Leonard J. Greenspoon, [*Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics,  
Progress*](https://jps.org/books/jewish-bible-translations/) (Jewish Publication Society, 2020).

**By Leonard J. Greenspoon**

This study guide is intended for use in tandem with the recently published JPS volume on Jewish Bible Translations. Beyond that, it could have some value for those interested in the topic even if they have not yet read the book.

The structure of this guide is chapter-by-chapter (including the Introduction). For the most part, it follows this format: Chapter title, sometimes expanded for easier comprehension; the major topics or themes primarily as determined by sub-heads; a selective annotated bibliography of works that are generally accessible to an audience without knowledge of a language other than English; a set of questions for further discussion. Typically, these questions ask of the reader to consider the implications of the material covered. Therefore, they don’t have “right” or “wrong” answers.

I consider this study guide as a work in progress that I can regularly update. With this in mind, I am providing my email: [ljgrn@creighton.edu](mailto:ljgrn@creighton.edu). As readers come up with more questions or additional bibliography, I plan to add these materials.

Leonard Greenspoon

Introduction.

Differing Jewish and Christian Understandings

Predominant Themes in Bible Translations

Overview of This Volume

Using This Volume

Greenspoon, Leonard J. “Jewish Translations of the Bible.” In *The Jewish Study Bible*. Edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2005-2020. New York: Oxford, 2003.

This is the most extensive single-authored review available on the history of Jewish Bible translation. Beginning with the Septuagint, this article introduces and evaluates versions in over a dozen languages through the first years of the twenty-first century. Attention is given to comparisons of recent English-language translations in terms of style and exegesis.

Greenspoon, Leonard J. “Versions, Jewish,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, 760-765. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009.

This extensive review of Jewish Bible versions, the first on this topic to appear in a general-interest Bible dictionary, aims to appeal to the wide audience targeted by NIDB. As such, the author makes a concerted effort to clarify any terms and explicate any concepts that may be unfamiliar to a general audience.

Margolis, Max L. *The Story of Bible Translations.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917.

Margolis’s monograph constitutes a sober and knowledgeable discussion of Bible translations, Jewish and Christian, up until the author’s time. As the editor-in-chief of the JPS 1917 version, Margolis demonstrates authentic familiarity with Jewish translations, about which his comments are unfailingly perceptive even when readers would disagree with his evaluations.

Orlinsky, Harry M., and Roger G. Bratcher. *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2004.

Orlinsky and Bratcher, Bible translators who were also knowledgeable in the history of Bible translation, co-authored this volume, with an emphasis on the twentieth century in the USA and Canada. Given the experience of both authors, there is little surprise that it shows a decided preference for functional equivalence over formal equivalence versions.

Barker, James W., Anthony Le Donne, and Joel N. Lohr, eds. *Found in Translation: Essays on Biblical Translation in Honor of Leonard J. Greenspoon*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018.

This is a collection of articles by a dozen scholars from throughout the world. The first five, under the heading “Ancient Hebrew Scriptures and Greek Translations,” presuppose some familiarity with ancient languages on the part of readers. The remaining chapters, grouped together under “Jewish and Christian Scriptures in Modern Translations,” are more accessible for a general audience. Each of them in its own way makes a notable contribution toward expanding our knowledge of Jewish versions of the Bible.

Chapter 1. The Septuagint: The Greek version known as the Septuagint (or LXX) is the oldest

translation of the Hebrew Bible. Jews began to produce it around 275 BCE in Alexandria, Egypt.

When completed, the Septuagint included Greek versions of all the books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as translations of other Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic) writings and some works originally

composed in Greek.

The Septuagint as a Jewish Document

The Letter of Aristeas

Intra-Jewish Origins of the Septuagint

The Septuagint as Immutable

The Translators of the Greek Pentateuch

The Translation Technique of the LXX Translators

Revisions vs. the Original Version

The LXX Beyond the Septuagint

The Terms “Septuagint” or “LXX”

The Septuagint “Canon”

The Septuagint Not “Abandoned” by Jews

The “Three”

The Septuagint among the Rabbis

Final Thoughts

Pietersma, Albert and Benjamin G. Wright III, eds. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

This translation, popularly known as NETS, is a project of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies (IOSCS). Individual scholars worked on an assigned book or books. These scholars seek to convey the meaning of the Greek as it would have been understood by the original translator(s) of the Septuagint; difficulties in that Greek are not glossed over. An accompanying commentary series is being prepared.

