ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

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The topic of Bible translation has come to the fore recently with Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible*: *A Translation with Commentary*[1], a work that completes Alter's decades-long project of translating the entire Tanakh. I want to put this newest translation into the larger context of Bible translations, especially English Bible translations, and examine many of the issues involved in translating the Bible and the choices that translators make.

What Are the Earliest Translations of the Bible?

Translating the Bible began in ancient times. The first Bible translation was the Greek translation, called the Septuagint. It was made for the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria. It began with the Torah in the 3rd century BCE (a hundred years before Judah Maccabee), and then went on to include the entire Tanakh. While originally a "Jewish" translation, it was later adopted by the Church as its official Bible. It fell out of use in Judaism and is now largely unknown to most Jews.[2]

More familiar to Jewish readers is the Targum, the Aramaic translation, for the Jews of the land of Israel and Babylonia. Actually, we should say "Targumim" in plural since there are a number of them. They date, in written form, from around the 1st century C.E. and thereafter; however, they were originally oral, and parts of their contents

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[1] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation and Commentary* (W. W. Norton, 2018)

[2] [Ed. note: See further discussion by Berlin below. See also, *e.g.*, Leonard Greenspoon, "The Septuagint," in Amy Jill-Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 562–565.]

go back quite a while before they were written down. The Targumim are more than just translations; they add various explanations and elaborations.[3]

What Is the Status of Bible Translations in Jewish Tradition?

As we have seen, Jewish tradition accepts translations of the Hebrew Bible. However, the translated Bible never replaced the Hebrew original. In normative public liturgical recitation, it is the Hebrew text of the Torah, the Prophets, and the *megillot*, that is to be read. Judaism's official Bible has always been in Hebrew. Translations have remained subordinate. To be sure, the Targum was held in great esteem in Jewish tradition; it was considered part of the Oral Law and contained authoritative interpretations. Yet it never took the place of the Hebrew Bible. It is fascinating to see the delicate balance that the Rabbis attempted to maintain between the biblical text and its Aramaic translation.

In Rabbinic times, the Targum was used in the synagogue and for study. In the synagogue, the Targum accompanied the public reading of the Torah.[4] After each Torah verse, the Targum of that verse was spoken aloud (for the haftarah, the Targum came after every 3 verses). The Rabbis specified a number of rules to keep the Torah and the Targum distinct: The Torah reader and the translator, the *meturgeman*, must be two different people. The Torah reader had to be clearly seen to be *reading* from the scroll; the translator had to recite the Targum from memory. He was not allowed to use a written text in the synagogue,[5] nor was he permitted to look at the Torah scroll—"lest," said the amoraic sage Ulla, "the people should say that the translation is

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3   [Ed. note: See, *e.g.*, the chapter on "The Targumim" by Paul Virgil Mc-Cracken Flesher in Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York, NY: DoubleDay [Anchor Bible Reference Library] 1994), pp. 606–629.

4   [Ed. note: The Targum is in fact read still in Yemenite communities, as of this writing, such as in the Anaf Haḥayyim synagogue on Yehoshu'a bin Nun St. in Jerusalem.]

5   [Ed. note: As regarding the present practice, note the previous footnote.]

written in the Torah."[6] Nor was the Torah reader allowed to prompt the *meturgeman* if he faltered.[7]

In preparing the weekly portion privately, a person was supposed to read it "twice in the Bible (*Miqra'*) and once in the Targum."[8] Here, too, the Targum accompanies the biblical passage but remains separate from it, and inferior to it in status.

The situation is quite different in Christianity and Islam. From its outset, part of Christianity's Bible—namely, that part that Christians call the 'Old Testament'—was a translated Bible. Prioritizing a biblical text in a vernacular that the laity could understand, the early Church adopted the Septuagint as its official Bible, adding its own New Testament, which was written in Greek. Christianity was born into a Greek-speaking world, and, therefore, it made sense to have a Greek Bible. Several centuries later, the Latin-speaking Roman Catholic Church adopted the Vulgate, a Latin translation of both the Old *and* New Testaments.[9] The Septuagint is still the official Bible of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

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[6] Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 32a. [Ed. note: The *amora'im* constituted an era of rabbinic sages ending shortly before the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud and immediately following the *tanna'im*, the final generation of whom saw the compilation of the Mishnah circa 225 C.E..]

