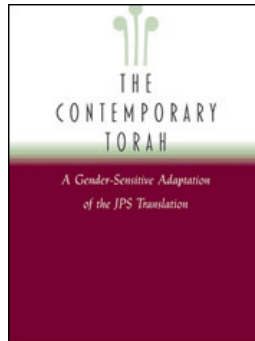


○ **REVIEW OF DAVID E. S. STEIN (ED.), *THE CONTEMPORARY TORAH: A GENDER-SENSITIVE ADAPTATION OF THE JPS TRANSLATION***

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Legend: 72 Jewish scholars working in isolation penned 72 identical Greek translations of the Torah. Each one rendered the personal name of the God of Israel as *ho kyrios* – the Lord. When the newborn Septuagint was read to the assembled Alexandrian Jews, they stood up and exclaimed that such an excellent and accurate translation must not be altered in any way. And so the ineffable name of God came to be translated as a masculine title, with *ho kyrios* leading to *dominus*, El Señor, and the Lord.

The effects of this decision are far-reaching. As David E. S. Stein, the revising editor of the Contemporary Torah (CJPS), notes, ‘rendering God’s personal name as “the LORD” can function like wearing male sunglasses to view the invisible deity: “I’m not sure what I’m seeing – but it appears to be masculine”’ (ix). Moreover, communities that have not maintained strong ties to the Hebrew text of the Bible have forgotten that ‘the name of the LORD’ is not ‘the lord’, that favourite locution of pietists everywhere, nor is it the medieval miscegenation ‘Jehovah’ or the scholarly conjecture ‘Yahweh’. Perhaps it would not be overzealous to claim that the decision of those Alexandrian Jewish scholars has had a profound influence not just on translations of the Hebrew Bible but on western conceptions of deity. The CJPS breaks with this tradition, replacing ‘LORD’ with an un-gendered alternative: the divine name itself – YHWH – in un-pointed Hebrew script.

The CJPS is an ambitious gender-sensitive revision of the New Jewish Publication Society translation (Torah 1962, Tanakh 1985), or NJPS. The NJPS was already sensitive to gender in that its makers sought to render the ‘plain-sense’ meaning of the Hebrew text into idiomatic English (e.g. replacing ‘fathers’ with ‘parents’ if ‘father’ was used as a synecdoche for both parents). In the preface of the CJPS Stein praises the ground-breaking accuracy of the NJPS, but points out inconsistencies, such as the occasional use of inclusive language when a non-inclusive translation would have been more accurate. It is important to note, therefore, that Stein and his team

of consulting editors revised the NJPS, not to make it gender-neutral, but to clarify authorial intent, which occasionally (but not often) required additional gender specific language (e.g. Genesis 32:23).

The most conspicuous change in the CJPS is, of course, its use of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. ‘The Torah’ Stein notes, ‘employs the Name primarily *as a name* (not an attribute, not as a declaration, and not in terms of etymology), which surely is how the original audience experienced it... [The un-translated Name] enables the word to function as a name, without limiting the conception of God to a single quality’ (xxvii emphasis original). This is a most welcome innovation, although the revisers would have been more faithful to their own ‘sense for sense’ method had they rendered the Name in English letters (i.e. YHWH), as the original audience would not have encountered the Name in an unknown script. Indeed, Stein himself notes on the SBL website¹ that he had hoped to use ‘YHWH’, but the publisher opted for the Hebrew.

Surprisingly, however, the un-translated Tetragrammaton is not the most audacious revision in the CJPS. In his commitment to render the plain sense of the Hebrew text into idiomatic English, Stein constructed a method of construing gender that some readers will find odd:

[A] given term can easily mean more than one thing in context. In a plain-sense translation, as a rule, only one meaning can appear at a time. So what happens in those cases if one meaning is gender neutral while the other is not – which gender sense prevails? At such points, I defined my charge as deciding which sense the text’s original audience would have perceived in the *foreground* of their mental image... Then I sought to convey the foreground sense of the term (xviii emphasis original).

Stein might have added that he sought to convey *only* the foreground sense of the term in its *canonical* context, deliberately excluding possible background meanings.

