

Notes on Gender in Translation

THE JPS TANAKH: Gender-Sensitive Edition

(RJPS or Revised JPS Edition)

David E. S. Stein

RJPS Project Manager and Revising Translator

Readers of the [Preface](#) of *THE JPS TANAKH: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (scholarly abbreviation: RJPS, for Revised JPS edition) may well seek a more detailed understanding as to how and where RJPS differs from the iconic 1985 JPS translation (NJPS or New JPS edition). Or they may want to learn more about what distinguishes RJPS from previously published gender-sensitive translations, such as JPS's 2006 *Contemporary Torah* (CJPS, for Contemporary JPS translation) or ecumenical editions such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The following notes are intended to reward such readers for their curiosity, without requiring a background in formal translation studies or linguistics. After discussing four aspects of English that constrain translation into that language, these notes will look at how this edition has handled the Hebrew text's references to human beings, and then to divine beings. (Technical arguments, extensive documentation, and discussion of the scholarly literature can be found in the sources cited in the final section, [For Further Reading](#).)

ENGLISH CONSTRAINTS

Translating Gender in Light of English Idiom

This edition follows contemporary English-language norms for how and when gender should be mentioned while referring to someone. Generally in English, the expectation for a speaker is as follows:

- If gender is germane in context, then say so; if not, then do not mention it.¹
- If gender is already known or inferable, do not mention it.

¹ In English parlance, gender is generally considered to be germane in certain speech contexts that involve the intersection of gender with other social categories. It is typically supposed to be specified whenever announcing a newborn or introducing certain kin relations (e.g., one's brother/sister), and when discussing a specific instantiation of royalty or nobility (e.g., a man is typically crowned *king* rather than *monarch*). Occasionally, therefore, a gendered rendering may be warranted in English even where the original text is not gendered.

These norms are a feature of the language itself (independent of a speaker's gender politics). It is a straightforward application of a commonplace in communication, namely, that speakers do not waste effort on articulating whatever does not matter or can otherwise go without saying.²

Abiding by these norms can be tricky when translating across cultures, in contexts where gender is germane for one audience but not for another. What was normal parlance in the ancient Near East (also known—less Eurocentrically—as Southwest Asia) may differ from what is normal in today's Western world. A key factor is what the present audience believes to have gone without saying. For example, English translators generally assume that when they label a given Israelite as a *soldier* or a *priest*, readers will infer that only a man is in view (because it is common knowledge that warfare and the priesthood were male-only endeavors, which usually went without saying in the ancient text). Hence that gender profile can go without saying in the translation; it need not specify *male soldier* or *male priest*. Yet in other cases, an equally implicit gender restriction warrants being stated outright in the translation. For example, in the Genesis account of how an alarmed Jacob deals with a perceived threat to his household, NJPS reads:

...taking ... his eleven children,³ he crossed the ford... (32.23)

At this point in the narrative, Jacob actually has twelve children: eleven sons plus a daughter, Dinah. Her apparent eclipse at this juncture can be explained by a frequent feature of communication: whenever a speaker makes a reference to a definite party, an audience must infer who it is that the speaker has in mind, and they always make that inference on the basis of perceived salience. For an ancient audience, it could therefore go without saying that Jacob's "children" of interest—the ones whose survival truly mattered to such an audience—were specifically his sons, for this story foreshadows the tribal nature of the Israelite nation. A key part of the ancient audience's identity was their own tribal affiliation, whereas we in today's audience lack that tie. By comparison, we focus more on the characters in the story—and on that basis, we infer that Dinah is also in view.

² Not all types of Bible translation are consistent with this norm. The type that is the *least* compatible is the one that, given a certain Hebrew noun or pronoun, strives to always represent it with the same English noun or pronoun. That approach prefers to employ a standard literal rendering of all Hebrew terms applied to persons—including, e.g., *father*, *brother*, *man*, *he*. In this way, the resulting translation often comes across as *more male-oriented* than the wording in the original language.

³ Here "children" renders יְלָדִים *yeladim*, literally "those who have been born."

In this verse, synchronizing our perception with that of the ancient audience means realizing that gender is indeed germane in context, albeit indirectly. And if so, then as noted above, English idiom expects specificity in the rendering. Hence RJPS reads *sons* rather than *children*.

Gender and Figurative Language

Gender-related assumptions can differ between the two audiences—ancient and modern—in another way, as well. This concerns a figurative manner of speaking that uses one label to refer to two associated things at the same time. For example, GOD⁴ instructs Moses as follows:

Take a census of the whole Israelite community⁵.... from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. (Num. 1.2–3, NJPS)

The initial label *the whole Israelite community*, taken literally, is at odds with the ancient practice of census-taking, which typically counted only the able-bodied men of military age. The dissonance is precisely why the ancient audience would have construed such an expression figuratively. For them, the label is signaling that as the militia is counted in preparation for battle, it should be viewed as representing the whole community. Although only the latter body is named in the opening clause, the militia is what really stands in the depicted foreground.

Making two related references at once is attractive as an efficient way to communicate: it needs less effort to articulate and to understand than would mentioning each referent separately. Linguists call it *conventional metonymy*.

Unfortunately, this device can create problems in translation, because what is considered to be conventional varies from one language community to another. The above example is one of those cases that tend to be taken literally in English, where “the whole community” is not a conventional metonym. And because we English readers expect “the whole community” to include women, that pair of verses in NJPS tends to strike us as incoherent with regard to gender, which is unsettling.⁶

⁴ This essay follows the RJPS practice of rendering as GOD (in small capitals) the “personal” name of Israel’s God, as discussed in the [Preface](#).

⁵ Here “community” renders עדה *edah*, a label that does not constrain the gender of its referent.

⁶ Some readers of a literal translation may infer that women did not count as part of “the whole Israelite community.” However, that conclusion is not tenable: it would also have meant excluding the noncombatant men (e.g., elders and Levites) from that same community, which is not plausible.

In general, where there are two simultaneous references that differ in their gender implications and the metonym is not conventional in English, the present translation offers a footnote to unpack that metonym. The footnote points to the unnamed party that is quietly standing in the foreground, while articulating that party's relationship to the named group. Hence at Num 1.2, the note on *the whole Israelite community* reads: "I.e., those eligible to be fighters on the community's behalf." This approach conveys the heft of Hebrew metonyms while addressing the gender discord that they sometimes create.⁷

Employing *They* as a Singular Pronoun

As noted in the [Preface](#), one significant shift in English is the intensified evocation of gender by the grammatically masculine pronouns *he/him/his/himself*. In recent decades, English speakers have increasingly compensated for this development in part by drafting plural pronouns to function as non-gendered singular ones. Such usage has become commonplace, especially when the antecedent term is an indefinite pronoun (e.g., *anyone* or *someone*) or the generic noun *person*.⁸ Given the formality of the diction in NJPS, the present revision has employed this kind of usage sparingly. Nonetheless it appears more often in RJPS than in its predecessors NJPS and CJPS. For example, Leviticus 27 discusses how to vow to GOD the equivalent in silver of a person; in verse 8, a pair of pronouns is rendered in each rendition as follows:⁹

But if one cannot afford the equivalent, he shall... (NJPS, 1962)

But if one cannot afford the equivalent, that person shall... (CJPS, 2006)

But if someone cannot afford the equivalent, they shall... (RJPS)

Given the available options and current English usage, a rendering with the pronoun *they* was deemed the most acceptable for RJPS.¹⁰

⁷ A different tack was taken in CJPS (2006), which rendered verse 1 as "Take a census of the whole Israelite company [of fighters]...." That approach avoided the footnote by collapsing the Hebrew metonym; it usually downplayed the representational import of the speaker's label.

⁸ Examples: "No one has to go if *they* don't want to"; "An employee can file a complaint if *they* need to." Such usage has been adopted as the regular practice in recently published editions of some Bible translations, such as the New International Version (2011).

