

BOOK REVIEW

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition, Original editor, W. Gunther Plaut; Revised edition editor, David E. S. Stein, New York: [Union for Reform Judaism] URJ, 2006, 1604 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

In the last decade there have been three excellent Torah commentaries published by, respectively the Conservative and Reform movements. They are *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001); *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* ([Union for Reform Judaism] URJ, 2006); and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* ([Union for Reform Judaism] URJ/Women of Reform Judaism, 2008).

Each volume brings special gifts. Together they contain a wealth of sources and resources.

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition is an updated version of the venerable volume first published in 1981, edited by Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut. When first published a quarter century earlier, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (abbreviated below as *TAMC*) broke new ground. It was the first liberal Torah commentary ever published. For the world of Progressive Judaism, it became the standard Torah commentary for synagogues. It was as important a volume as the monumental Hertz Pentateuch (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, edited by Rabbi Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, Soncino Press) was for the English-speaking Jewish world when published back in the 1930s. *TAMC* was accessible and scholarly; it combined modern scholarship with traditional teachings from the rabbinical period, featuring excerpts from the Talmud and various midrashim. There also was material taken from the traditional commentators throughout the centuries such as Rashi and Ramban, and selections from the Hasidic world as well. *TAMC* contained maps, extensive end-notes, and a bibliography. While *TAMC* acknowledged the traditional fifty-four *sedarot/parashot* (weekly-based cycle of liturgical readings) the book divided into smaller study segments.

TAMC Revised under the innovative and sensitive leadership of the revising editor, Rabbi David E. S. Stein, features some changes in translation of the *David J. Zucker, PhD is Rabbi/Chaplain at Shalom Park, a senior continuum of care center. His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005). He has published several articles in Jewish Bible Quarterly, and he contributes to a variety of journals.*
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biblical text. The first edition had incorporated the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) version (*Torah*, 1962, 1967; *Nevi'im* 1978), whereas the Revised Edition incorporated a recent rendition of the book of Genesis and of the *haftarot*, freshly rendered in the 1990s by the late Rabbi Chaim Stern. Stein served as the revising translator for the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy.

In its own way, *TAMC Revised* is a seismic shift, certainly in terms of language. "The most prominent feature . . . is its use of 'the Eternal' to render the divine name YHVH. That usage dates back to 1783, when the famous scholar Moses Mendelssohn published his translation of the Torah into German. It was he who first rendered YHVH as 'der Ewige' (the Eternal) . . . The root meaning of the divine name in Hebrew is 'to be,' and the name 'Eternal' renders that name according to its meaning rather than its sound. That is, it conveys the overtones that an ancient Israelite would have heard when encountering YHVH as a name" (*TAMC Revised*, xxv).

Another major consideration for the editors was gendered language regarding God. A primary issue was "counter misunderstanding" that the Bible's masculine references to God are pointing to a male deity (*TAMC Revised*, xxix). They wished to make clear that the Jewish God is beyond human gender categories. The translators utilize a wide range of approaches. "He said, His people, His covenant, His voice," became "[God] said, God's people, the Covenant, the divine voice."

"The second, more intensive . . . adaption . . . focused on the intersection of grammatical gender with social gender" (*TAMC Revised*, xxvi.) At times the biblical text's grammatical masculine wording refers to men (only) and sometimes to men and women (together). The NJPS translation had already sought a way to represent the text's plain meaning in idiomatic English.

Like the NJPS translators, the revising translators sought "to render the Hebrew text as they believed the original author of that text meant it to be understood" (*TAMC Revised*, xxviii). This meant that if social gender was germane in the Hebrew text, it was rendered exclusively, and if it was not germane, then an inclusive term was used. For Exodus through Deuteronomy, the *TAMC Revised* used NJPS as its base version, although the new editors found ways to improve the contextual accuracy in certain passages with

regard to gender. In the Preface to this Revised Edition, examples are clearly provided. A few illustrations where there were differences include:

GENDER NOT AT ISSUE IN THE HEBREW TEXT – NJPS RENDERED IN MASCULINE TERMS:

Deuteronomy 22:26

(NJPS) *one man attacking another and murdering him*

(TAMC Revised) *one party attacking and murdering another*

GENDER AT ISSUE IN THE HEBREW TEXT – NJPS RENDERED IN NEUTRAL TERMS
Numbers 1:2

(NJPS) *take a census of the whole Israelite community*

(TAMC Revised) *take a census of the whole Israelite company [of fighters]*

In addition to these grammatical considerations, this Revised Edition offered several innovations. Divisions are now by *sidrah/parashah* and all material has been reorganized accordingly. Some material formerly found in the Introductions now appears as essays. (This primarily applies to Leviticus.) A slanted line (/) encloses new comments regarding translation issues.

As the commentary to the text offers alternative ways of considering a matter, so likewise do the essays. The essays reflect the fact that the Bible often is purposely vague. In the contemporary world, where "we are prone to say 'either . . . or,' the Bible may say 'both' and let the unresolved tension between the two stand without further comment" (*TAMC Revised*, xlv).

New in this edition are commentaries for the *haftarot* (additional prophetic readings) excerpted, thoroughly re-edited and supplemented from W. Gunther Plaut's *Haftarah Commentary*. In the Hebrew text of the Torah, traditional *aliyah* divisions (sections for public readings) are clearly delineated, as are those for when there are combined *sidrah* readings. Cantillation and accent marks are more clearly set out (*TAMC Revised*, xxiv).

As in the original version, there is an extensive bibliography that lists Bible translations, midrashic and post-midrashic collections. There also are references

to apocryphal and hellenistic sources available in English, medieval codes and philosophical works, commentaries from earlier centuries and from the 20th century, as well as commentary aids. William W. Hallo has updated his introductions to each of the books of the Torah. As in the earlier volume, there are extensive – and here additional – endnotes. This new volume contains several other features that will interest biblical students. There is a correlation of variant verse numbering in the Torah, as opposed to some other editions of the Torah; an index to prophetic passages, and a very valuable Subject Index for Book and *Sidrah* Introductions, Translations, Commentary and Essays.

Extensive documentation is available online regarding details of editing the Hebrew text and its translation, as well as a list of corrections made in various printings; see <http://www.urjpress.com/torahrevision/documentation.html>

As noted earlier, Plaut's original commentary published in 1981 figuratively was earth shattering; it was the first ever comprehensive liberal commentary to the Torah. This volume, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* by Rabbi David E. S. Stein significantly enhances the earlier volume. Its focus on the intersection of grammatical gender with social gender, and its conscious choice of appropriate gendered language regarding God allows it to be faithful as to how the ancients heard these words millennia ago. This is an immeasurable gift to the contemporary reader. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* honors the past as it speaks to the present.