[7] [Ed. note: The principal discussions begin in the Mishnah at Megillah 4:4. For further discussion, see, *e.g.*, Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third–Sixth Centuries," in Lee Levine (ed.), *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 253–286.]

[8] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a.

[9] [Ed. note: The Vulgate notably began as a Latin text predominantly based in the process of translating from the Greek Septuagint; however, in the late 4th century, the Latin Christian priest Jerome began the work of revising the Vulgate so as to accord better with the original biblical texts in Hebrew. For more on the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the resultant Latin Vulgate, see, *e.g.*, Görge K. Hasselhoff, "Revising the Vulgate: Jerome and his Jewish Interlocutors," in *Zeitschrift für Religions—und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2012), pp. 209–221.]

In Islam, things are just the opposite. The Arabic language of the Quran was held in such high esteem—it was considered within Islam to be of such purity and clarity that the divine word could only be transmitted through it—that many medieval Islamic scholars forbade the translation of the Quran into any other language, even for non-Arabic-speaking Muslims. Eventually, as a matter of necessity, the Quran was translated into other languages, but the translations never acquired official religious status.[10]

Are There Differences Between Jewish and Christian English Translations?

While most modern Bible translations are done by scholars, both Christian and Jewish, who employ academic methodologies and up-to-date information, translations may be conditioned by the translators' religious traditions and beliefs. Moreover, many translations are aimed specifically at either Christian or Jewish audiences and are designed to meet the needs of those audiences. For the most part, Jewish and Christian translations are in agreement, but there are some notable differences between them.

1. First of all, besides including the New Testament, Christian Bibles arrange what they call the Old Testament (our Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible) in a different order. They have the Torah or Pentateuch first, then the Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther); The Poetical and Wisdom Books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs); and finally, the Prophetic books, which include Lamentations (which follows Jeremiah, who is traditionally held to be its author), and Daniel (considered to be a prophet in Christianity—and in some ancient Jewish circles as well). It is not an accident that the prophetic books come last in the Christian Old Testament, for they lead up to the major

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10 [Ed. note: For the narrative of a modern controversy over the translation of the Quran into other languages spoken even in Muslim-majority lands, see, *e.g.*, M. Brett Wilson, "The First Translations of the Qur'an in Modern Turkey (1924–38)," in *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (August 2009), pp. 419–435.]

prophet of Christianity, whose coming the Old Testament prophets foretell (according to Christian theology).[11]

2. Christian translations may also reflect Christian theology. Perhaps most famous is the "sign" in Isaiah 7:14: הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן (*hinneh ha'almah harah veyoledet ben*). The New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (NJPS) renders: "Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son." Robert Alter has: "the young woman is about to conceive and bear a son." But the King James Version reads: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son."

The Hebrew word translated as *virgin* in the King James is עלמה (*almah*), which means "a young woman of marriageable age." So where did *virgin* come from? Ultimately from the Septuagint, by way of the Gospel of Matthew. The Septuagint renders עלמה as *parthenos*, which means "virgin" or "maiden," that is, an unmarried woman, presumably a virgin. Now in the New Testament, Matthew (1:18–25), which was written in Greek, quotes the Septuagint's version of this verse from Isaiah in his account of Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus, which he sees as a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. It thus seems quite natural for the King James Version, a Christian translation, to understand Isaiah 7:14 the same way that Matthew did.

Now modern scholarly Christian translators know that עלמה does not mean *a virgin*, but they handle this in different ways. The New International Version, a conservative Christian translation, puts the word *virgin* in the main translation of the Isaiah verse with a footnote that says "or *young woman*." The New Revised Standard Version, a more ecumenical Protestant translation whose translation committee included one Jew, puts *young woman* in the main translation with a footnote that says "Greek: *the virgin*."

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[11] [Ed. note: By contrast, the order in the Tanakh apparently reflects the stages in which the different books were accepted as authoritative—first the Pentateuch, then the Prophets, then the miscellaneous "writings". See generally, for example, Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007) at pp. 9–12 and 276–277. While the last book in the present ordering, *i.e.*, II Chronicles, indeed ends on an 'upbeat' note from a Jewish-historic perspective, Brettler cautions, at p. 288, fn. 19, that this was not the placement in many of the most accurate early manuscripts.]

