

Centennial Celebration for JPS Bible Translation

Professor Leonard Greenspoon,

Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization, Creighton University

In January 1959, about a month after my thirteenth birthday, I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah at Beth El, the conservative synagogue in Richmond, Virginia. After my “performance,” I was gifted by constituent organizations of the congregation. Among my gifts was an English-language edition of the Hebrew Bible.

I would like to think that even then I was aware that this volume consisted of The Jewish Publication Society’s version originally published in 1917. Such an image, were it true, might have qualified me as a Bible prodigy of prodigious proportions. Alas, that edition of JPS17 undoubtedly ended up on my shelf—where it stayed unopened and unexamined for quite some time.

But I should not berate myself overmuch. In knowing little about Jewish translations of the Bible and caring even less about them, I was in good company. And I have spent much of the four decades trying to acquaint not only myself, but also other Jews (academicians, rabbis, and the general community) and other scholars (primarily Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians) with the riches Jews have bequeathed through two and a half millennia of Bible translating.

In this effort, as in so many others, anniversaries provide an appropriate occasion to look back over a period of years and assess how a relationship began, developed, and (where possible) continues. Thus it is that this article, and this year, is a time to reflect on a JPS Bible translation that is 100 years old. The history of this version is even older,

since Bible translations, in common with similar phenomena, are birthed over an extended period of time under the watchful eyes of many parents.

Just so, there is a part of me that wants to go back to the very beginning, to around 275 BCE when Jewish scholars produced the first translation—in this case, the Septuagint, from Hebrew into Greek—of the Hebrew Bible—in this case, the Torah. And then I could trace the varied and exciting (yes, exciting!) efforts by thousands of Jews to produce hundreds of Bible translations in the vernacular tongue of the society in which they lived. But that would take a book, you say! Absolutely correct. And I have written just such a volume.

For this centennial celebration we need to carefully delineate our purview. English translations of the Bible? Far too broad. Jewish translations of the Bible into English? More manageable, but still too long a tale to tell here, especially when we take into account the many Anglo-Jewish versions—that is, those produced by Jews in Great Britain. Jewish-American versions that appeared prior to 1920? Now we've got a topic.

Let's begin this discussion with a celebration or at least the notice of a celebration. On Monday evening, January 22, 1917, The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) celebrated the completion of the new Jewish translation of the Bible by giving a dinner at the Hotel Astor in New York. The Hotel Astor was a grand edifice, containing more than one thousand rooms, near Time Square. This establishment, suitably elegant and sophisticated, was the perfect locale for an event staged by JPS, whose leadership drew from Jewish elites in banking, commerce, education, government, and communal service. As we shall see, all of these factors played into the production and publication of the Bible version being given such a prominent send-off that evening.

At least a few people at the dinner had recollections of the decades-long process that led to the text being celebrated that night. If they were born in the United States, they might recall the Bible version they had received at their Bar Mitzvah—the Leeser Bible—the first Jewish-American translation and the predecessor to JPS17. This Bible took its name from its translator, Isaac Leeser, a leader of American Jewry during the first half of the nineteenth century, when he was a well-known, energetic rabbi and communal leader.

His translation of the Torah appeared in the 1845; his rendering of the entire Hebrew Bible followed a decade later in 1853. Although critics disparaged his style as wooden and devoid of literary distinction, the Leeser Bible found its way into most American Jewish homes and remained there until early in the twentieth century. Leeser aspired to wording and stylistic features that he took directly from the ancient Hebrew text, owing nothing (he averred) to any earlier English renderings. In this he differed both from his British contemporaries and his successors at JPS.

Forty years after the full Leeser version appeared, JPS embarked on a plan to produce a new biblical version as its replacement. This was in 1892, when JPS (founded in 1888) was still in its institutional infancy. In the view of the JPS leadership, Leeser's work was no longer serviceable as the English-language Bible for a growing, upwardly mobile Jewish community that aspired to wider acceptance and respectability. In fact, they reasoned, no such version could be the result of a single individual working alone. Instead, a number of individuals would be enlisted.

What they came up was sort of a hybrid: one person, in this case the capable Marcus Jastrow, was to serve as editor-in-chief and as chairman of an editorial committee,

which would assign biblical books to translator, one translator for each book. When the translator completed his task, he was to submit his manuscript to the editorial committee, which would then revise the submission and later harmonize all of the manuscripts.

This process was as cumbersome to carry out as it is to explain. After ten years (at untold cost in time and money), only one book, Kaufmann Kohler's rendering of the Psalms, appeared in print. So it was that by 1908 JPS, along with the Central Conference of American Rabbis, determined that only a major structural overhaul would salvage the goal they were all committed to: a new Jewish version of the Hebrew Bible. The new plan, more in line with earlier translation projects, envisioned a strong board of editors with a single editor-in-chief. This person would have the sole responsibility for preparing preliminary drafts of the new version, which would then go through a series of revisions by the board at regularly scheduled meetings. Clearly the abilities and dedication of the editor-in-chief were crucial to the successful completion of this process in a reasonable timeframe.