Fernández Marcos, Natalio. *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible.* Translated by W.G.E. Watson. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Originally published in Spanish, this volume is especially strong in its treatment of the Septuagint in its daughter versions and in Jewish traditions. Overall, it is informed by judicious insights on the part of its author, a seasoned researcher. Some background in LXX studies is necessary to appreciate fully the material contained here.

# Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the* Septuagint. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

This jointly written book, now in its second edition, represents an innovative approach that does indeed live up to its title: its structure and pedagogical approach really do “invite” learners at all levels. It can profitably be used in informal group settings or by individuals as well as in classrooms.

Greenspoon, Leonard J. “Greek: Septuagint.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 3.595-598.

This entry comprises a new article (not a revision of what appeared in the first edition of *EJ*); it highlights LXX origins and early developments within the context of Hellenistic Judaism. It also identifies Jewish scholars of the Septuagint and calls for increased knowledge and appreciation of the Greek Bible among contemporary Jews.

Wasserstein, Abraham, and David J. Wasserstein. *The Legend of the Septuagint, From Classical Antiquity to Today.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

According to these authors, almost everything we can know about LXX origins is legendary, beginning with *The Letter of Aristeas*. Within Judaism, Josephus and Philo, among others, passed on and enhanced these legends. Talmudic sources evaluated such accounts—sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. The Wasserstein’s also chronicle later developments within Judaism and in Christianity.

Further questions:

1.The Septuagint has traditionally not played a significant role in Jewish education or worship. What would be the likely effects of including the Septuagint within mainstream Judaism?

2.Some LXX translators took a formal equivalence approach in their works. Others tended toward functional equivalence. What factors may have influenced a given translator to favor one approach over the other?

3.Sorting through all of the explanations and explorations put forward for LXX origins, what do you think were the main factors that motivated Septuagint translators?

4.What representative factors can you detect that motivated those who revised existing Greek texts rather than produce their own translation? Can you apply you these insights to later revisers as well?

5.In what ways does the study of the Septuagint enhance our knowledge of Jews and Judaism during the Second Temple period?

6.To what extent does it matter whether the LXX version of a specific biblical book originated in Alexandria or somewhere else?

Chapter 2. The Targums: The term “Targums” refers to Aramaic translation of books of the Hebrew Bible undertaken by Jews during the Rabbinic period (c. 70–600 CE).

Early Aramaic Translations

Targums to the Torah: Targum Onkelos, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, the Fragment Targum, Codex Neofiti I, Cairo Genizah Fragments

Targums to the Prophets

Targums to the Writings

Specific Examples from Each Portion of the Hebrew Bible

Final Thoughts

The Aramaic Bible. Wilmington: Michael Glazier; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987-2007.

This series, consisting of twenty-two volumes, constitutes the major English-language translation and annotation of the Targums, Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Bible. The scholars involved in this project are well-respected specialists. In print form, the total output for the series stands at just over five thousand pages.

Alexander, Philip S. “Targum, Targumim.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6.320-331.

Here, Alexander, a well-known scholar of Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, offers a succinct introduction to and overview of the Targums. Because of his extensive research experience and unbiased presentation of primary and secondary sources, this article is accessible even to beginners and authoritative even for specialists.

Flesher, Paul V. M., and Bruce Chilton. *The Targums: A Critical Introduction.* Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011.

The authors are judicious in handling complex issues relating to the time and place of composition for Targums (or Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Bible). They are adept at explicating how and why translators characteristically introduced extended exegetic material into what was otherwise a literal rendering of the underlying Hebrew.

Further questions:

1.The same individual or groups that provided a straightforward rendering of the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text into the Aramaic-language Targums also inserted into their translations substantial additional legal and narrative material. What do you think was on the minds of those who produced the Targums?

2.In your view what motivated the translators of the Targums to restyle anthropomorphisms and antropopathisms connected with God in their renderings?

3.The Targums played a significant role in early synagogue worship practices. What would it look like if the Targums were restored to that role in today’s synagogues?

4.Do you think it will ever be possible to identify with greater precision the locale and timeframe for individuals and groups responsible for the Targums?

5.In what ways does the study of the Targums enhance our knowledge of, and appreciation for, the history and development of Jewish Bible versions?