3. Some Jewish translations do the reverse, purposely avoiding terms that have a Christological nuance. For example, NJPS and Alter never use *salvation* but rather synonyms like *deliverance, rescue, victory.* On the other hand, the ArtScroll translation, circulating widely in the Orthodox Jewish community, finds no problem with *salvation.* Are Orthodox Jews so removed from Christian thought that they are oblivious to the Christological concept of salvation?

4. Jewish translations stick mainly to the "official" Jewish Tanakh, the Masoretic Text (the Hebrew text of the Bible, as prepared by the Masoretes,[12] which includes the vowel signs and the *trop* signs). Christian translations today are generally also based on the Masoretic Text since that is our only complete Hebrew text. But they are more likely to adopt readings from the Septuagint,[13] which has a higher status in Christianity than in Judaism (as the Septuagint has no status in Judaism). We saw this in the case of the Isaiah verse.

Let me give another, non-theological, example—the missing *nun*-verse in the alphabetical-acrostic Psalm 145 (this psalm forms the bulk of the *Ashrei* prayer). The Masoretic Text lacks a verse beginning with the letter נ (*nun*). Its absence is explained midrashically in the Babylonian Talmud by the fact that the Bible contains a negative statement about Israel beginning with *nun* and that, therefore, our psalm did not want to recall it, even indirectly:

> R. Yohanan says: Why is there no *nun* in *Ashrei*? Because the fall of Israel's enemies [a euphemism for the fall of Israel] begins with it. For it is written: "נָפְלָה לֹא־תוֹסִיף קוּם

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12 [Ed. note: *I.e.*, scholars of the Bible text, flourishing in the 6th–10th centuries, exemplified by the Aleppo Codex of ben Asher (circa 930 C.E.).]

13 [Ed. note: In most places the differences between the Septuagint, Vulgate, and Masoretic texts are in the understanding of individual phrases. Certain books of the Septuagint, however, *e.g.*, Jeremiah, Esther, and Job, are materially different from the Masoretic texts, either because the translators were working from different underlying traditions and/or made modifications of their own. See, for example, Berlin's discussion of the Septuagint additions to Esther, in Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), pp. xlix–lii.]

בְּתוּלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל" ("Fallen is the virgin of Israel, she shall no more rise") (Amos 5:2.).[14]

Actually, though, we know what that missing *nun*-verse is, for it is present in translation in the Septuagint and Syriac versions, and it is written in Hebrew in the large Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPsª) from the Dead Sea scrolls.[15] It reads:

נאמן אלוהים בדבריו וחסיד בכול מעשיו

Trustworthy is God in His words and faithful in all His works.

This verse appears in the main translation of some Christian Bibles (New Revised Standard Version, New International Version) but not in Jewish translations, which tend to stick more closely to the Masoretic Text, although this missing verse is mentioned in the footnotes of some Jewish translations and commentaries (*e.g.*, that of Alter's).

This is not to say that modern Jewish translations never adopt Septuagint readings when they differ from the Masoretic Text, or that Christian Bibles always do; however, Jewish translations are less likely to depart from the Masoretic Text.

Why Are There So Many English Translations of the Bible?

Translation, like commentary, is a way to engage with the Bible, and it is a perennial preoccupation. In fact, every translation is a mini-commentary, a way to convey, very succinctly, what the Bible means. Moreover, every translation has an agenda or a goal. It may aim for a

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[14] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4b.

[15] Scholars are somewhat divided about whether this verse was original or whether it was added later to make the acrostic complete. [Ed. note: See, *e.g.*, arguing that the 'omission' was original and intentional, Reuven Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure and Impact," in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 113:1 (Spring 1994), pp. 37–58. See also Adele Berlin's forthcoming discussion on Psalm 145 as part of JPS' forthcoming multivolume commentary on Psalms.]

number of different things: to draw on new discoveries or new linguistic knowledge; to offer an innovative interpretation, or to promote an alternative interpretation, or to reinforce a traditional interpretation; to update the English wording or style for the benefit of the modern reader; to convey the Bible's own literary style (that is Alter's goal); to transmit a theological position or religious worldview.