⁹ On the conditions under which grammatically masculine pronouns have a gender-inclusive force, see below under "[Referential Gender and Specificity](#)."

¹⁰ To avoid *he/him/his/himself* in nonspecific reference, RJPS has otherwise employed well-known and noncontroversial measures for gender-inclusive communication.

Man and Its Special Function

The [Preface](#) also noted a major shift in the patterns of usage of *man*. Many observers say that *man* has become a “false generic,” for it is no longer applicable to all members of the groups to which it formerly applied. That argument is correct yet incomplete. It oversimplifies the challenges faced by translators into English, for it overlooks a classic special function of *man* in the English language. That distinctive function will now be explained, so that its implications for translation can be properly taken into account.

As a label deployed to refer to persons, *man* belongs to a tiny yet important class of words: it is a *situating noun*. Its primary function is to situate the person being talked about (in linguistic terms, the “referent”).¹¹ Typically when a speaker employs such a noun, it signals that the audience should attend to the referent’s place within the depicted situation, rather than to the person’s intrinsic features.¹²

An exemplar is the classic emergency cry “Man overboard!” Those two words immediately evoke a situation of distress, in which the person’s attributes (age, gender, social class, race, hair color, etc.) are beside the point. The speaker wishes to communicate about a situation of urgent interest—involving one participant; the situating noun *man* enables the situation to be sketched succinctly, in a schematic way.¹³ This noun links the participant to the situation and vice versa.

¹¹ The evidence for *man* as a situating noun is too extensive to detail here, beyond the following list of five types of stereotypical usage. (1) Fixed expressions that employ *man* tend to succinctly evoke a situation, such as the classic construction-zone sign *Men at Work*. (2) This noun is featured in predications that situate the person in question, as in the slang approbation *You the man!* (3) It is employed in phrases that introduce situationally essential information about a participant, e.g., *a man of means*. (4) It appears in social-role terms that presuppose situations, such as an *advance man*. (5) It is used to label its referent in terms of a situation that is already under discussion: *You’re just the man we’ve been looking for*.

¹² I.e., a situating noun operates mostly within the realm of communication *between the speaker and an audience*, rather than on the level of providing information about its referent’s qualities. In this domain (studied in the academic field of linguistics called *pragmatics*), cognitive operations are known to be largely invisible even to native speakers. A situating noun is processed at such a basic level of cognition that it is hardly available to conscious reflection. Not surprisingly, then, the category of situating nouns has been widely overlooked.

¹³ The need to communicate *schematically* about situations is nearly ubiquitous. It arises not only when *announcing* a situation but also when *commenting* upon one. Furthermore, when formulating a *question*, a speaker must often identify the situation of interest in order to elicit more information

Crucially, in such usages the referent's gender is not at issue. It is either a given or beside the point. What is at issue is *how the participant in question is situated*. This is the reason why, for example, the legal term *manslayer* (along with *manslaughter*) has never been gendered with respect to the victim; *manslayer* evokes a schematic situation in which one participant has killed another, by labeling the former in terms of the situation.

Even so, since the thirteenth century—that is, after *man* came to be paired with a female counterpart term—the meaning of *man* predictably evolved over time: the more that this noun was applied to men (versus women), the more such an association with maleness came to be seen as part of its own meaning. Thus a classic expression like *not a man in sight*, which used to mean “I see no other participants in this situation,” nowadays is often used to mean “There are no men around—only women.” As the gendered semantic content of *man* has increased, it has become less able to perform its classic situating task; that function is no longer available nowadays in many speech situations.

Such a shift has major implications for a Bible translation that seeks to provide an accurate picture of gender in the Bible's world. In NJPS, *man* appears 2,399 times (counting singular and plural, but not compounds); RJPS has replaced 1,468 of those (61%) with something else. (At the same time, RJPS restored 62 instances of *man* or *men* that had meanwhile been replaced in the first printing of CJPS, deeming those substitutions to have been overcorrections.)

As the situating power of *man* has become muted, some of its usages have dropped out of current parlance. NJPS employs *man* about two dozen times as a label to situate (or resituate) a supernatural being—typically in a prophetic vision—but that way of speaking is now considered obsolete.¹⁴ Similarly passé is the construction *man of {a group}*, which appears a dozen times in NJPS (as in the assurance of military victory “A single man of you would put a thousand to flight,” Josh. 23.10). So, too, is the fixed expression *to a man*, referring to every participant in a given situation, which appears seven times in NJPS (as when GOD tells Gideon “you shall defeat Midian to a man,” Judg. 6.16).¹⁵

about it. Likewise when issuing a *command*, the speaker normally must describe the desired state of affairs. The recurring need for making a quick sketch in words explains why the situating noun *man* (together with *woman*) has been used more frequently than any other personal noun in the English language, including other general human nouns.

¹⁴ As noted under sense 6 for “man” in *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, [unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/man](https://www.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/man). Accessed 6/24/2022.

¹⁵ None of these three recent changes in the English language can be explained by the concept of a false generic. Gender is almost never directly germane in the utterances cited in this paragraph.

Meanwhile, in far more cases, the impact of the rapidly changing meaning of *man* is less predictable. For more than seven centuries, this noun's gender implications have been a function both of the grammatical construction in which it is embedded, and of the context of use for the utterance. Whether a given NJPS usage of *man* works nowadays still depends upon those same factors.

In many instances in NJPS, the usage of *man* now evokes an emphasis on (masculine) gender that did not exist in the Hebrew text—and therefore *man* overrepresents gender as a matter of concern. Consequently, the communicative efficiency of *man* for situating purposes can conflict with the translator's responsibility to achieve accuracy regarding gender in the Bible. This means that each instance of personal reference must be weighed on its own merits. Accordingly, the next section discusses the evaluation process for all Hebrew terms that refer to persons.¹⁶

REFERENCES TO HUMAN BEINGS

As noted, in order to take proper account of gender-related changes in English, it is necessary to revisit all referring expressions in the original Hebrew text that were not female oriented. The referring expressions of concern are of two overlapping types: one shows a grammatically masculine inflection, and the other employs a noun label that has a female counterpart term (e.g., אָח *'ah*, commonly glossed as “brother,” whose counterpart term is אֲחֵי *'ahot*, “sister”). The decision as to whether to render them in gender-neutral terms relies on several factors. Some of them are applied in a fairly straightforward manner. For example, if the speaker is making an issue of the referent's social gender, then a gendered rendering is probably warranted. Certain other factors, however, require more nuance—and they will now be discussed in turn.

Referential Gender and Specificity

In Biblical Hebrew, whenever a reference is not to a *specific* individual, but rather the label is being used broadly to classify a *type* of person, a grammatically masculine referring expression by default includes women or girls in its scope.¹⁷ Consider the promise that the two Israelite spies make to Rahab the prostitute, regarding an imminent attack in which every resident of Jericho is supposed to be killed:

¹⁶ On the replacement of *man* in the Bible's references to supernatural messengers and guides, see below under “[The Situation-Oriented Construal of אֱלֹהִים](#).”

¹⁷ This is a property of the language that arises naturally from its structure, quite apart from sexism.

Bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your family together in your house; and ... if a hand is laid on anyone who remains in the house with you, his blood shall be on our heads. (Josh. 2.18–19, NJPS)

In the latter part of the corresponding Hebrew sentence, the personal reference כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּבֵיתָךְ *khol 'asher yihyeh 'ittakh babbayit* “anyone who remains in the house with you” is grammatically masculine, as is the subsequent suffixed pronoun (NJPS: “his blood”) that takes this expression as its antecedent. Yet all the story’s characters and its narrator clearly understand that Rahab’s mother is included in its scope (see also 6.22–23, which recounts her being saved alive). Likewise the text’s ancient audience must have shared the same understanding of the spies’ wording. This is because the protected group, as the speakers outlined it, is one that includes *everyone* who meets the stated criteria.¹⁸ Hence RJPS renders gender-inclusively: “anyone...their blood.”