For example, Genesis 2:2 reads ‘On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken: [God] ceased on the seventh day from doing any of the work’ (brackets original). Compare this to Robert Alter’s wooden translation: ‘And God completed on the seventh day the work He had done, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work He had done.’ The CJPS uses a passive construction and inserts ‘God’ in brackets to avoid using male pronouns. This would seem to violate the plain sense of the second creation account which features an anthropomorphised God who strolls around the garden at the breezy time of day. Moreover, the Hebrew grammar in this verse is exclusively male. Stein argues, however, that the Bible uses the grammatical masculine whenever the referent is indefinite and that the Torah as a whole portrays a transcendent God. Read canonically, therefore, Genesis 2:2 depicts a transcendent God who is not (necessarily) male.

Stein’s effort to convey only the foreground sense of a word is more noticeable when applied to human gender. For example, *’ish*, a very common word that is usually translated ‘man’, is frequently interpreted as ‘generic representative’, and is translated dozens of different ways, including envoy, emissary, human, troop, householder, and party. The word ‘man’ is limited to mean ‘adult male’. Thus, Ishmael is ‘a wild ass of a person [*’ish*]’, (Gen 16:12), and God tells Moses to gather ‘a representative [*’ish*] of each tribe’ (Numbers 1:4). On the other hand, the CJPS also draws attention to gender when it is implicit or unclear: ‘For that night I will go through

the land of Egypt and strike down every [male] first-born' (Ex 12:12 brackets original), or '[You men,] take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives' (Ex 32:2 brackets original).

At times the CJPS seems too innovative for its own good. In the second creation account, for example, God fashions 'The side that had been taken from the Human [*ha-'adam*] into a woman, bringing her to the Human.' The Human exclaims 'This one shall be called Woman [*'ishshah*]/ For from a Human [*'ish*] was she taken' (Genesis 2:22-23). Despite the fact that *'ishshah* and *'ish* are etymologically unrelated, the Hebrew text seizes on their assonance, their tensive similarity and difference, to create an etiology of gender. The CJPS's rendering suggests that humanity, in its pristine primordial form, is Male, and that the Woman is only partially human, or better, human only insofar as she is masculine. From the Human/Man she came and to the Human/Man she shall return. This etiology of gender is remarkably similar to the ancient understanding of male and female as two points on a traversable and hierarchical continuum (Laqueur 1990), but I doubt that is what the makers of the CJPS were aiming for, and most modern readers will not be pleased. See Robert Alter's translation of Genesis or the NRSV for a way out of this thicket.

Another example of an overly ambitious translation can be found in Genesis 19. After the divine messengers enter Lot's house to spend the night,

The town council [and] the militia of Sodom – insignificant and influential alike, the whole assembly without exception – gathered around the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the envoys... who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.' (Gen 19:4-5)

One gets the impression that a band of local dignitaries would like to get to know the envoys. This translation masks the violence of a mob (*we-'anshe ha-'ir*) – not a town council – demanding to 'know', that is, rape, the visitors.

Furthermore, the quest for gender sensitivity engenders some unfortunate prose. When the humans are being banished from the Garden in Genesis 3:24, the NJPS states 'He drove the man out', which the CJPS changes to 'It was driven out'. Another lifeless sentence appears in Genesis 5:2: 'Male and female He created them' (NJPS) becomes 'Male and female were they created'. The CJPS has also inherited the NJPS's strange combination of semi-archaic words such as 'thereupon' and 'lest' with a style that seems intended to go easy on the intellect (e.g. in Deut 10:17 'God of Gods and Lord of Lords' is changed to 'God supreme and Lord supreme').

In short, the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the CJPS is the bold agenda of its creators. Stein et al. reconsidered some of the basic vocabulary of the Torah and then set out to remove its false whiskers. The CJPS accomplishes this task and raises the bar for gender-sensitive bible translation, but to this reviewer's eye more than one passage seems over-translated. Readers who do not find *The Contemporary Torah* excessively solicitous and who do not mind its infelicities will appreciate its dogged pursuit of gender accuracy. And perhaps the word 'lord' will be granted a much-needed reprieve.

ENDNOTES

¹ See <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=552>.

REFERENCES

Laqueur, T. 1990. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.