

TECHNICAL PAPERS FOR
**THE BIBLE
TRANSLATOR**

*Published twice yearly
(January and July)
by the United
Bible Societies*
Vol. 58, No. 3, July 2007

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DAVID E. S. STEIN

**GOD'S NAME IN A GENDER-SENSITIVE JEWISH
TRANSLATION¹**

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If you were preparing a gender-sensitive translation of biblical books, how would you represent God's name—that is, the Hebrew four-letter proper noun sometimes called the Tetragrammaton? I posed that question last December to certain Bible scholars, rabbis, and Jewish leaders. The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) had commissioned me to prepare such a translation of the Five Books of Moses by adapting its New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation.² Ellen Frankel, the Society's editor-in-chief, and I were seeking to identify a worthy gender-neutral substitute instead of representing the Name as "the LORD." This essay reports on what transpired.

Background

First appearing in 1962, the NJPS *Torah* (formerly the New Jewish Version) was a fresh sense-for-sense translation of the Pentateuch from the Hebrew original. Its translators strove for a clear, precise, contextual rendering into the idiom of modern English. As such, NJPS remains popular in many Jewish circles and beyond.

¹ This article was originally published in the Summer 2006 *SBL Forum*, found at www.sbl-site.org, and is reprinted here with permission.

² *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006). It refers to God in gender-neutral terms except where poetry employs gendered imagery. This new edition complements rather than replaces the NJPS translation.

The late Harry M. Orlinsky, later a president of the Society of Biblical Literature, served as editor-in-chief for a seven-person translation committee. In addition to establishing the text's plain sense (as presumably construed in ancient Israel), the committee took into account post-biblical Jewish interpretation. Nowhere was the latter need more salient than with regard to the Name. Jews have given special handling to God's name for more than 2200 years.

To represent the Name, NJPS adopted a practice that dates back to the first translation of the Bible, the ancient Jewish version in Greek called the Septuagint. Its audience lived in the polytheistic milieu of Hellenistic Egypt. Apparently the translation's producers wanted to emphasize that their Deity was not merely one more named god among many. As a substitute name, *kyrios* ("Lord") put this particular deity in the spotlight.

At the same time, some ancient Septuagint copyists employed a different approach: They consistently inscribed the Name using Hebrew letters. Meanwhile, in the land of Israel, some copyists of Hebrew manuscripts, working on what are now called the Dead Sea Scrolls, were also writing the Name in a special way. To set the Name apart from the rest of the text, they resorted to an archaic Hebrew script that Jewish scribes had abandoned several hundred years earlier. In the view of those copyists, not only could the Name not be translated into another language; it could not even be properly presented in the standard script of Hebrew itself!

In short, the Name has long been treated not like any ordinary Hebrew word but like something totally other. Such distinctive treatment appears to have been a reflex of the monotheistic concept of God, as well as of the Name's reputed magical power.

The problem

The new gender-sensitive version was to remain a Jewish translation; that is, the publisher presumed that most of the new version's readers would be seeking to reconcile the English translation with contemporary Judaism's concept of a non-gendered God. And such readers have grounds for discontent with the NJPS rendering of the Name as "the LORD." By common usage, "lord" is a male title; for these readers, rendering God's personal name as "the LORD" is like wearing male sunglasses to view the invisible deity: "I'm not sure what I'm seeing, but it appears to be masculine."

The survey

To identify an acceptable substitute rendering of the Name that would find favor with today's audience, Dr Frankel and I queried via e-mail a number of people whose biblical scholarship or experience with the Bible in Jewish religious settings had prompted them to consider the question of gender-neutral representation of God's name in English.

Our missive asked first about historical accuracy: "What did the Name mean to the text's ancient audience?" "What was its plain, foreground sense when they heard it?" "What image(s) or concept(s) did it bring to mind?"

Our second main question concerned contemporary acceptability. We asked: "Of the constituent audiences (for a gender-neutral Jewish translation) with which you are most familiar, what rendering do you imagine would work best?"

Responses

We received thoughtful suggestions from twenty respondents.¹ In effect they served as a combined seminar of experts, panel of opinion leaders, and audience focus group. It was a diverse set that included eight women. Nearly all informants had worked mainly in the United States (all around the country); one was based in England and is now in Australia, another was in Israel, and at least one had traversed many countries in the course of teaching Judaism or organizing communities. We heard from leaders in five Jewish religious denominations, as well as from a Protestant and a Catholic scholar.

What we found

My tabulation of the responses proved to be an encapsulated symposium. Five main findings follow:

1. *Most respondents believe that our questions do not admit of a simple answer.* Only two persons responded with a single favorite, whereas most pointed out the pros and cons of a number of options, with three not even hazarding a proposal. Many respondents thought it best to offer more than one choice as worthy of consideration. Ed Greenstein, a translator and professor of Bible at Tel Aviv University, exemplified the overall tenor of responses when he wrote: "I confess at the outset that . . . I have never been altogether happy with any solution."