Likewise, women are potentially in view if the referring label is almost any of Hebrew’s “male” personal nouns (i.e., those that have a specifically female counterpart)—as long as the reference is not specific.¹⁹ An exemplar is the noun אָדָם (see the previous section) when a narrator describes the release of both male and female slaves in Jerusalem:

...everyone should set free their Hebrew slaves, both male and female, and...no one should keep their fellow (אָדָם) Judean enslaved. (Jer. 34.9, RJPS)²⁰

This speaker covers both genders of slaves via the masculine term אָדָם alone—as does GOD again later in the same passage (vv. 14, 17).²¹

In short, translators must ask themselves whether a given reference is being made in a classifying manner. If so, then masculine grammatical gender and so-called male terms are not constraining the gender of the persons in view.

¹⁸ In such cases, the speaker’s use of masculine grammatical gender constrains the referent’s gender in only one respect: the scope is not restricted to females only.

¹⁹ Perhaps the only exception is the noun זָכָר *zakhar* “male.”

²⁰ Rendering אָדָם here via an adjective appears already in NJPS. The revised edition continues to treat “fellow” as a gender-inclusive term when it is employed as an adjective, but not as a noun.

²¹ The same passage shows that the so-called male noun יָרֵעַ (“fellow”) can likewise be used gender-inclusively when referring to a class of persons (Jer. 34.15, 17). Indeed, biblical interlocutors are repeatedly depicted as matter-of-factly employing and construing nonspecific “masculine” references gender-inclusively. They do so in a wide range of contexts—mundane conversation, public announcements, contracts, vows, and civil law. In this respect, Biblical Hebrew differs sharply from contemporary Israeli Hebrew.

What Goes without Saying

The Bible's transmitters could rely upon the fact that the original audience, in making sense of the text, would apply their society's familiar gender categories to textual interpretation.²² Consequently, those categories' implications could go without saying. This section outlines what was thereby presupposed.

In ancient Near East societies, gender mattered: the first detail communicated about a child's birth was whether it was a boy or a girl. The corresponding gender roles were complementary both in conception and in practice. "Manly" and "womanly" qualities and behaviors were largely defined in reciprocal terms. Gender differentially constrained who did what, and who answered to whom. Thus, generally speaking, women possessed vital expertise that men seldom (if ever) grasped, while men held crucial skills and knowledge that women seldom (if ever) learned. Women and men each learned how to exemplify their respective gender.

Gender expectations varied somewhat depending upon the intersecting factors of one's ethnicity, family ties, social class, and age. Nonetheless, the commonplaces that would have most affected the original audience's gender perceptions of the biblical text appear to have remained quite stable over the historical period in question (roughly sixteen hundred years).

Those commonplaces included the following: the basic social and economic unit was the corporate household, typically headed by a man; social structure was articulated in terms of extended patrilineages traced to a common ancestor, although everyone recognized kinship through female relatives as well as male; persons situated themselves in their community largely on the basis of kinship and gender roles; individuals derived their sense of identity both from their ancestry and from their corporate household, whose well-being they viewed as paramount; "real" men knew how to handle a sword, and "real" women, a spindle; men featured not only in military endeavors but also in formal communal leadership; women were essential workers in economic production, and essential administrators in resource management; women led aspects of public celebration and mourning; and women could and did acquire property (including slaves and land) via purchase, dowry, or inheritance.

²² Although it has been argued that the סָרִיס *saris* "eunuch" be considered another gender in ancient Israel, such a classification would have little impact on how the biblical text is translated. Consequently, these notes are framed only in terms of the classic two genders.

Much like a society's commonplaces, a speech community's conventions—their shorthand ways of speaking—likewise normally go without saying. One convention that can affect gender perceptions involves second-person address (“you”). To illustrate, imagine sitting in the front row of a commercial airliner in the U.S.A. as it prepares for landing. You hear the flight attendant announce: “Please put your seat backs and tray tables in their full upright and locked positions.” Would it be correct to infer that *everyone* sitting behind you had those items lowered? Of course not. In English, it goes without saying that a general directive is addressed nonspecifically to those in the audience *to whom it applies*.

The same convention applied in Biblical Hebrew. Consider the classic exemplar—namely what Moses announces to אֲנָחָה *ha’am* (NJPS: “the people”) while preparing for the revelation at Mt. Sinai: “do not go near a woman” (Exod. 19.15). Contrary to the assertions of some prominent scholars, that wording does not necessarily allow us to conclude that Moses’ audience consisted entirely of men. For by convention, the Israelites normally treated the man as the active agent in (hetero)sexual relations.²³ This explains why Moses did not address the women in his audience; it went without saying that this particular instruction did not apply to them, since they would not have been expected to “go near” their sexual partners. In short, Moses’ utterance says nothing definitive about whether his immediate audience included women as well as men.

To discourage the categorical misreading of that verse and other second-person utterances that have gender implications, this edition adds a clarifying footnote to those passages. In the example case, אֲנָחָה is rendered as *the men*, with a note to describe the convention that applied.

The Role of Literary Genre

The genre of a given text is another factor that would have affected the ancient audience’s perception of whether a referring expression placed women in view. In discourses that exhort their audience to adopt certain commitments or ways of living (such as Deuteronomy and Proverbs), the speaker or proverb-maker often invokes familiar situations, many of

²³ The Bible’s locutions repeatedly cast the man as the active party. See, e.g., Lev. 15.18, and the lists in Leviticus 18 and 20, which make a telling exception for bestiality as the only sex act that a woman might initiate (18.23 and 20.16). The same convention applied to behavior. At least as a matter of propriety, a desirous woman could only make polite suggestions, relying upon her male partner to respond with action (Song 1.2; 2.6; 4.11, 16; 7.12–13; 8.13–14; cf. Gen 3.17).

which are gendered stereotypes.²⁴ For *legal* matters, the audience presumably tends to construe a nonspecific participant reference broadly, to include those women who are known to sometimes function in the capacity at issue. Even in *genealogies*, contrary to popular belief, women are sometimes in view—especially at the end of a list of segments—given the occasional identification of a lineage by a woman’s name.²⁵

The Situation-Oriented Construal of אִישׁ

Of all the words whose usage warranted examination, none was more important than אִישׁ *’ish* (and its irregular plural אַנְשִׁים *’anashim*). This general human noun matters not only as the most frequent one in the biblical text (with nearly 2,200 instances of its masculine forms), but also as a noun that is highly influenced by context. For these reasons, and because the approach taken in this revision was a distinctive one, the construal of אִישׁ will now be discussed at some length.

The noun אִישׁ is commonly glossed in English as “man.” This does not mean, however, that its purpose is to convey that its referent is an adult male. In ancient Hebrew usage, אִישׁ almost always reflects a speaker’s concern for the referent’s *situatedness*. That is, like *man* in English, אִישׁ is the standard situating noun for human participants.²⁶ It is the clearly preferred label for performing various situating functions—even in settings where gender is not at stake. One such function is to enable the quick sketch of a situation in terms of its necessary participants, while also framing the participants in terms of their situation. For example, GOD, while listing the characteristic actions of a righteous man, can simply say

מִשְׁפָּט אֱמֶת יַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין אִישׁ לְאִישׁ

he has...executed true justice between one party and the other (Ezek. 18.8, RJPS)

where the counterposed instances of אִישׁ evoke the two constitutive participants in a legal dispute, namely the contending parties. By labeling those participants in terms of their stereotypical situation, the speaker conveys a schematic picture that is readily grasped. This

²⁴ The conceit of the book of Proverbs is that it is educating a young male toward what is conventional and prudent. Its addressee is being prepared to govern a household, and perhaps even to serve in the king’s court. (The book’s literary conceit does not imply, however, that only males were deemed worthy of wisdom education in ancient Israel.) In light of the fact that this book’s dramatic voice is directed at a young man, in RJPS many referring expressions that did not require a manly rendering (according to the criteria stated elsewhere) nonetheless received one. In short, for Proverbs, RJPS tended to favor clear and concise poetic expression over strict gender accuracy.

