

# An Interview with David E. S. Stein, revising editor

## The Contemporary Torah

### Q: What was the need to adapt an existing translation?

**A:** I'll give you three answers. The *translators'* answer is: NJPS—the base translation—hadn't fully lived up to its promise. Yes, it had achieved its aims of clarity and precision—except with regard to social gender. That wasn't an area people thought much about at the time. (In a way, what we've now done is to go back and finish the job. I like to quip that this version is “just like NJPS, only more so”!)

The *historians'* answer is: During the past fifty years, scholars have learned a lot about how people in the ancient Near East lived, conceived of themselves, and structured their society. That knowledge hadn't yet been brought to bear in the NJPS.

The *marketer's* answer is: Today there's a reading audience that wants a Bible translation that has paid attention to gender issues. It's an audience that's used to gender's being specified in English only where relevant—in journalism, medical and technical publications, and so forth.

### Q: Given that ancient Israel was a gendered society and that Hebrew is a gendered language, how can a “gender-sensitive” translation be true to the text?

**A:** The challenge is that the composer(s) of the Torah—the Five Books of Moses—made assumptions that today's readers don't share, in terms of what goes without saying. And Hebrew doesn't work the same way that English does. Different society, different language: for both reasons, a literal translation can sometimes be misleading.

This is where a sense-for-sense translation—such as NJPS—can shine. Its approach enabled us to truly convey what the Torah was saying. Basically, where gender was at issue in the Hebrew text, we made sure to translate with gendered English; and where gender was not at issue, we translated with gender-neutral English.

What's this translation “sensitive” to? To the text's nuances of humans' gender. In this respect it's more true to the text than a literal translation would be in some places.

### Q: Why did you handle the language for God differently than the language for human beings?

**A:** Like NJPS itself, this version was to remain a Jewish translation. Most of its audience looks at the Torah in light of Judaism's concept of a God who is beyond gender. God-language which reflects that concept is more readily congruent with Jewish theology.

Even so, not all of this translation's God-language is gender neutral. As with references to human characters, where it's clear that the Hebrew text was describing God with imagery in which maleness was germane, we respected poetic license and conveyed the thought in English via gendered language.

### Q: How did you come to be involved in this adaptation project?

**A:** One thing led to another. I had helped JPS produce seven Bible-related books, with an emphasis on accuracy and precision. Then another publisher tapped me to create a gender-accurate translation—with the help of consulting editors—for the books of *Exodus* through *Deuteronomy*. It was a small part of a huge project. For expediency, we adapted NJPS (with JPS sharing the adaptation's copyright). The consulting editors were impressed with how it turned out. So after that work was published, JPS engaged me to tackle *Genesis* in the same way.

### Q: What did you learn from working on this book?

**A:** I learned how to think like an ancient Israelite—like people who, for example, derived their primary identity from their corporate household. I feel closer to my ancestors after having put myself in their sandals.

I also learned that Bible dictionaries are not always right: their categories don't fit how the text employed some basic gender-related terms. And the meaning of those terms sometimes dramatically affects the stories.

Finally, I learned just how much detailed work is involved in translating an ancient, sacred text in a way that meets my standards for scholarly integrity. Ironically, I have more respect for NJPS than ever!