In pursuing their goal, translators have to make choices. Here are the major types of decisions.

1. Should the translation be literal (word-for-word) or dynamic/free? How closely to the biblical language should it be? If it is too literal, it may be unintelligible to the modern reader; if it is too free, it may lose the flavor of the original.

2. Does "biblical" style demand old-fashioned English or should the translator aim for contemporary English? For example, how is חגר מתניך (*ḥagor motnekha*) best rendered? "Gird up your loins" (King James Version); "tie up your skirts" (NJPS); "get ready" (Common English Bible); or "Tuck your cloak into your belt" (New International Version)?[16]

3. Should a given Hebrew word always be translated by the same English word? Should the syntax of the original be preserved or changed to make it flow better in English? My answer is that while it is not possible, and not correct, to always use the same English word for the same Hebrew word (the semantic range of each word differs from language to language), some attempt should be made to capture the Bible's use of repetition and key words and phrases, for this is a hallmark of biblical style.

4. How should the translator render Hebrew terms that we understand but that have no easy English equivalent? To take three examples:

1) אשרי (*ashrei*) does not mean "happy," in the sense of feeling good or being cheerful.[17] It means to be in a good state or condition,

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16 [Ed. note: For the original phrase, see, *e.g.*, II Kings 4:29, in the story of Elisha and the woman from Shunem, which most (though not all) Jewish communities read as the *haftarah* (i.e., 'concluding' reading from the Prophets) after *Parashat Vayyera* (i.e., Genesis 18:1– 22:24).]

17 [Ed. note: Familiar from the opening lines in Jewish liturgy to Psalm 145, drawn from Psalms 84:5 and 144:15—*ashrei* is also the first word in Psalm 1:1, discussed below.]

to be in a fortunate position in life.[18] (Yet "fortunate" sounds like it is a matter of luck, which it is not.)

2) The word חסד (*ḥesed*)[19] is more than "kindness" or "favor," for it implies an obligation as well, a sense of loyalty. God's *ḥesed* to Israel derives from His covenant obligation to His people.[20] The King James Version often renders חסד as "loving-kindness" (I am not sure what that means to modern readers) and NJPS has "faithfulness" or "steadfast love" (NJPS is often inconsistent).

3) נפש (*nefesh*)[21] does not have the body/soul dichotomy that most people identify with the English word "soul." נפש means "self" or "being" or sometimes "life" or "throat."[22]

5. Then there are words whose meaning is uncertain. For instance, what is the כתנת פסים (*ketonet passim*) that Jacob had made for Joseph (Gen. 37:3)? The King James Version offers "a coat of many colours," the New Revised Standard Version sees "a long robe with sleeves," NJPS reveals "an ornamented tunic," and ArtScroll presents "a fine woolen coat."

6. How should proper names be rendered? What is the difference in effect between *Jacob* and *Yaakov*? Between *Jerusalem* and *Yerushalayim*? Most translations opt for *Jacob* and *Jerusalem*, but the Koren

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18 [Ed. note: On this etymology, see, *e.g.*, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (ed.), *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003), p. 62.]

19 [Ed. note: See, *e.g.*, Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. On the idea of "*ḥesed*-living" as an ideal, see Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday Press [Anchor Bible Series], 1975), pp. 29–30.]

20 [Ed. note: For a more detailed exploration of this complex term, see Nelson Glueck, *Ḥesed in the Bible*, Elias L. Epstein (ed.) and Alfred Gottschalk (trans.) (Cincinnati, Ohio: The Hebrew Union College Press, 1967).]

21 [Ed. note: See, *e.g.*, Genesis 2:7 and 2:19 and the extended discussion of the word in Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (first published in 1906 and frequently reprinted).]

22 [Ed. note: For further analysis of the multiple meanings of this term, see Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "A Forgotten Meaning of *nepeš* in Isaiah LVIII 10," in *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 47, Fasc. 1 (Jan., 1997), pp. 43–52.]

translation[23] prefers the transliterated Hebrew rather than the anglicized forms (that derive from the Greek).

