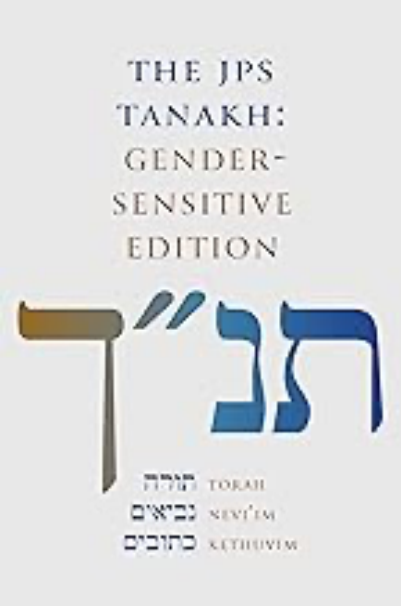
RBL 07/2025



David Stein, Beth Lieberman, and Hilary Lipka, eds.

The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition

Jewish Publication Society, 2023. Pp. xxxiii + 1718.
Hardcover. $39.95. ISBN 9780827615595.

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Although no translation of the Bible will ever be perfect, this translation wrestles in sophisticated and fruitful ways with assumptions of gender, as it renders Biblical Hebrew into contemporary English. The most outstanding linguistic feature of this "Revised JPS Edition" (RJPS) pertains to the total and utter elimination of any "LORD" language in the Hebrew Bible. This removal is a distinctive accomplishment of this translation in a sea of English Bible versions. Even the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, also published in 2023, does not put this long-overdue linguistic insight into practice. To have access to an English Bible translation that does not perpetuate kyriarchal language for God, as feminist Bible scholars have demanded for decades, is thus a huge theological accomplishment. For this reason I can live with some of the other aspects shaping this translation that I consider less desirable. The scholarly translation team and the renowned publication house deserve high praise for making this intellectual-exegetical leap in this exquisite RJPS edition.

I want to begin by highlighting the RJPS's decision of removing any kyriarchal God rhetoric in the English text. The linguistic solutions are creative, dynamic, and intelligent. The RJPS follows German Jewish Bible translators since the eighteenth century CE, such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Moses Mendelssohn, who used different fonts or replaced the Tetragrammaton with "the ETERNAL" before the Hebrew noun *'elohim*. Accordingly, in verses such as Gen 2:4b the English reads, "When the ETERNAL God made earth and heaven…." This rendition is both elegant and theologically sensible. When the Tetragrammaton appears by itself, the divine name appears in capital plus small

capital letters, "GOD," whereas the Hebrew word *'elohim* is written as "God." The argument of the translators is as follows:

> The term *GOD* provides access to the ancient experience of the divine name primarily as a name (rather than as a description or a theological claim). In the Hebrew, this name is distinct from, but exists alongside of, other ways of referring to the Deity. Using two versions of the same word (*GOD* and *God*) for this name and for certain other Hebrew terms underscores that the Deity is being invoked in all of these cases, while … enabling readers to know which type of expression appears in the biblical text. (xvii)

The English word for the deity is the same but written in different cases to indicate the difference in the Hebrew vocabulary. Thus, the emphasis in the translated text is on the referent, God, addressed by a name that covers various functions depending on what particular Hebrew word is used for the divinity.

Related to this point, the English translation also avoids any third-person masculine pronouns for God even if the Biblical Hebrew contains such pronouns. This linguistic move is also far-reaching and ought to be applauded by everyone. In an addendum titled "Notes on Gender in Translation" (available online at purl.org/jps/gender), Rabbi David E. Stein, who served as the project manager and revising translator of the volume, explains:

> This Deity *was so obviously unlike any known persona* that the ancient audience, hearing that opening passage [of Genesis 1], would have been hard pressed to ascribe gender—even by analogy to some familiar figure…. Consequently, … Genesis 1 … 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*. ("Notes," 21, emphasis original)

Since God is constructed as "beyond gender" in the Hebrew Bible, the English translation avoids ascribing gender to God even when masculine pronouns appear in the Hebrew text. For instance, the translation refers to "God's people" and not to "His people" (Deut 32:43). Or Ps 4:4 changes from "the LORD hears when I call to Him" (NJPS) to "GOD hears when I call out." Many other examples appear in the addendum on pages 23–24, all splendid illustrations for the benefit of using nongendered grammar for God. Although Tikva Frymer-Kensky is not quoted in the footnotes on depicting the biblical God as a gender-free deity, she was one of the first feminist Jewish Bible scholars making this point forcefully in her work. I believe she would have been delighted with this linguistic argumentation and welcomed this new Tanakh edition with open arms.

Despite my enthusiasm for the RJPS, I also notice a significant drawback that, however, is not unique to this translation. As the preface and the online addendum suggest, the translators felt bound by what

they believe is the biblical meaning as the original audience would have heard it. As Stein explains in the preface of the RJPS:

> Consequently, this edition should once again evoke for today's audience the same mental picture as the original text apparently evoked for its ancient one. This edition therefore preserves the differences between the Bible's world and our own, while—crucially—allowing the biblical text to speak to contemporary readers who might otherwise find it alienating. (xx)

Said differently, this translation wants to get rid of some "archaisms" (xviii) but not others. Wedded to what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza classified as the antiquarian-empiricist paradigm, the RJPS favors "ancient" meanings over meanings grounded in today's readerly locations.