2. *Two terms that are popular among some students of Bible were conspicuously absent from the conversation.* No one suggested Yahweh, which is commonly used in scholarly works like the Anchor Bible. Yahweh, a modern historical reconstruction based on ancient Greek transcriptions, carries no resonance for Jews. As we will see again below, the taboo on pronunciation of the Name is vital to how Jews in their communities relate to God. Similarly, no one suggested Jehovah, a Christian reflex of the early medieval Jewish scribal practice of superimposing on the Name's consonants the vowels of its substitute pronunciation, *Adonai* ("Lord"). The name Jehovah has never gained currency among Jews.

3. *The most favored rendering was as "the Eternal"—which is popular well beyond the bounds of the Reform movement,* where it has appeared in Bible translations and liturgy for at least fifteen years.² Most informants involved in ritual settings gravitated toward the idea that the Name is related to the Hebrew verbal root for existence—a connection made by the Torah itself at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3). This understanding commended renderings such as the Eternal, the Eternal One, The One Who Will Be There, the One, Being, Eternal Being, Becoming, Source of Being. Of these, "the Eternal" was most often named.

Some who suggested such renderings did so because they understood that for many contemporary Jews, God as a persona either makes no sense or is anathema.

1 I express my grateful appreciation to Judith Antonelli, Adele Berlin, Yitz Greenberg, Frederick E. Greenspahn, Leonard Greenspoon, Edward L. Greenstein, Joel M. Hoffman, Tamar Kamionkowski, Jonathan Keren Black, Harold Kushner, David L. Lieber, Goldie Milgram, Judith Plaskow, Sharon Ringe, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Drorah Setel, Marcia Cohn Spiegel, David A. Teutsch, Arthur Waskow, and one scholar who prefers to remain anonymous.

2 Only one of our twenty informants was affiliated with a Reform organization. Meanwhile, in a significant shift, the Reform movement (the largest Jewish religious denomination in North America) is issuing a prayer book in the near future that will render the Name as *Adonai*; on the latter approach, see finding #5.

A few respondents mentioned *der Ewige* (a German coinage in 1783 by the Jewish philosopher and translator Moses Mendelssohn) or *L'Éternel* (used in the most widely accepted French translation among Christians, by Louis Segond, 1874). Familiarity with those precedents seemed to make it more likely to find “the Eternal” unexceptional. However, a few respondents objected that such a term overinterprets how the Torah presents its Deity; and another considers it “far too impersonal.”

Others focused less on the Name’s meaning than on its sound, finding it remarkable that the Name consists only of vowel-letters, such that its original pronunciation must have been unusually breathy. For Arthur Waskow, a rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement, this warrants rendering the Name as “the Breath of Life.”

4. *Despite decades of intense scrutiny by scholars as to the Name’s original significance, several respondents insisted on professing ignorance.* We today really have no way of knowing what the Torah’s ancient audience thought that the Name meant. Further, they noted, the Name itself may never have given the audience a clear signal as to meaning, outside of occasions when the text makes an issue of it. At any rate, the Name’s etymology probably was not much of a factor. That is, the Name was a name—and as such, its origin would have been largely beside the point. Thus, for example, Adele Berlin (University of Maryland) questioned whether anyone in ancient Israel “gave much regular thought” to the Name’s meaning.

5. *Most of our respondents balked when asked for a translation of the Name—and gave cogent reasons for doing so.* Indeed, half of them preferred something that would retain “the sense of a name while preserving the aura that surrounds the original,” as Frederick Greenspahn (Florida Atlantic University) put it.

Among those ten informants, some were concerned to give readers a term that could be read aloud. For this reason, they suggested a transliterated Hebrew word, either *Adonai* (“the Lord”), which is the Masoretic vocalization and is conventionally used in prayer, or *HaShem* (literally “the Name”), common in contemporary Orthodox Jewish circles outside of worship, or the latter’s translation: the Name.

A plurality, however, suggested that we consider terms that lack any obvious pronunciation, including the English forms YHVH or YHWH (the latter reflecting the earlier pronunciation of the Hebrew letter *vav* as known from ancient Greek transcriptions). Informants pointed to Everett Fox’s use of the term YHWH in his well-regarded translation project.¹ They argued that for Jews, a lack of vowels is itself meaningful. To Marcia Cohn Spiegel, who for two decades has organized Jewish women to study sacred texts, the act of transcribing, rather than translating, the Tetragrammaton “reflects the mystery of our knowing or comprehending who/what God is.” Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, described his having experimented with various renderings and representations. Yet he concluded, “Since we have to use words that people already know, we are in trouble—because there aren’t any good words in our current vocabulary that could substitute for the four-letter name. It seems

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1995). So also Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

still best to come back to [a transcription as] YHVH and to leave it at that.” And theologian Judith Plaskow sees value in offering readers the challenge of an unvocalized name: “It raises as a potentially lively question for communities how the name should be rendered.”

A couple of respondents put forth proposals that disregarded English entirely. Adele Berlin suggested simply inserting the Name—in Hebrew—into the English text.¹ And Joel Hoffman, a linguist and translator of liturgy, imagined our adopting the ancient practice of using archaic Hebrew letters.