Chapter 3. Bible Translation into Arabic: The *Tafsir* of Saadiah Gaon (882-942 CE)

Avoiding Anthropomorphism and Anthropopathism

Avoiding Contradiction

Avoiding Ambiguity

The Life and Achievements of Saadiah Gaon

Saadiah as Champion of Rabbanite (Rabbinic) Interpretation

Saadiah’s Translation as *Tafsir*

Islamic Influence on Saadiah

The Consistency of Saadiah’s Translation

Saadiah’s Representations of the Divine

The *Tafsir* as a Free, Functional Equivalence Translation

Saadiah’s Goal: *The* Standard Arabic Version

Measuring Saadiah’s Success

Extant Evidence for Saadiah’s Translation

Saadiah’s Intended Audience

Final Thoughts

Brody, Robert. *Sa’adyah Gaon*, Translated by Betsy Rosenberg. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013.

Brody’s is the most recent study of the life and career of Saadiah Gaon, a teacher, author, and community leader in tenth century Jewish Babylonia. Brody devotes a chapter to Saadiah’s production of an Arabic Bible, along with an extended commentary. These formed significant parts of Saadiah’s vigorous defense of rabbinic Judaism.

Further questions:

1.Do you agree with this book’s author that Saadiah’s handling of human-sounding language about God in his translation would lead its readers to think of the Divine as primarily an impersonal and distant figure?

2.Saadiah regularly rendered halachic passages to conform to rabbinic practices of his time. So, for example, “don’t boil a kid in its mother’s milk” appears as “do not eat meat together with dairy.” Do such renderings seem like “translations” to you?

3.Saadiah insisted that properly understood, there are no contradictions or inconsistencies within the Hebrew Bible, and his Arabic-language text reflects this view on his part. What sorts of arguments could you make against removing such difficulties in a Jewish translation/commentary of the Bible?

4.Saadiah insisted that, properly understood, there are no contractions or inconsistences between the Hebrew Bible and the application of reason. In what ways does Saadiah’s version promote this understanding? What do you think about his handling of the Hebrew in such instances?

5.How do you think Saadiah was able to find the time and resources for his biblical translations and commentaries within the context of his communal involvement and leadership?

Chapter 4. Bible Translation into Yiddish (Judeo-German) and German: From the Thirteenth through the Twentieth Century

Early Yiddish Translations

The Classic Yiddish Bible: *Tsena Ureena*

The First Complete Bibles in Yiddish

Yiddish Bibles for Christian Missionaries

The Yiddish Bible in the Twentieth Century

Moses Mendelssohn and the First Translation into German

The German Translations of Zunz and Philippson

The German Translation of Samson Raphael Hirsch

The German Translation of Simon Bernfeld

The German Translation of Buber and Rosenzweig

Final Thoughts

Yaakov ben Yitzchak Ashkenasi. *Ts’enah Ur’enah*. 2 volumes. Translated by Miriam Stark Zakon. New York: Mesorah, 2001.

This is an English translation of the classic Yiddish-language version of parts of the Hebrew Bible. From its initial publication in the early 1600s until the first decades of the 1900s it was a familiar item in almost every Eastern European Jewish household.

Altmann, Alexander. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study.* London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998.

This magisterial biography provides the full, carefully nuanced cultural, religious, and historical context necessary to understand and evaluate Mendelssohn’s towering achievements in producing the first German translation of the Bible by and for Jews. Mendelssohn also prepared a running commentary in Hebrew that displayed a thoroughgoing acquaintance with traditional Jewish exegesis.

Plaut, W. Gunter. *German-Jewish Bible Translations: Linguistic Theology as a Political Phenomenon.* Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 36. New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1992.

Plaut, born in Germany in the early twentieth century, was a scholar as well as a pulpit rabbi. He brings all of this to bear in his perceptive analysis of the interplay between academic theory (or theology) and community politics in the production of Bible translations by nineteenth century German Jews.

Gilman, Abigail E. Gilman, *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Gilman investigates the interplay between German Jewish Bible translators and the larger culture they inhabited. Only in this way can we arrive at a proper evaluation of a given version of the Bible. What was true for these individuals can be profitably expanded to cover other translations and the cultures in which they originated.

Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation,* translated by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

This collection of essays is based on the aspirations and experiences of its renowned authors in preparing their German rendering of the Hebrew Bible. More broadly, it succeeds in presenting a sustained and sensitive platform on which to construct almost any formal equivalence version. Such translations of the Bible bring forward to the modern reader as many characteristics as possible of the ancient text.

Hirsch, Rabbi Samson Raphael. *Hirsch Commentary on the Torah****.*** Translated into English by Isaac Levy. New York: Judaica Press, 1966.

This is an English-language translation of Hirsch’s German version of the Torah. It is accompanied by Hirsch’s still influential commentary on the Five Books of Moses, which was also composed in German. Hirsch, a leading proponent of neo-Orthodoxy, published this material between 1867 and 1878.

Further questions:

1.Moses Mendelssohn fashioned his translation and commentary both to teach Jews proper German and to instruct them in traditional Jewish exegesis and application of the Hebrew Bible. His version was well received by some; rejected by others. What do you think about the goals Mendelssohn set and his success at achieving them?

2.Mendelssohn undertook his work primarily as a critique of popular Yiddish versions circulating at his time. Do you agree with his assessment?

3.Nineteenth century Jewish translators into German differed as to how much/how little non-Jewish scholarship they would allow in their commentaries and notes. Which translator or translators achieved what you consider to be an ideal balance between citations of Jewish and non-Jewish sources in their work?

4.Samson Raphael Hirsch’s work continues to be very influential in many Orthodox or traditional circles. Why do you think that is?

5.Nineteenth century Germany saw the first widespread appearance of competitive Bible versions for Jews. Based on your reading, are there one or more of these versions that most appeal to you? And others that you dislike?

Chapter 5. Translations into Other Selected Languages

Spanish: The Alba Bible and the Ferrara Bible

French: Samuel Cahen’s *La Bible, Traduction Nouvelle*; Zadoc Kahn and *La Bible du Rabbinat Français*

Italian: Samuel David Luzzatto

Hungarian: Mór Bloch/Ballagi

Russian: Leon Mandelstamm’s Russian Translation of the Pentateuch; Judah Leib Gordon and Colleagues’

Russian Translation of the Pentateuch

Final Thoughts

Arragel, Rabbi Moses. *The Alba Bible*. London: Facsimile Edition N. D., 1992.

This is a limited edition facsimile of the Alba Bible, an early fifteenth century translation by the otherwise unknown Moses Arragel under the sponsorship of the Catholic Don Luis de Guzman. This edition, prepared with the support of the Spanish monarchy, appeared 500 years after the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

Cahen, Samuel, translator. *La Bible: Torah, Nevihim, Ketouvim*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994.

Cahen’s French-language translation, with commentary, initially appeared in 1851. It was one of many literary and pedagogical efforts he undertook on behalf of his Jewish community. Its reprint, in this and other recent editions, points to an abiding interest in this version.

Luzzatto, Samuel David. *Torah Commentary*. 4 volumes. Translated and annotated by Eliyahu

Munk. Brooklyn, New York: Lambda Publishers, 2012.

Luzzatto (or Shadal) was a major figure of the Jewish Enlightenment, whose life spanned the first half of the nineteenth century. Between 1857 and 1860 he published his Italian-language version of the Torah, along with an extensive commentary. Here, as elsewhere in his prolific writings, he sought a harmonious balance between Jewish tradition and critical methodologies.

Further questions:

1.Do you agree with several of the translators featured in this chapter that Judaism is best preserved when Jews immerse themselves in the dominant (i.e., Christian) culture through Bible versions and other means?

2.Many of this chapter’s translators were supporters of Haskalah or the Jewish Enlightenment. How did such connections influence the versions they produced?

3.All of the translations included in this chapter are broadly speaking European (so also chapters on Yiddish/German and English-language versions). Would you be interested in learning more about Jewish Bible versions from other cultures and contexts?

4.On the basis of extant sources, many of this chapter’s translators can be portrayed as child prodigies. To what extent do you think these surviving sources reflect the actual childhoods of these individuals? Is it important for us to be able to distinguish between “fact” and “legend” in such accounts?

5.In what ways does Bible translation/commentary figure into the overall life and achievements of these individuals? Do you detect common, as well as distinctive features when you compare and contrast them?