²⁵ See the [extended discussion of Gen. 22.24](#) in the preface to Stein, *The Contemporary Torah*.

²⁶ On the concept of a situating noun, see above under “[Man and Its Special Function](#).”

makes for efficient communication. (The alternative—using labels that are more informative, such as עַד ‘*ed* “accuser” for the plaintiff—would only complicate the picture.)

Another example of using אִישׁ to frame a situation occurs when Jeremiah asserts that the future legacy of his exiled king is a fractured one:

הָעֶצֶב נִבְּזָה נְפוּץ הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה כְּנִיָּהוּ

Is this man Coniah / A wretched, broken pot...? (Jer. 22.28, NJPS/RJPS)²⁷

Why does the prophet add the label אִישׁ? After all, he could identify his target by the name Coniah alone, and his audience already knows that their king is an adult male. The best explanation is that Jeremiah is focusing attention on a situation that concerns him. He wishes to comment upon it, so he evokes it by labeling its key participant *in terms of the depicted situation*.

In general for biblical texts, viewing אִישׁ as a situating noun can consistently explain not only its distinctive linguistic behaviors but also its very presence²⁸ and its absence.²⁹

As a situating noun, אִישׁ is employed to efficiently manage the audience’s mental picture of the depicted situation. It is the preferred label not only when the speaker or writer wishes to quickly frame a situation (as noted above), but also to resituate a given participant of interest in relation to their previous state (e.g., Gen. 20.8; 30.43), or to treat that known participant as a point of reference (e.g., Gen. 24.61; Exod. 2.21), or to mark a certain quality as essential (e.g., Gen. 6.4, 9). This communication-management role is actually the prototypical meaning of אִישׁ—far more than its informational content, which in Biblical Hebrew is usually incidental.³⁰

²⁷ Relative to the Hebrew word order in this verbless clause, NJPS transposed the subject and the predicate for the sake of good English idiom.

²⁸ Tellingly, אִישׁ is employed hundreds of times for situating purposes while giving no useful information about its referent’s features (let alone their gender). Such usages do not affect translation, but they provide vital clues to how אִישׁ functions in Biblical Hebrew. Namely, it is employed to carry out the same communicative functions as *man*, albeit expressed in even more ways.

²⁹ Namely, אִישׁ is not used as a label when the depicted situation is already established in the discourse, the participants are construed as given, and the speaker’s attention is oriented toward depicting an activity.

³⁰ In the Hebrew Bible’s non-specific singular references, אִישׁ can be used to regard a referent in terms of the attributes of gender and age—but only if it is counterposed with a term that specifically denotes women or children. Similarly, אִישׁ can be used to pointedly regard its referent as a human being—but only when placed in contrast with deities or animals. Such usages comprise a small minority of the total instances. That being said, the meaning of אִישׁ evolved over time, like *man* in

To the present translator—the team member who was responsible for the treatment of **אִישׁ**—viewing it as a situating noun is superior to the conventional view:³¹ it yields a coherent and informative biblical text more often, and more readily, while resolving long-standing interpretive cruxes. On that basis, a situation-oriented construal of **אִישׁ** was adopted for the preparation of this edition.

How, then, does this edition render **אִישׁ** into English? In most cases, the same way as NJPS did. Where women are not in view, the label most often employed is *man*, which still retains its situating force in many contexts.³² However, in some cases, a situation-oriented construal suggests a different focus. For example, in Exod. 5.9, Pharaoh is dissatisfied with the situation and (using the plural for **אִישׁ**) decrees, “Let heavier work be laid upon **הָאֲנָשִׁים** *ha-’anashim*.” Others render **הָאֲנָשִׁים** as *the men* or *the people*. Yet the prototypical meaning of **אִישׁ** suggests that Pharaoh is regarding the referents situationally rather than according to their intrinsic qualities. Hence the present translation reads *those involved*, i.e., the salient participants in the situation.³³

However, it often happens that a situation-oriented construal suggests a different rendering than what appears in NJPS, yet the latter does not warrant alteration on the basis of gender. In such cases, this edition—in recognition of the fact that its view of **אִישׁ** is not the consensus position among biblical scholars—tends to deploy the new rendering in a footnote as an alternative, rather than in the translation itself.³⁴

Four special usages of **אִישׁ** deserve mention because of their distinctive treatment in this edition. One is the role term **אֵלֹהִים אִישׁ אֵלֹהִים** *’ish ’elohim*, which occurs 73 times in the Hebrew Bible. The traditional rendering *man of God* is inapt, for two main reasons: (1) Its

English. Postbiblically, it came to be understood as mainly conveying gender, age, and humanness (i.e., adult male person).

³¹ The conventional view sees **אִישׁ** as prototypically informing the audience that its referent is an adult male human being. Even so, that prototype is widely understood to account for only a minority of biblical attestations. That unusual state of affairs is attributed to one effect of a noun’s frequent use—namely, a bleaching of its informational meaning. Reading with this conventional construal of **אִישׁ** yields a reasonably informative and coherent text in about 90% of biblical cases.

³² See discussion above under “[Man and Its Special Function](#).”

³³ For other cases with this new rendering, see, e.g., Exod. 10.7; Num. 14.22, 38; 16.14. On these and the hundreds of other instances where situation-oriented construal has led to a changed rendering, see the online “[Commentary on the Functions and Rendering of אִישׁ](#)” (in process).

³⁴ For such footnotes, see, e.g., Gen. 9.20; 18.2; 32.25; Num. 30.3; Deut. 1.17; 29.9; 1 Sam. 2.33; 4.9; 26.15; 1 Kgs. 2.2; Ezek. 23.45; Prov. 7.19; 30.2.

meaning, “a man devoted to the service of God,”³⁵ reflects a Christian construal; Christianity’s New Testament applies the term in question to anyone who relinquishes normal human ties in order to serve God alone.³⁶ However, that meaning is at best secondary to the Hebrew Bible’s usage; devotion is never at issue where **אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים** appears. (2) The markedly increased gendering in recent decades of the noun *man*, as discussed above, has undercut its situating usage in this expression, leaving an opaque term in its wake.³⁷

Whenever **אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים** is used as a label or title, what is actually in view is the person’s ability to articulate GOD’s view of the political or social situation at hand, or to otherwise represent GOD’s interests regarding that situation—that is, to bring the divine realm to bear upon the mundane realm. The term itself situates the referent between GOD and the rest of society. Consequently, the present revision employs the rendering *agent of God*—an expression consistent with all of the Hebrew term’s characteristic usages.³⁸

A second expression with special meaning—occurring often in the Former Prophets—combines the singular **אִישׁ** with the name of a group, which is then applied collectively rather than to an individual. For example, while recounting the start of a rebellion against King David, a narrator notes,

וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה דָּבְקוּ בַּמֶּלֶךְ

but Judah’s contingent accompanied their king (2 Sam. 20.2, RJPS)

In the expression **אִישׁ יְהוּדָה** *’ish Yehudah*, the head noun is singular, yet here its associated verb and pronoun are plural. Such a formulation encourages the audience to regard the group referent as a single entity in relation to the overall situation, i.e., as a constitutive participant. (Typically the situation in question is a group conflict, in which that referent is a disputant; or a bilateral agreement, to which that group referent is a party.) As usual, **אִישׁ**

³⁵ “man, n.1 (and int.),” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. P2.t. Another definition, “a godly man,” as given in *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* (s.v. “[man of God](#),” accessed 6/24/2022), is equally inapt for the Hebrew Bible’s usages.

