have sexual intercourse with Mary “until she gave birth”, has the natural implication that after the birth of Jesus a normal marital relationship was begun. The NJB avoids this inconvenient inference by subtly mistranslating the verse as “he had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth”.

The New Testament elsewhere affirms that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Matthew 12.46-7; 13.55-6; Mark 3.31-2; 6.3; Luke 8.19-20; John 2.12; 7.3; Acts 1.14), again naturally implying that Mary had other children after giving birth to Jesus. However, in order to preserve the preconceived notion of Mary's perpetual virginity, the NJB notes on some of these other passages argue that the brothers are
no more than cousins. While this line of interpretation might be thought relatively harmless, it is a fact that the supposed perpetual virginity of Mary has been taken as a model of celibacy by countless numbers of Roman Catholic nuns, under the delusion that this is a superior form of female spirituality.

It should be mentioned here that at Luke 1.34, where the 1966 Jerusalem Bible commented that this verse perhaps expressed Mary’s intention to remain a virgin, the NJB and the 1973 French edition both concede that “nothing in the text suggests a vow of virginity”. This admission, as far as it goes, is a welcome improvement.

Mary the “Mother of the Church”

Another Marian doctrine concerns her role as the “mother of the Church”, a title which was officially bestowed upon her by Pope Paul VI. At John 19.26-7, a note in the NJB interprets Christ’s words from the cross as “a declaration that Mary, the new Eve, is the spiritual mother of all the faithful”. A similar note at John 2.4 describes Mary as “the new Eve, ‘mother of the living’”. It is this kind of teaching that encourages people to devote to Mary a reverence which is due to God alone. Such an attitude is reflected, for example, in the words of Pope John Paul II, that “Mary is an inexhaustible source of trust, because she is our Mother”. But the teaching of Scripture is that God Himself is the only source of trust and hope for sinful humanity.

Mary the “Queen of Heaven”

A further Marian teaching is that when Mary died she was taken body and soul into everlasting glory to reign as “Queen of heaven and earth”. This is known as the doctrine of the “Assumption”, which was promulgated by the “infallible” authority of Pope Pius XII in 1950. This erroneous doctrine is hinted at in the NJB note on Revelation 12.1, suggesting that John’s vision of a woman who is clothed with the sun and wears a crown of twelve stars possibly represents “Mary, the new Eve, the daughter of Zion”. Any such glorification of Mary inevitably detracts from the glory of Christ and His Church. It is interesting that the 1966 Jerusalem Bible stated that “it does not seem probable that John had Mary in mind”. The revised edition, based on the French edition of 1973, thus displays an increased Catholic bias at this passage.

Mary’s “co-operation” in Redemption

Another Roman Catholic teaching concerning Mary is that she “co-operated” in Christ’s work of redemption. It is claimed that she “united herself” to Christ’s sacrifice, and herself offered Him upon the cross as a sacrificial victim to the Father. A reflection of this erroneous teaching is found in the NJB note at Luke 2.34: “As the true Daughter of Zion, Mary will herself hear the sorrowful destiny of her race. With her Son she will be at the centre of this contradiction, where secret
thoughts will be laid bare, for or against Jesus". The 1966 and 1973 editions have a further reference to this doctrine at Proverbs 8.22, where it is noted that the Catholic liturgy applies this verse to the virgin, "collaborating with the Redeemer as Wisdom collaborates with the Creator". This note is omitted in the NJB, but the index still retains Proverbs 8.22 as a proof text of the association of Mary with Wisdom. The exaltation of Mary's role takes away from the glory which is uniquely due to her Son.

Mary and Ecumenism

Marian notes in ecumenical editions of the Bible have to be seen in the light of the words of Pope Paul VI on the subject of Mary and ecumenism: that "devotion to the Mother of the Lord is in accord with the deep desires and aims of the ecumenical movement" and that "devotion to the humble Handmaid of the Lord . . . will become, even if only slowly, not an obstacle but a path and a rallying-point for the union of all who believe in Christ" (Marialis Cultus, 1974). The Marian notes in the NJB, though designed to be fairly unobtrusive, are fully in accord with the Roman Catholic desire that progress towards Catholic-Protestant unity should be accompanied by an increase in devotion to Mary.

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