7. As for gender-sensitivity[24]: The masculine is the default in Hebrew, much as it is, or used to be, in English. Now we are more conscious of gender, and we try to find neutral expressions when the gender is not specified. Should we do that in Bible translations? When does the masculine in the Bible refer to men only, and when to both men and women? This is an especially contemporary problem, and its complexity deserves a separate essay. Here again, a balance should be sought. The translation should not erase all gender, as the New Revised Standard Version does at Lamentations 3:1, with its "I am the one" for אני הגבר, where גבר is a strongly masculine term. But neither should a translation slip into the masculine linguistic default when the text is not referring exclusively to males. It is often difficult to decide, but the effort leads to a better understanding of the ancient mentality and our own.

To take one common phrase, how should we translate בני ישראל (*benei yisra'el*)? "Sons of Israel," "children of Israel," or "Israelites?" At Exodus 1:1, "These are the names of the sons of Israel" is appropriate, for listed are the names of Jacob's sons. But, for the most part, בני ישראל refers to the people of Israel (as the singular בן [*ben*] means, not only "a son of," but also "a member of"), so *Israelites* is better. *Children of Israel* is presumably a way to be gender-neutral, but it risks infantilizing the people.

Does God have a gender? How should God's proper four-letter name, and the pronouns referring to God, be translated? The most common translation of God's name is "LORD," but some people think that "Lord" is too masculine and too hierarchical; it is associated with slaves or with a rigid class system. Therefore, some of the more liberal Jewish translations prefer the more neutral "Eternal." Other translations opt to just write the four Hebrew letters, unvocalized, of God's proper name. When it comes to divine pronouns, attempts to circum-

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23 [Ed. note: *I.e.*, the *Jerusalem Bible* (Koren), a 1964 modernizing by Harold Fisch of the traditional English Jewish translation in 1881 by Michael Friedländer, generally viewed as an 'Orthodox' translation.]

24 See the excellent work of David E. S. Stein, *The Contemporary Torah. A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

vent gendered pronouns are successful up to a point, but, it can be argued, male metaphors for God (as a warrior, for instance) should be rendered by male pronouns.[25]

The first two words of Psalm 1, אשרי האיש (*ashrei ha'ish*), present us with two problems alluded to earlier. "Happy is the man" reads the New Jewish Publication Society translation (first published completely in 1985), while the King James Version has "Blessed is the man." Neither *happy* nor *blessed* quite capture the right nuance, but both can be justified. The New Revised Standard Version, being gender-sensitive, reads "Happy are those" (but makes the singular into a plural); better is the New International Version: "Happy is the one." The word איש (*ish*) does not refer solely to a male; in fact, it may refer to an inanimate object, like a star (Isaiah 40:26) or the wings of the figures in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:9). The word means *a person* or *an individual*. So, a gender-neutral translation is apt and especially appropriate for modern readers. On the other hand, one could argue that in ancient times the person referred to in Psalm 1, who is immersed continually in Torah study, was most likely to have been male.

We can argue endlessly about the merits of one translation or another and agree that there are no perfect translations. But studying and comparing Bible translations is one of the easiest and most pleasurable ways of engaging with the biblical text. [26]

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[25] [Ed. note: See, *e.g.*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "On Feminine God-talk," in *The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 59 (Spring 1994), pp. 48–55; and, in the same issue, Marcia Prager, "Beyond Lordship: Personalizing Adonay" pp. 32–37; and, similarly, Shohama Harris Wiener, "Connecting God's Names and My Name: A Spiritual Journey" pp. 80–85 (esp. pp. 83–84).]

[26] [Ed. note: As no translation can capture the nuance of the original, engaging with or contrasting different translations permits the reader to discover, however, with some of the richness of the original text that gets lost in another translation. For more on this, see, *e.g.*, Edward L. Greenstein, "Theories of Modern Bible Translation," in *Prooftexts*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Special Issue on Translation: January 1983), pp. 9–39; Robert Alter, "How Berkeley Made the Old Testament New: Liberating a new translator of the Hebrew Bible," in *Boom: A Journal of California*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter 2015), pp. 85–89; and Hillel Halkin, "On Translating the Living and the Dead: Some Thoughts of a Hebrew-English Trans-

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lator," in *Prooftexts*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Special Issue on Translation: January 1983), pp. 73–90.]