³⁶ The apostle Paul was pointedly employing the same Greek term that the Septuagint (Old Greek) translation of the Hebrew Bible’s books had used throughout to render **אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים**.

³⁷ In contrast, the NJPS renderings of other social-role terms that employ **אִישׁ** as their head term, such as **אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה** *’ish milḥamah* “warrior,” are not susceptible to the shifted meaning of *man*.

³⁸ See especially Judg. 13.6; 1 Kings 17.24; 2 Kings 1.9–13; 4.16; 5.14; 8.4. The fact that some individuals labeled as such are also depicted without normal human ties arises incidentally from the role. Whenever someone is serving as the agent for another party, that agent’s other identities become irrelevant.

evokes the situation of interest. Unfortunately, that evocation is shortchanged in translation by the traditional (and NJPS) rendering of **אִישׁ יְהוּדָה** as *the men of Judah*. In order to bring the larger situation into view, the present edition instead uses a more situationally oriented term, such as *contingent, side, force, and delegation*.

A third usage of interest is the application of **אִישׁ** to refer to supernatural messengers or guides.³⁹ To put this biblical practice into perspective, let us observe that it is just one of many applications of **אִישׁ** to non-human entities (including also animals, inanimate objects, and abstract sets). In all such cases, this noun's usage can be readily explained in terms of its classic situating function. Occasionally the need arose to mentally situate and keep track of non-human entities; and when that function needed to be communicated, **אִישׁ** was available to be applied to such referents—performing the same prototypical situating function as for persons.⁴⁰

As noted above, when **אִישׁ** is applied to a supernatural being, the rendering *man* is no longer appropriate, because the meaning of *man* has become too gendered and human-oriented;⁴¹ it has lost the ability to indicate situatedness in such a context of use. Hence the present edition employs another label that has similarly vague semantic content, more akin to the original meaning of *man*. For example, in recounting a vision, the rendering *that figure was standing beside me* replaces *[the] man was standing beside me* (Ezek. 43.6, NJPS).

The fourth noteworthy special usage is found in the book of Proverbs, which repeatedly deploys **אִישׁ** to spotlight certain types of people as either a positive or negative role model. The pedagogic goal appears to be that the student addressed by the book identify with such figures, so as to adopt the positive roles and avoid the negative ones. In 11.17, for example,

³⁹ Gen. 18.2, 16, 22; 19.5(?), 10, 12, 16; 32.25; Judg. 13.11; Ezek. 9.2–3, 11; 10.2–3, 6; 40.3–6; 43.6; 47.3; Zech. 1.8–10; 2.5–6; 5.9; Dan. 9.21; 10.5–6, 18–20; 12.6–7.

⁴⁰ Meanwhile, it is telling that in the nine cases where the Bible describes non-human figures as having a human appearance, the label used is something other than **אִישׁ**. Rather, the terms are **אָדָם** 'adam (Isa 44.13; Ezek. 1.5, 10, 26; 10.21; Dan. 10.16, 18), **זָכָר/נֶקֶבָה** *zakhar/neqevah* (Deut. 4.16), and **גֶּבֶר** *geber* (Dan. 8.15). If that were indeed an available meaning of **אִישׁ**, it surely would have been employed due to its being shorter and easier to pronounce than the competing nouns. Consequently, the notion that the label **אִישׁ** means that its referent looks like a human being lacks support. In the Bible, it is not used in that manner. Hence the references to supernatural beings with the label **אִישׁ** cannot be taken as a signal that their appearance is indistinguishable from that of a human being, as some scholars have claimed.

⁴¹ See above under "[Man and Its Special Function](#)."

the Hebrew text concisely and memorably teaches that how we treat others ultimately redounds to ourselves:

גִּמְלַ נְפִשׁוֹ אִישׁ חֶסֶד וְעֵכָר שְׂאֵרוֹ אֶבְזָרִי:

A kindly man benefits himself; / A cruel one makes trouble for himself.

How the point is made is inseparable from the message itself. As usual, the label **אִישׁ** signals that its referent is an essential participant for grasping the depicted situation. Indeed, this party is the key to its possibilities, while the contrasting option is meanwhile treated as a given by being labeled without **אִישׁ**. This differential usage of **אִישׁ** spotlights the positive pole in the contrast, while the proverb's formulation in the grammatical singular focuses attention on the individual's own behavior.

Although the verse's Hebrew wording is not gender-restricted per se, and although its moral point applies regardless of gender, in English its message does not seem to be expressible in gender-neutral terms while still retaining both the situational hinge and the focus on the individual actor. Those vital aspects of meaning are, however, preserved by rendering this case in terms of *man* and *himself*. For RJPS, such gendering is deemed acceptable when translating Proverbs, given the book's male-centered nature.⁴²

Terms Regarding Women

Accuracy regarding the Bible's treatment of gender involves assessing not only masculine language, but also how fairly the explicitly feminine labels and concerns are rendered. Such a review has led to a variety of revisions. To give six disparate examples:

- When GOD specifies the consequences of the first woman's having eaten the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3.16), she is not singled out for future suffering; rather, both of the guilty parties are destined for lifetimes of intense work. Hence "I will make most severe / Your pangs in childbearing; / In pain shall you bear children" is replaced by "I will greatly expand / Your toil—and your pregnancies; / In hardship shall you bear children."
- In accord with contemporary idiom, the NJPS labeling of a young woman as *girl* is now restricted to informal direct speech, in order to avoid its dismissive connotation and the implication that children were expected to engage in sexual relations.
- For תֹּפֶן *toph* (e.g., Exod. 15.20; Jer. 31.4), *hand-drum* replaces the ambiguous *timbrel*, to make it clearer that women, as drummers, were setting the tempo during Israel's public celebrations.⁴³

⁴² On gender in the book of Proverbs and its treatment in RJPS, see above, n. [24](#).

⁴³ "Timbrel" can mean either "hand-drum" or "tambourine"—and in our day, the latter construal

- For *אִשְׁשָׁה חַכְמָה* *'ishshah ḥakhamah* (2 Sam. 14.2; 20.16), the expression *a woman who was wise* replaces *a clever woman*, to avoid the negative connotations of *clever*.
- For *אִשְׁת־חַיִל* *'esheth ḥayil* (Prov. 12.4; 31.10), the rendering *capable wife* is replaced by *woman of substance*, reflecting the typical use of *אִשְׁשָׁה* *'ishshah* (as a situating noun) to introduce a situation-defining quality.
- For *קִדְשָׁה* *qedeshah* (e.g., Deut. 23.18), the expression *consecrated worker* replaces the discredited term *cult prostitute*, and *retainer* is offered as an alternative rendering, while the meaning is marked as uncertain.

With regard to a number of bodily functions, the present edition employs wording that is now normative, such as *pregnant* rather than *with child*, and *infertile* rather than *barren*. Similarly, the renderings of terms for menstruation assume an emotionally neutral rather than negative valence.

Examples of Significant Differences

In a variety of ways—apart from the God-language—the present translation differs not only from NJPS but also from other gender-sensitive translations, such as the ecumenical New Revised Standard Version (NRSVue, 2021). Examples of differences among the three translation renditions are shown in Table 1. Women are in view in only about half of these cases, which underscores that the goal of gender accuracy is a far-reaching endeavor.