Chapter 6. English-Language Versions

Prior to the Late Eighteenth Century

Christian Hebraism and the King James Version

Christian Hebraism and Sixteenth-Century Translators

Anglo-Jewish Versions in the Late Eighteenth Century

Jewish Translations in England during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Jewish Translations in England during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Isaac Leeser’s Bible

*The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*,

or the Old Jewish Publication Society Version

The JPS TANAKH, or New Jewish Publication Society Version

*The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, or Contemporary JPS

ArtScroll *Tanach*

*The Living Torah*

*The Schocken Bible*

*The Steinsaltz Humash*

Friedman’s *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation*

Alter’s *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*

For Those Wanting to Read the Versions Themselves

Final Thoughts

Fisch, Harold, ed. *The Koren Tanakh. New Edition of the Koren Jerusalem Bible*. Jerusalem: Koren, Publisher, 2010.

The English translation used in this and other editions of the Koren Bible is from Michael Friedlander, *Jewish Family Bible*, which was first published in 1881. Friedlander was father-in-law of Moses Gaster, the renowned scholar and Sephardic chief rabbi in London.

Orlinsky, Harry M. *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation.* New York: Ktav, 1974.

Orlinsky covers many eras and topics in this wide-ranging collection. He is especially vigorous in his contention that contemporary Bible translators should give preference to the needs of their target audience (functional equivalence) when retention of formal elements from the source language (formal equivalence) would produce difficulties for modern readers.

Sarna, Jonathan D. *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture 1888-1988.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989.

As part of this centennial study of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), Sarna examines the two English-language Bible versions JPS produced. In so doing, he uses to good advantage both his intimate acquaintance with the inner workings of JPS and his extensive knowledge of the broad sweep of American Jewish history.

Further questions:

1. With specific reference to English-language versions of the Bible, do you have a preference between those that are primarily formal equivalence and others that display functional equivalence?

2.In connection with English-language versions of the Bible, which ones are your favorites? And others that are least appealing?

3.The King James Version (KJV) is a product of sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestantism. And yet it features a number of details and images from Jewish exegetical sources. How can you explain this development?

4.In what context(s) would you recommend formal equivalence English-language versions for Jews? Functional equivalence translations?

5.In connection with English-language versions, what paratextual features (that is, introductions, notes, illustrations, choice of fonts; in short, everything beyond the wording of the translation itself) do you find most useful? Feels free to include types of material that we do not regularly encounter in Bible versions.

Chapter 7. Non-Jewish Translations with Jewish Features

Yiddish Translations of the Bible: Yiddish Translations of the New Testament; Other British and Foreign Language Society (BFBS) Translations; Characteristics and Goals of Bible Society Translations; Jewish Reactions, as Reported Primarily by Bible Societies

The *Complete Jewish Bible*: Messianic Judaism, Characteristic Features of the “Jewish New Testament”

A “Jewish” Bishop and Bible Translator: From Eastern Europe through the United States to the Far East of Asia, in China and Japan, Behind Schereschewsky’s Translations, Jewish Influences in Schereschewsky’s Translation and Commentary on the Old Testament

Final Thoughts

Eber, Irene. *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible: S.I.J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906)*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Schereschewsky was a Protestant missionary in China when he prepared Bible versions in different dialects. As Eber demonstrates, he also made use of his background as an Eastern European Jew. This is shown sporadically in his text, but more prominently in the notes, where specific references to distinctive Jewish exegesis can be detected.

Further questions:

.Is there something inappropriate or even sinister about Bible societies promoting a given version (so, for example, Yiddish and Hebrew renderings of the New Testament) for the purposes of converting Jews to Christianity?

2.Do you agree that there is something incongruent in David Stern’s designation of his translation of the Old and New Testaments as a Jewish Bible?

3.In what sense does it seem apt to designate Schereschewsky and his translations as “Jewish”?

4.In what ways do the versions cited here differ from with others discussed in previous chapters, especially the Alba Bible (chapter 5) and King James Version (chapter 6)?

5.Some would argue that the material contained in this chapter detracts from the overall value of the volume. Obviously, the book’s author disagrees. What do you think?

Conclusion

It Really Does Matter Which Version You Use: How Humans Understand God in the MT and *Tafsir*; Which Humans Are Commanded by God in OJPS and CJPS

Seven Shared Characteristics of Jewish Bible Translations

Future Jewish Bible Translations