Yet even historical meanings of the Bible are always constructed by readers living in the postbiblical world. There is no going back to some unimpeded ancient audience's meaning. For sure, as the RJPS correctly suggests, *barren* needs to be replaced with *infertile*, and its translation of Gen 3:16 offers a long-overdue rendition of a verse that for many centuries was used to justify misogyny:" I will greatly expand / Your toil—and your pregnancies; / In hardship shall you bear children." But why this insistence on antiquarian-empiricist biblical meaning in many other places? Since the translation team included influential feminist historical-literary critics, among them Adele Berlin, Tamara Eskenazi, Hilary Lipka, Carol L. Meyers, and Susan Niditch, the adherence to the intentional fallacy is unsurprising. The internal debate among the translation team is, however, also apparent in a statement such as this: "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" ("Notes," 19). Or this one: "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" ("Notes," 26). Allow me to put these statements in the colloquial: "We just can't be sure if the ancient audience would or could have heard the text in the way we translate it, but we believe we are close enough!" That is the tenor of the explanations, and so there is room for debate. Good.

Allow me also to make this seemingly harsh point: the decision of the translators to privilege a vaguely defined ancient audience complies with the hegemonic tendencies in the field of biblical studies that as a whole is still mostly committed to the colonizing methodology of the antiquarian-empiricist paradigm. The RJPS's loyalty to this paradigm is, however, conflicted due to its aim of retiring archaic English vocabulary. For instance, Stein recognizes the many "shifts" in gender sensibilities in the English-speaking culture that have led to the infrequency of masculine pronouns and a preference toward generic terminology (x). Stein states unambiguously: "Nowadays we tend to separate our mention of a person's accomplishments and social roles from the gendered garb in which we used to clothe our points" (xi–xii). Yet at the same time the translators abide to the "normal parlance in the

ancient Near East" although it is "different from what is normal in today's Western world" ("Notes," 2).

The tension of this hermeneutical dilemma within the translation team is apparent in many instances. A central example appears in Gen 2:7 , which the RJPS translates as: "the ETERNAL God formed a Human from the soil's humus, blowing into his nostrils the breath of life: the Human became a living being." A footnote after "a Human" explains: "Heb. *ha-'adam*. Although this term is not gendered, to the ancient audience it went without saying that the progenitor of all human lineages was a male" (5). What a missed opportunity! On the basis of a vague reference to "the ancient audience," the translators claim that this verse communicates the idea that the first human-like creature is a male, although feminist biblical scholars have long shown the linguistic ambiguity of the Hebrew noun *ha-adam* that could be viewed as a proto-sexual human being and be translated as "earthling" or "earth creature." So the question is why the translators hand over their interpretive authority to a vaguely defined ancient audience. Could it not be that this particular verse challenges the phallogocentric status quo of ancient society by suggesting that the first human was a nongender being not yet exhibiting a particular gender identity? Or does the RJPS want us to believe that nonhegemonic ideas about gender emerged only in our time and that people of ancient Israel submitted to oppressive male supremacy at all times?

Another passage that accepts archaic terminology appears in Gen 34:2. Here the translators avoid the contested issue of sexual violence. Accordingly, the RJPS offers this rape-prone translation: "Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her." A footnote after "disgraced" indicates: "disgraced. Lit. 'violated.'" So why did the translators privilege shaming vocabulary ("disgrace") and avoid an explicit reference to rape? In my view, this is another missed opportunity that perhaps the footnote seeks to remedy. Do the translators believe that "the ancient audience" classified as "disgrace" what Shechem did to Dinah although contemporary gender-sensitive readers would never think of rape as a disgrace? The footnote does not give an answer, but the scholarly literature on this verse is certainly rich and contested. Interestingly, other translations do better than the RJPS. Already the NRSV of the late 1980s combines the last two verbs to "and he laid with her by force," not an ideal wording because no contemporary reader would use this vocabulary to refer to rape. Yet it is better than the RJPS translation, which seemingly accommodates a view according to which Gen 34:3 ought to be read as an expression of the rapist's love. Perhaps this is what the translation team had in mind: that love after rape turns the latter into hasty sex that requires marriage, which Shechem offers in verse 4. Thus, verse 2 turns into disgrace for he should have simply married her first and then the entire situation with her brothers would have been preventable. I think the RJPS could have done better than suggest this kind of reading.

In sum, the RJPS has a lot to offer, and I will certainly assign it to my mostly Christian-Protestant students in my various Hebrew Bible courses. The fact that the RJPS eliminates all LORD references and masculine pronouns for God is ground-breaking in the current landscape of Bible translations. That other verses are not translated so boldly is disappointing, but this fact should not deter. After all, no Bible translation is perfect, and the business of Bible translations is stony and long-winding. I recommend the RJPS to readers of any religious or secular background.