Table 1. Selected References to Human Beings in RJPS versus NJPS and NRSVue

Locale	RJPS	NJPS (1985)	NRSVue (2021)
Gen 13.7	the herders of Abram's cattle	the herdsmen of Abram's cattle	the herders of Abram's livestock
Gen. 42.11	we are being honest	we are honest men	we are honest men
Gen. 44.17	Only the man in whose possession the goblet was found	Only he in whose possession the goblet was found	Only the one in whose possession the cup was found
Exod. 4.31	and the assembly was convinced	and the people were convinced	The people believed
Exod. 8.13	upon human and animal	upon man and beast	on humans and animals alike
Exod. 21.7	a parent sells a daughter	a man sells his daughter	a man sells his daughter

seems to be more common. Yet the first meaning denotes a basic, tempo-setting instrument, whereas the second meaning denotes a more ornamental one (not attested until the Roman era).

Locale	RJPS	NJPS (1985)	NRSVue (2021)
Exod. 11.5	every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt will die	every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die	Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die
Lev 15.33	concerning her whose condition is that of menstrual separation	concerning her who is in menstrual infirmity	for her who is in the infirmity of her menstrual period
Num. 1.4	a representative from every tribe	a man from each tribe	A man from each tribe
Num. 26.7	the men enrolled	the persons enrolled	those enrolled
Num. 36.6	They may become the wives of anyone they wish	They may marry anyone they wish	Let them marry whom they think best
Deut. 11.21	the land that GOD swore to your fathers to assign to them	the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to assign to them	the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them
Deut. 23.25	a fellow Israelite's vineyard	another man's vineyard	your neighbor's vineyard
Josh. 23.10	A single one of you	A single man of you	One of you
Judg. 8.1	those in Ephraim's contingent said	the men of Ephraim said	the Ephraimites said
Judg. 13.6	An agent of God came to me	A man of God came to me	A man of God came to me
Judg. 14.1	he noticed a certain young Philistine woman	he noticed a girl among the Philistine women	he saw a Philistine woman
Judg. 16.19	she called in someone else	she called in a man	she called a man
1 Sam 11.12	Hand over those involved	Hand the men over	Give them to us
1 Kings 5.5	every family under its own vine and fig tree	everyone under his own vine and under his own fig tree	all of them under their vines and fig trees
1 Kings 8.46	for there is no mortal who does not sin	for there is no man who does not sin	for there is no one who does not sin
1 Kings 22.40	Ahab rested with his ancestors	Ahab slept with his fathers	So Ahab slept with his ancestors
Prov. 31.10	How precious is a woman of substance!	What a rare find is a capable wife!	A woman of strength who can find?

Lingering Uncertainties

Any claim to faithful translation of the Bible must face the fact that biblical scholars today are far removed from the linguistic and cultural world of ancient Israel. So just how close

can the RJPS translators come to achieving their goal of accuracy regarding gender? Two observations may help readers in making their own assessment of the references to human beings. First, the systematic attempt to render the Bible's treatment of gender accurately has shown that levels of confidence can be discerned, which vary by the topic. For the vast majority of biblical passages, the usual evaluation process (namely, taking into account the gender commonplaces of ancient Israel,⁴⁴ while expecting that a text be informative and coherent) succeeds in yielding a gender interpretation with high confidence. By and large there is little cause for doubt, and that is a noteworthy result.

Furthermore, with regard to gender, the translators' choice of rendering is not equally weighted, because English prefers non-gendered wording.⁴⁵ Gendered renderings are warranted only when strong evidence exists that the ancient audience had ample reason to believe that women were *not* in view.⁴⁶ Practically the only way for this translation *not* to be gender accurate in a given passage, therefore, is that either the referring expression had a conventional exclusionary meaning that since has been lost, or an otherwise-unrecognized social norm excluded women from view. It is left to the reader to assess the likelihood of those two possibilities in each case.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that only on limited occasions might this translation be affected by our present-day ignorance about either ancient Hebrew or the Israelite construction of gender. The present translators have sought to identify such cases and mark them with a footnote.⁴⁷ Happily, what remains unsure in such passages need not hinder our benefiting elsewhere from what is known with high confidence.

REFERENCES TO DIVINE BEINGS

Israel's God: The Case for Gender-Neutral Language

Due to our remove in time and culture, irreducible uncertainties exist regarding how the Bible's ancient audience would have ascribed gender to the persona of GOD.⁴⁸ Scholars

⁴⁴ See above under "[What Goes without Saying](#)."

⁴⁵ See above under "[Translating Gender in Light of English Idiom](#)."

⁴⁶ Although, as discussed in the [Preface](#), a second criterion must also be met, it is not germane to this question of cultural accuracy.

⁴⁷ For the provision of a second rendering that offers a different gender implication, see, e.g., Gen. 29.22 and Ps. 34.9. For an acknowledgement of uncertainty, see, e.g., Num. 15.38 and Deut. 23.2.

⁴⁸ Such a discussion is properly cast in terms of GOD's *persona* (i.e., the personality that is projected

cannot reach a firm conclusion about gender in ancient Israelite depictions of the Bible's Deity, because nowhere does the Bible state outright that its Deity's persona is or is not male. We are left with implications, which ultimately are arguments from silence.

Yet it is fair to say that by the time the Pentateuch was promulgated (i.e., relatively early in the Bible's canonization), its editors had good reason to believe that their ancient audience would construe its Deity's persona as *beyond gender*. As many observers have noted, nothing in the Bible requires us to conclude that this persona is gendered. Grammatically masculine referring expressions do not require construing a persona as male.⁴⁹ Further, the biblical text never explicitly ascribes to GOD anatomical sex features or sexual activity, in contrast to some ancient Near Eastern literature about high gods and goddesses.

Some scholars have asserted that the Bible's application of predominantly manly imagery for GOD shows that its audience thought of that Deity's persona as male. However, ample evidence shows that the denizens of the ancient Near East did not think about gender in that way; rather, they distinguished between personas and the imagery that was employed in saying things about them. For example, consider the biblical practice of describing men with womanly imagery (without remarking upon their masculinity), as in the image of being seized with pangs "like a woman in labor" (Isa. 13.8; 21.3; 26.17; Jer. 6.24; 13.21; etc.), or of suckling at the breasts of kings (Isa. 60.16). Likewise, consider the practice of referring to GOD with grammatically masculine inflections even while employing womanly metaphors—such as asserting that this deity served as a midwife (Ps. 22.10) and as presupposing that GOD possesses a womb (Isa. 46.3).⁵⁰ Given that the audience was obviously expected to distinguish between the persona of interest and *womanly* imagery, it

through speech and action) rather than innate *nature*. In the ancient Near East, deities were normally depicted and experienced in both personal and nonpersonal ways. A human-like persona was one among many alternate ways of evoking the same deity's presence and functions.

⁴⁹ In Hebrew, masculine inflections are the norm whenever the speaker does not know a specific referent's social gender or it is indeterminate. Therefore they are the expected way to refer to someone for whom the social category of gender is deemed not to apply. Once such a status is established, the inherent stability (identity) of a persona then supports the continued use of masculine grammatical gender in reference to that party.

⁵⁰ The same practice is attested in the ancient Near East for a male deity. Furthermore, two-gender predications (i.e., describing someone with both manly and womanly figures of speech within the same utterance) are attested in the ancient Near East both for kings and for deities.

stands to reason that a corresponding distinction would have applied, as well, to the *manly* imagery used elsewhere.⁵¹

Indeed, such presumed distinctions are in accord with how (according to psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists) people normally interpret the plain sense of a text. They do so by expecting both its wording and any characterizations to be coherent—that is, internally consistent. Given that fact, the Bible’s ancient audience would predictably infer that any assertion about someone’s actions or nature is *not* to be taken as a claim about the gender (or non-gender) their already established persona, unless it is framed as a challenge thereto.

Crucially, two factors suggest that the Bible’s initial characterization of its Deity—which necessarily colors the subsequent portrayals—precludes a gendered reading of that same persona throughout the canon. First, in the opening of the creation account at the start of Genesis (1.1–25), the protagonist is rendered as a *dramatis persona* but with muted personification. Conspicuously absent is a corporeal body and a social role. Interpersonal interactions are likewise limited. Even the other parties who are addressed lack any gender indications. Thus in this opening passage, the Deity remains unlinked to the standard notion of gender and its framework of complementary categories.