Along these lines, each member of the board of editors would need to exhibit an equally deep sense of commitment and be willing to work constructively with the editor-in-chief and with others chosen for the board if when their previous interactions had been marked with acrimony. Although at its inception there were no guarantees that this ambitious project would succeed, the publication of the completed work less than a decade later is the best possible evidence of success.

Selected as editor-in-chief was Dr. Max L. Margolis, who was the leading Jewish scholar of the Bible in the United States at that time. Having immigrated from Lithuania,

Margolis completed his PhD at Columbia University and taught at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati twice, with a period at University of California, Berkeley, in between his two stints at HUC. During the last phases of preparation for the Bible translation project, Margolis and his wife Evelyn were in Europe, where Margolis was conducting advanced research at German universities.

Six other men were chosen for the committee: JPS appointed Solomon Schechter, Cyrus Adler, and Joseph Jacobs; C.C.A.R. representatives were Kaufmann Kohler, David Philipson, and Samuel Schulman. Not by chance, two of these six individuals were associated with HUC, two with the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and two with the recently founded Dropsie College of Philadelphia. This attention to the Jewish academic world was matched by an equally concerted effort to bridge the spectrum of Jewish observance.

Some of these individuals were accomplished scholars, although none of them came close to matching Margolis' preeminence in biblical studies. Others had made their mark as institutional leaders. But somehow they put aside, for the most part, their personal and professional disagreements through the years of extensive correspondence and lengthy sessions needed to complete the new Bible.

Although unrivalled in his scholarship, Margolis carried with him an extensive amount of what we might today call baggage. This was especially true in connection with Kohler and Philipson, with whom he worked at HUC. Margolis, as a Zionist, butted heads frequently and famously with these two, and his ardent (Kohler and Philipson might have described it as strident) defense of Zionism was the major reason for Margolis' second, and final, departure from Cincinnati. It is a credit to all three of them, as well as their

colleagues on the board, that they made it through the entire process with tempers in check and reputations intact.

How did the committee go about its work? As already observed, it was Margolis' responsibility to prepare a first draft, which would then become the basis for committee discussion via correspondence and in person. Prior to the committee's first meeting, in December 1908, Margolis had completed his first draft of the Torah. By early Fall 1909 (that is, in just about a year), he was finished with his first draft of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. We will soon return to enumerate the factors that allowed Margolis to work at what was, and remains, warp speed in the world of Bible translation.

For now we content ourselves with remarking that the committee as a whole met sixteen times from 1908 to 1915. Each of these sessions lasted ten days; they were taken up with a verse-by-verse, sometimes word-by-word, analysis of Margolis' draft, working in canonical order from Genesis 1 to 2 Chronicles 36:23. A seventeenth, and final, meeting was held in autumn 1915 to sort through and adjudicate the three hundred or so problems that had thus far eluded satisfactory solutions. The number three hundred may seem huge and formidable; in fact, it was a reassuringly small percentage of potentially problematic passages.

These procedures remind us of the picture painted in the *Letter of Aristeas* (the second century BCE document that is the earliest witness to the origins of the Septuagint) of the seventy-two Jewish scholars who worked on committees and sub-committees to produce the oldest Greek rendering of the Torah. As recorded in the *Letter*, the major difference between the ancient translators and their twentieth century counterparts was that those responsible for the Septuagint were ensconced in palatial luxury on a secluded island,

compliments of the reigning king, Ptolemy II Philadelphus. The committee that met from 1908-1915 had to make due with much more plebeian surroundings!

The year 1916 was taken up with debating and determining what we now speak of as the extra-textual components of the version: the color of the cover, the wording of the title, sub-titles, and all other front and reference material, the number and nature of notes, the font of the text, the margins of the printed page, etc., etc. Although these and a veritable mountain of other details are largely relegated to the small type in discussions of translation, they loom large when it comes to the overall impression that a volume makes on its intended audience (and for any others who happen to pick it up).

Taking all of this into account, we can say that JPS moved with discipline and dispatch from formulation to publication. There was an additional factor that was of great importance in keeping this project on the fast track: it was not actually a translation at all, but rather a revision. What's the difference? Those responsible for a translation of, say, the Tanakh begin with the Hebrew text, which they render from the source language, here Hebrew, into the target language, in this case American English. Although other earlier versions in the target language may be consulted, this occurs late in the process if at all.

With a revision, the first text translators—more properly, revisers—consult is an earlier English-language version. Where this earlier version is deemed to contain an appropriate rendering, it is retained. When changes are called for, it is revised. Not surprisingly, producing a revision is typically a speedier task than the creation of a new translation *ex nihilo* (that is, out of nothing).

