

## BOOK REVIEW

*Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress.* Leonard Greenspoon. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society / Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2020). 298 + xxii pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

There is an Italian phrase, “*traduttore, traditore*” which roughly means all translations are traitorous. What does one, what *should* one expect from a translation of the Bible? Should it adhere as closely as possible to the original text, literally word for word? Or should the translator bear in mind the target audience, expressing the translation in words relevant for that time and place? Greenspoon explains that “no Jewish Bible translation is intended as a practical or implicit replacement of the original. Jewish Bibles point to the original rather than attempt to replace it ... they supplement but never supplant the original Hebrew.” That said translators are well aware of the “social, cultural, historical, political, and theological environments” in which they live. (xi).

For example, there are numerous examples where in past centuries translators guarded against what they “saw as a potentially serious misunderstanding of the nature of God. For this reason they restyled most Hebrew anthropomorphisms (applying human physical attributes to nonhumans) and anthropopathisms (furnishing nonhumans with human emotions) related to God so as to avoid even the possibility of thinking that God had a human type of body or human emotions ... Alongside these efforts, the translators had no difficulty in supplementing or even contradicting biblical law, regardless of its being seen as of divine origin, when such legal passages failed to support contemporary communal practice. Such changes took advantage of centuries of rabbinic and implementation of biblical laws.” (34). For example, in the Aramaic translation *Targum Pseudo- onathan* [c. 350-650 CE?], those laws known as *lex talionis*, *eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot* (Deut. 19:21) are translated as “the value of an eye in exchange for an eye, the value of a tooth in

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exchange for a tooth, the value of a hand in exchange for a hand, the value of a foot in exchange for a foot.” (36).

Leonard Greenspoon divides this work into seven sections. The Septuagint [LXX, the Bible’s translation into Greek, c. 275 BCE]; the *Targums* [translations into Aramaic, c. 300-650 CE?]; Bible Translation into Arabic [largely Saadia Gaon, c. 950 CE]; Bible Translation into Yiddish and German [c. 1200-c. 1950]; Translations into Other Selected Languages [including Spanish, French, Italian, Hungarian, and Russian]; English-Language Versions; and then Non-Jewish Translations with Jewish Features.

Chapter 6, English-Language Versions relates that when British Jews (who were permitted to resettle in England in 1654) “sought out an English-language version of the Bible, they relied on KJV” (141), the so-called King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version, 1611). This work was commissioned, but not translated by England’s King James I. In America, Greenspoon explains that in the very middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia translated the Bible, he relied both on the KJV as well as offering his own translations at various points (164). Several pages in Greenspoon’s book are devoted to the 1917 version of the Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society of America, *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, also known as OJPS (Old JPS) (166-173). This is followed by a discussion of the *JPS TANAKH, or New Jewish Publication Society Version* (1985), also known as NJPS (173-180). In this section Greenspoon offers comparisons of how various passages were translated in these different versions. In 2006 JPS published *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation, or Contemporary JPS, CJPS*. As the revising editor, David E. S. Stein explained, this new version “selected language that judiciously portrays ancient gender roles in order to reflect a more nuanced understanding of the biblical world and its original audience.” (180). For example, the translators changed most of the third person references, i.e. he, him, his, to the second person, i.e. you, your, or the neutral “one,” for example, not to “his tent” but rather to “your tent,” or to “one’s tent.” The goal is to understand what was “the intended scope of the original Hebrew text ... these examples also demonstrate that a literal rendering is not always the best or closest to the original.” (181-82). Greenspoon then also deals with other modern English translations such as the ArtScroll *Tanach*; (Aryeh Kaplan’s) *The Living Torah*; *The*

*Schocken Bible* (Everett Fox's translation); *The Steinsaltz Humash: Humash Translation and Commentary*; as well as Richard Elliott Friedman's *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation*, and Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*.

This work is not only comprehensive, but it is “the first-ever book-length study solely devoted to Jewish Bible translators and translations” (x) from the third century BCE to the present day.

*Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress* is enhanced by suggestions how it can be used in a variety of settings including a study guide with a URL (xxi), Notes, a Bibliography, a Subject Index, an Index of Biblical Passages and Other Ancient and Religious Texts.



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