Meanwhile, in that definitive introduction, this persona accomplishes what no literal person or other deity could conceivably do: organize the cosmos solely by wishing it to be so. This Deity was *so obviously unlike any known persona* that the ancient audience, hearing that opening passage, would have been hard pressed to ascribe gender—even by analogy to some familiar figure.

Consequently, a likely ancient interpretation of Genesis 1 is that it was introducing a Deity of breathtaking otherness—an otherness that not only resisted any gender categorization, but also was intended *as a distinguishing feature of this Deity*. And so, in setting up a canonical reading of the rest of the Bible—according to the normal expectation of the continuity of each persona’s identity—this “beyond gender” construal would then persist throughout. It cast GOD’s persona as independent of the varied ascriptions and anthropomorphisms that would follow it—by framing them as rhetorical flourishes.⁵²

⁵¹ How, then, to explain the predominance of manly imagery for GOD in the Bible? By an abiding desire to depict the Deity as possessing the kind of power and ultimate authority that, in human society, was typically possessed by *men*. In the context of recounting the fate of a nation, the Deity’s ability to win victory over enemies, and to administer justice, was highly salient.

⁵² Furthermore, this construal would apply despite the ancient audience’s possible familiarity with a *male* deity with the same name, as some archeological evidence suggests. The apparent fact that

Representing the Tetragrammaton

As noted in the [Preface](#), NJPS represented the Name (the four-letter “personal” name of God that is traditionally not pronounced as it is spelled) impersonally as *the LORD*, in accord with an ancient and widespread practice. The Name has long been treated not like any ordinary Hebrew word but like something totally other. Such distinctive treatment appears to reflect the monotheistic concept of God as unique and transcendent.

In preparation for the 2006 publication of *The Contemporary Torah*, JPS asked certain Jewish scholars, rabbis, and opinion leaders—people whose training or experience had led them to ponder the question of how best to represent the Name in English—for their suggestions. Twenty respondents provided thoughtful input. Among the proffered candidates was *the Eternal*, which was employed in a Torah commentary issued by the Reform movement in 2005 (which borrowed the term from a widely accepted rendering among German-speaking Jews since the late eighteenth century), and *Adonai*, the classic Hebrew substitute in liturgical settings (which means “the Lord” or “my Lord” but in effect prompts unique reference, akin to a name). Weighing the options, the editors concluded that the Bible employs the Name primarily *as a name* (not a defining attribute, not as a declaration, and not in terms of etymology), and that the project should present that name in as unvarnished a manner as possible. Ultimately the Name was represented in an untranslated fashion, with (unvocalized) Hebrew letters, in emulation of a practice in antiquity.

In 2021, while revisiting the issue for the present project, the editors looked back at the experience of the previous fifteen years. It was concluded that not only the Hebrew name itself but also Hebrew-oriented substitutes such as *YHVH* or *Adonai* or *Yah* (the transcription of one biblical abbreviation of the Name) remained too off-putting for many readers—especially those less acquainted with the Hebrew Bible and its varied labels for the Deity. Before settling on a preferred approach, the editors looked at the various options when deployed in sample biblical passages that used the divine Name both in isolation and combined with a wide variety of epithets/titles and phrasing. The choice of *GOD* to serve as the default representation, with *the ETERNAL* as a secondary form, was then made for the reasons stated in the [Preface](#).

some Israelites thought of this deity as male-gendered does not necessarily mean that every Israelite (or the transmitters of biblical texts) did so.

Third-Person References to Israel's God

In order to avoid *He/Him/His/Himself* when referring to GOD, the translators of this edition revised the NJPS wording according to techniques recommended by standard guides such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*, while hewing to the underlying Hebrew text. That being said, the consistent avoidance of pronouns poses special challenges that should not go unremarked. Compared with the normal recourse to pronouns, the resulting utterances can demand more audience attention (in cognitive processing), have a jerkier or more staccato feel, and tend to be less precise about that persona's relationships. The present edition minimizes such side effects via attentive editing, guided by the goal of functional equivalence: to evoke the same plain-sense meaning for today's audience as the original text would have done for its audience. (Where the RJPS substitution moves markedly toward paraphrase, a literal rendering is given in a footnote, emulating NJPS practice.) For examples, see Table 2.⁵³

Table 2. Typical References to Israel's God in RJPS versus NJPS

RJPS	NJPS	Citation
[God] said	He said	Exod. 24.1
God's people	His people	Deut. 32.43
the Covenant	His covenant	Deut. 17.2
laws that were enjoined upon you	laws that He enjoined upon you	Deut. 28.45
the divine voice	His voice	Deut. 4.36
the fear of God	the fear of Him	Exod. 20.17
doing what displeased and vexed GOD	doing what displeased the LORD and vexing Him	Deut. 9.18
may GOD be the one to demand	may the LORD Himself demand	Josh. 22.23
GOD hears when I call out	the LORD hears when I call to Him	Ps. 4.4

⁵³ This translation is not the first one to depict GOD without gender. In 1930, a translator of the Bible into Chinese, Wang Yuande, coined a [third-person pronoun](#) whose written form shows that God has no gender aside from being God. The German translation *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (2006) refers to God by alternately using masculine and feminine forms (since German requires one or the other, practically speaking). As for the English language, *The Inclusive Bible* (2009) avoids pronouns for God.

RJPS	NJPS	Citation
I cry aloud to GOD, / who answers me	I cry aloud to the LORD, / and He answers me	Ps. 3.5
Then GOD, having become incensed against Israel, said	Then the LORD became incensed against Israel, and He said	Judg. 2.20

Where Angels Tread, GOD Does Not

Academic literature on the Bible’s angels and its Deity is replete with claims that the text often conflates the two, such that biblical depictions of an angel’s body (and gender) hardly distinguish it from GOD’s ostensible body (and gender). Such a view ignores ancient Near Eastern lore—well attested throughout the Hebrew Bible—on how an agent, along with the related parties involved, was expected to behave. When those conventions are taken into account, GOD is not depicted as embodied in the passages in which an agent is on the scene.

Biblical angels function chiefly as messengers; the most frequent term for an angel, מַלְאָךְ *mal’akh*, reflects this role.⁵⁴ The present edition preserves the NJPS practice of rendering מַלְאָךְ contextually as *angel*. At the same time, by footnoting its literal meaning as “messenger” whenever it refers to a specific figure,⁵⁵ this edition prompts its readers to consider that for the original audience, that celestial agent was expected to follow the same protocols observed with human emissaries.

Agency Metonymy: Whose Body Is in View?

Ancient conventions for agency (the endeavor in which an agent is acting on behalf of some other party, known as the principal) include how to talk about it. The misconstrual of one such linguistic convention has all too often prompted modern readers to perceive GOD as being male. Applied in the Bible most often to interactions between people, this convention names only the principal yet also invokes the agent. Hence it succinctly refers to *both parties at once*.⁵⁶ The two parties can be verbally linked in this way because the agent is conceived of as standing in for the principal.

⁵⁴ On מַלְאָךְ as another label for divine agents, see above, “[The Situation-Oriented Construal of מַלְאָךְ](#).”

⁵⁵ In regular English, *messenger* designates an agent who performs any kind of errand.

⁵⁶ Or alternatively, the dual reference is achieved while speaking only *as* the principal, or only *to* the principal. For this linguistic convention, see Gen. 19.12–14; Judg. 11.19; Isa. 7.10; cf. Rashbam and Kimhi at Gen. 19.24; Kimhi at 31.3; Ibn Ezra at Exod. 3.4, 7; Isa. 7.10; Kimhi at Josh. 6.2; Zech. 3.2; Gersonides at Judg. 6.14.