As it happens, we know with certainty that JPS17 was a revision of the 1885 Revised Version, itself the first authorized revision of the King James Version (KJV) of 1611. The 1885 Revised Version was primarily a British project, which to put it bluntly flopped in its country of origin. In America it fared much better as the American Revised Version, the progenitor of the hyper-literal New American Version as well as the eminently mainstream Revised Standard Version and New Revised Standard Version. In a Judaized form, it gave birth to JPS17.

Although the extent of this dependence was largely buried in the front matter of the 1917 and subsequent editions, it was always noted in internal communications and was enthusiastically endorsed by Margolis. Himself an immigrant from Eastern Europe, he strongly urged his fellow immigrants to learn their English not from what they read in the daily paper and certainly not what they heard on the street. The best writers in English, Margolis extolled, had based themselves on KJV—and JPS should in this instance follow their lead. That’s exactly what they did.

Margolis obtained a large-print edition of the Revised Version and pasted each of its pages on a larger sheet of white paper. On the margins he would enter his corrections and those suggested by other committee members. He used this procedure in Genesis and carried it through to 2 Chronicles. When he introduced new (that is, non-KJV) wording into the JPS version, he—aided by his wife, Evelyn—ensured that it fit seamlessly into the linguistic context the KJV translators had constructed.

For JPS, this procedure promised a fast, but not frantic pace. This promise was met. JPS also hoped that its new version, properly bound and fitted in many editions with a

place to record family milestones (births, bar mitzvahs, weddings, etc.), would take the place in the libraries of proper Jewish homes that KJV filled for Protestants. Robust sales figures for JPS reasonably lead to the conclusion that this goal was also met. For Margolis, this procedure provided the largely immigrant population of American Jews with an impeccable guide to proper, uptown diction and vocabulary. I doubt that this promise was widely realized.

I don't want to leave the impression that matters of style were all that mattered—or even that they mattered the most. What many readers would have observed were the differences where the Protestant exegesis of KJV ran counter to the theological predilections of the JPS translators. Sometimes only a small change was needed, one that a lot of readers might well not pick up on. So at the beginning of Genesis, KJV has, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Here JPS17 reads, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. . . . And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.” For theological purposes, the major difference is the substitution of “spirit” (with small “s”) in JPS17 for KJV’s “Spirit”—where the capital “S” is intended to capture all three parts of the distinctly Christian concept of the trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (capitalization here conforms to Christian practice).

In other passages the change was sure to be noticed. For an example of this, we turn to Isaiah 7:14. Where KJV reads, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,” JPS17 has, “behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The text of JPS17, with “the young

woman,” is a better contextual rendering of this expression within the prophecies of Isaiah himself and cuts any connection between this figure and the Virgin Mary.

And there are other passages where the JPS translators hit upon exactly the right way to say something in English, where this “inspired” wording had eluded centuries of earlier translators, Jewish and Christian alike. My favorite example of this is at Proverbs 31:10: “a woman of valour.” No rendering before or since could improve upon this.

Readers of this article should not conclude that the members of the board of editors lacked for excitement. Some of it took place within the confines of committee work. For example, Margolis was not above trying to pull a fast one on his fellow board members. I think we can sympathize with him on scholarly grounds even if we chide him on ethical ones.

As it happened, Margolis spent much of his life and career on the Greek text of Joshua, for which he achieved considerable renown and praise. In the course of this work, he determined that the Hebrew text should read “city” at Joshua 8:12, 16, instead of “Ai,” the city name the Masoretes offer. In the Hebrew the difference between these words is the presence or absence of a final *resh*: “city” has the letter, the place name does not. Hardly, we might think, the stuff of major controversy. So Margolis must have felt when he made the change in these two passages without mentioning it to anyone else. And so it stood until the very last stages of page proofs, when someone noticed this discrepancy. When called on it, Margolis immediately “restored” Ai. I can only imagine how this made him feel!

And yes, there were receptions, dinners, and the opera. As Cyrus Adler recalls (I think this recollection works best in his own words):,Once we ventured upon a frivolity in

the shape of a revue. The grave and reverent gentlemen were much absorbed by the current edition of the Ziegfeld Follies. Opera glasses were in constant use, and after the show was over, one gentleman astonished us by saying: “I never knew so many girls were vaccinated on their legs.”

By leaving out the name of this particular “gentleman,” Adler invites us, surely unintentionally, to speculate on who this might have been. Upon further reflection, I don’t think speculation is what we should be doing. Rather, we should use this as an opportunity to offer gratitude to these gentlemen for the work they produced. Even if we rarely use their words anymore, they should remain a shining example of what Jews do best: scrutinize and analyze texts—not through an opera glass, but under the microscope of tradition, innovation, and collegiality.