Our decision

Although Dr Frankel and I began by seeking an English rendering, we came to see that no single, consistent rendering could do justice to the Name—either as presented in the Bible or as treated thereafter in Jewish lore. The Torah employs the Name primarily as a name (not as a title, attribute, description, or declaration), which surely is how the original audience experienced it. The Torah’s deity is a named persona. Taking the text on its own terms requires rejecting any rendering with a definite article. Multiword renderings likewise seemed too impractical and unlikely to suit many instances of biblical rhetoric.

Upon considering what our respondents had to say, we first settled on representing the Name unmediated and unvocalized: YHWH. This styling would enable the word to function as a name without limiting the conception of God to a single quality. We would invite those who read the translation aloud to pronounce the Name via whatever term they customarily use for it. Thus those who prefer the traditional vocalization as *Adonai* could say it that way, while others who prefer “the Eternal” could say it that way, and so on.

Eventually, however, the publisher opted to employ Hebrew letters rather than YHWH, but with the same intent. Initially we had stopped short of using Hebrew partly as a practical matter: The presence of Hebrew type might constrain some authors from quoting our work. We also had been concerned that the “foreign” language might intimidate too many readers. Yet, given the spread of Unicode computer fonts, Hebrew type is now readily available. And arguably the Tetragrammaton in standard Hebrew looks more aesthetic, and feels more compelling, than its English transcription as YHWH (whereas we did deem archaic Hebrew script to be too strange). Although our target audience is largely monolingual—like most Americans—we surmised that they will accept the presence of this particular Hebrew term on most pages of the book. Thus we perceive an attitudinal shift in today’s audience from that of a generation ago.

In Jewish editions of the Bible in translation, some Hebrew type—usually on the title page and in notes—demonstrates that translation’s bond to the original text.² NJPS also employed the Hebrew Tetragrammaton in a passage that spotlights the Name itself, Exod 6.3. In this regard, it followed the 1917 JPS edition of the Bible in translation, whereas the King James Version and its 1885 revision read “Jehovah.”

¹ Such has been the approach of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, which will include both gender-sensitive translation and multi-author commentary (N.Y.: Women of Reform Judaism, forthcoming).

² Leonard Greenspoon, “Top Dollar, Bottom Line? Marketing English-Language Bibles within the Jewish Community,” in *Biblical Translation in Context* (ed. Frederick W. Knobloch; Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2002), 115-33.

The Jewish Publication Society is now greatly amplifying that earlier practice, as one of many bold features of the new edition. It is doubtful that we would have arrived at this outcome without conducting our survey. I therefore affirm that Bible translations are, as Leonard Greenspoon has noted, “by and large communal enterprises and possessions.”¹

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

WHO ARE “THEY” IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS?

What is the problem?

The author is a retired UBS translation consultant and former Editor of *Technical Papers for The Bible Translator* now living in Aberdeen, Scotland.

It is reasonable to assume that the gospels were written for people who were either Christians, or at least interested in Christianity. It is also reasonable to assume that the first receptors of a gospel knew or expected that it was a book primarily about Jesus, and secondarily about his first disciples.

That is no doubt one reason why the gospel writers so often use a third person singular verb to refer to Jesus, without naming him. Bible translators often supply the name “Jesus,”² especially at the beginning of a section, so that people who hear the passage read aloud will know from the outset who the subject is.

The situation is more complicated in the case of third person plural verbs whose subject is not expressed in the Greek text. There are three main reasons for this failure to say who the subject is. First, because, as in the case of third person singular verbs, the writers assumed that their first readers would know who was intended: most commonly, it was “Jesus and his disciples.” Second, because somewhere in the context, though not necessarily very close, there is a noun to which the verb refers (technically known as an antecedent). Third, the third person plural verb may be used impersonally, to refer to people in general, and occasionally as a reverential way of referring to God.

The third category is rather like the English use of “they” in such sentences as, “They say it will rain tomorrow,” or “They are going to put the bus fares up.” The analogy may however be misleading, in two ways. First, the English impersonal “they” normally refers to people with some kind of expertise or authority, such as weather forecasters or the directors of a bus company. Second, the English impersonal “they” seems to belong mainly to spoken or informal, rather than formal or literary, language.³ Neither of these restrictions appears to apply to impersonal third person plurals in the Synoptic Gospels, with which this article is mainly concerned. The Synoptic Gospels are chosen for this study because the parallels between them sometimes illustrate different ways of approaching a common problem.

1 Greenspoon, “Another Perspective—Jewish Translations of the Bible,” *SBL Forum* (August 2002).

2 For example in Matt 4.12, 23; 5.1, where, as in other places, NRSV adds a footnote “Gr He” which other translations find unnecessary. Other implicit names are occasionally supplied, for example, “Joseph” in Matt 2.21.

3 The same applies, perhaps more strongly, to the impersonal English “you,” as in “You can’t do that here!” This “you” is also sometimes ambiguous.