In the cases of interest here, the principal is not human but rather GOD, who is said to be on the scene—and the audience is supposed to infer that an angel or a human messenger is actually present.⁵⁷ For example, when a narrator in Genesis, while transitioning between scenes, recounts that וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנּוּ עֹמֵד לְפָנָי י״ we-’Avraham ‘odennu ‘omed liphne Y-h-w-h “Abraham remained standing before GOD” (18.22), this is not a claim that GOD was literally visible to Abraham. Rather, the oddity of the locution (in context) indicates that here GOD’s name is a conventional metonym:⁵⁸ it expresses that in the ensuing dialogue, the remaining agent—the last of the three visitors—will be speaking for GOD.

In sum, a referential anomaly encoded in the text signals to the audience that the label is not meant to be taken literally. The text’s plain sense thus diverges from its literal meaning. The metonym underscores that the agent’s speech or action is made on GOD’s behalf.

As with all metonyms, agency-based ones can get lost in translation from one language to another. Some conventions differ between ancient Hebrew and English. An audience that misses the cue to read the label figuratively will conflate the dual reference. Information that is conveyed about the agent’s (gendered) body is then mistaken as being about GOD’s ostensible body.⁵⁹

To avoid a literal reading of agency metonyms that are not conventional in English, and for the sake of maintaining gender accuracy with respect to GOD, this edition provides a clarifying footnote, as needed.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ E.g., in Genesis alone: 16.13; 17.22; 18.13, 22, 33; 21.17–18; 22.11–14; 31.3, 11–13; 32.23–33; 35.9–13.

⁵⁸ On conventional metonymy, see above under “[Gender and Figurative Language](#).”

⁵⁹ Related to this problem is the construal of the verb whose root is רָאָה *r-’-h* in the Niphal stem when it is applied to GOD or to persons. Customarily, English translations render it literally as “to appear,” which implies a visual manifestation—which in turn tends to imply that the Deity is displaying a (presumably gendered) body. Yet most instances lack support for such a meaning in the original text. Arguably that verb is most often used to denote *the advent of a communication event*. Ancient Hebrew idiom apparently expressed this abstract idea by drawing upon the sense of sight, much as English idiom draws upon the sense of touch; when we customarily say that someone “makes contact with” another person, it is not meant or taken literally. In cases where GOD is the subject, this edition offers the nonliteral construal in a footnote, as an alternative.

⁶⁰ Among the varied ancient usages of conventional metonymy to depict divine communication with humans via an intermediary, one type is conventional also in English: communication via an oracle, as in “She went to inquire of GOD, and GOD answered her” (Gen. 25.22–23). From the first clause, modern readers infer that an oracle’s presence as intermediary (vague and mysterious though it may be) goes without saying. They then know not to construe the second clause literally.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- This translation is based upon a principled analysis of English idiom and its evolution.
- It judiciously incorporates original research into how the biblical text’s ancient audience would have ascribed gender when hearing its words and while resolving its personal references. In so doing, it attends to the pitfalls of translating figurative language (metonymy) from Hebrew to English. It also takes conventions of communication into account.
- It reconsiders how depictions of women are rendered, so as to avoid introducing sexism in the act of translation.
- It adds several types of footnotes that are designed to avoid common pitfalls in construing gender.
- A case is made that the Hebrew Bible presented its Deity in a manner that resists a gender categorization, and that this was precisely the point.
- Although the gender implications of some of the Bible’s references to persons are uncertain, nearly all of the renderings seem to be accurate with a high degree of confidence.

In conclusion, this translation is designed to afford its readers with an accurate picture of the Bible’s treatment of gender—that is, as the ancient audience would have perceived gender in its human references, and as they may well have perceived it with regard to GOD.

For Further Reading

Supporting materials by the author, in reverse chronological order

“Commentary on Translation Choices in *THE JPS TANAKH* (RJPS).” Companion to RJPS on Sefaria.org, explaining selected instances, 2023 (and ongoing). purl.org/scholar/rjps-comm.

“Explaining the Preference for שְׁמִי as a Label.” Paper presented to the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section, Society of Biblical Literature. Annual Meeting, San Diego, 24 November 2024. purl.org/scholar/sbl24.

“Corrigenda: Changes made to RJPS on Sefaria, relative to the first printing (Oct. 1, 2023).” purl.org/jps/rjps-correx.

“Angels by Another Name: How ‘Agency Metonymy’ Precludes God’s Embodiment.” In *Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Volume 2: Texts, Readers, and Their Worlds*, edited by Soo Kim Sweeney, David Frankel, and Marvin A. Sweeney, 245–65. Resources for Biblical Study 107. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024. [doi:10.2307/jj.20307755.18](https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.20307755.18). More info: purl.org/stein/angels.

“The Situating Noun in Ancient Hebrew: A New Understanding of שְׁמִי.” *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion* [Dallas International University] 5/2 (2024): 1–26. purl.org/scholar/situat-noun-heb.

“Linguistic Analysis behind Innovative Renderings of שְׁמִי in a Newly Published Translation.” *The*

- Bible Translator* 75/2 (2024): 140–63. doi:10.1177/20516770241251704. Accepted Manuscript: purl.org/scholar/rjps-groups.
- “Isaiah 66:13 — A Solution to the Puzzle.” Poster presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Global Virtual Meeting, April 2024. purl.org/scholar/Isa.66.13.
- “The Impact of Discourse Functions on Rendering the Biblical Hebrew Noun שִׁנָּה in a Gender-Sensitive English Translation.” In: *[Re]Gained in Translation: Bibles, Theologies, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Vol. I, edited by Sabine Dievenkorn and Shaul Levin, 283–310. Arbeiten zur Theorie und Praxis des Übersetzens und Dolmetschens 133. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2022. purl.org/scholar/cjps-discourse.
- “Relational Meanings of the Noun שִׁנָּה (’iš) in Biblical Hebrew.” Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Ancient Studies, University of Stellenbosch, 2020. purl.org/scholar/stein-phd-diss.
- “When Did the Biblical Hebrew Noun שִׁנָּה Become Lexically Gendered?” Paper presented to the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section, Society of Biblical Literature. Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 24, 2019. purl.org/scholar/lex-gender.
- “Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation: Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18:1–15 and 32:23–33.” *Open Theology* 4 (2018), 545–89, doi:10.1515/opth-2018-0043.
- “Gender Representation in Biblical Hebrew.” In *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, 2:20–22. Leiden: Brill, 2013. purl.org/stein/ehll-gender.
- “Unavoidable Gender Ambiguities: A Primer for Readers of English Translations from Biblical Hebrew.” *SBL Forum* (Summer 2009), online. purl.org/scholar/sbl-gender.
- “The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew.” *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008): 7–26, doi:10.1353/hbr.2008.0014. purl.org/scholar/HS-2008.
- “The Matter of Gender in the JPS Torah Translation.” In *JPS Guide: The Jewish Bible*, 51–55. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008.
- “On Beyond Gender: Representation of God in the Torah and in Three Recent Renditions into English.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 15 (April 2008): 108–137, doi:10.2979/NAS.2008.-.15.108.
- “God’s Name in a Gender-Sensitive Jewish Translation.” *The Bible Translator* (Technical Papers) 58/3 (July 2007): 105–10. purl.org/scholar/bt-godname.
- “Dictionary of Gender in the Torah.” In *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, edited by David E. S. Stein, 393–412. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006. purl.org/stein/dict-gender.
- “Preface.” In *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, edited by David E. S. Stein, v–xxxv. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006. purl.org/stein/cjps-preface.
- “Part II: Translation (Notes)—Methodology; Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers.” *Documentation for the Revised Edition of The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, online. New York: URJ Press, 2014. purl.org/ccar/tamc.