

## Bible Translation

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# Adonai is My Shepherd: Theology, Values, and Sexism in Bible Translation

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**Abstract:** Our translation of biblical passages, and our selection of translations, has an effect on their liturgical use and the values we teach. By choosing a gender-neutral translation we may make a statement of gender inclusion, but at the same time some worshipers may find the change from a familiar translation jarring. Should we sacrifice the value of inclusion for the comfort of a familiar text? Psalm 23 is a case in point. The strong masculine imagery of the psalm, and its well-known translation, put off those who seek gender-neutral language for prayer and sacred texts. But do the King James and RSV translations, or a modernized version, have inherent sacredness, as well as comfort through their familiarity? This paper explores the nuances of some of the issues involved in a gender-neutral translation of Psalm 23 (and other texts) within the liturgical context of the synagogue.

**Keywords:** Bible translation, feminist theology, Psalm 23, God language in worship

In his essay on the book of Psalms, the American poet and critic John Hollander refers to a child who innocently misquotes—or misremembers—a verse from Psalm 23: “Surely good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Hollander avers that the child in the story he tells was really getting something more profoundly right than her parroting classmates. For in her mind she could understand how good Mrs. Murphy might follow her around “like a beneficent nurse,” as Hollander puts it.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we misunderstand, misremember, or misquote a biblical text (or any text) and the version we recall takes on a life of its own. Sometimes, as well, a translation of biblical verses becomes so well-known that it is dominant in our minds. Sometimes the translation we know and cherish is at odds with questions of theology or possibly accuracy of meaning. This is particularly the case when biblical verses are adopted liturgically and especially when the text is widely known and repeated.

Take the example of Psalm 23 and its King James Version translation. The King James Version (1611) is dominated by masculine references to God:

The Lord in my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...

and this well-known translation is reinforced by the Revised Standard Version (1952), with some “updates”:

He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.

In the Jewish world, the first Jewish Publication Society translation, in 1917, practically duplicated the King James Version:

<sup>1</sup> Hollander, “Psalms,” 294.

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The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;...

and this translation was adopted by many Jewish prayer books as a standard “version.” In the New Jewish Publication Society translation, in 1985, with a second edition in 1999, we read an updated translation in some respects:

The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me to water in places of repose;  
He renews my life;  
He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

The earlier (1917) translation, with some updates, was also used by the Reform movement in Judaism in its 1975 prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, and in its (Reform) Rabbi’s Manuals (1961 and 1988). By the mid-1980s, however, the issue of gender in Bible translation and liturgy were very much on the minds of many Bible scholars, translators and clergy. Feminist scholars and theologians had begun publishing their ideas and discussing the issues of masculine imagery and translation.<sup>2</sup> Was this masculine language and imagery the intention of the authors, a literal translation, a reflection of the gender roles in biblical times, or a slavish repetition of a previous translation?

Many scholars, feminists among them, pointed out that God in the Bible has no gender and translations should be rendered “gender neutral,” as some would call it.<sup>3</sup> Others insisted on using an already accepted translation. Others were guided by philological concerns. Harry Orlinsky, writing in his *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* in 1969, states that “the committee of translators felt utterly free to render the Hebrew text as they believed the original author of that text meant it to be understood by his contemporaries.”<sup>4</sup> Orlinsky developed this approach further in writings such as “Male Oriented Language Originated by Bible Translators.”<sup>5</sup>

In her classic 1990 work, *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow explores traditional images of God (as male), the conception of God as a Dominating Other, and Jewish feminist God-language, feminist spirituality, and a Jewish feminist understanding of God, as reflected in the language of translation and prayer. Some translators, writers, and liturgists, such as Marcia Falk, have removed masculine imagery (“Let us bless the source of life...”)<sup>6</sup> and substituted new poetry and prayers for the original liturgy. Others, such as Phyllis Bird, focused on the larger purpose of Bible translation: “The aim of a Bible translator, in my view, should be to enable a modern audience to overhear an ancient conversation, rather than to hear itself addressed directly.”<sup>7</sup>

In their Introduction to *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*,<sup>8</sup> editors Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss discuss the issue of gender and the translation of the Torah. After reviewing some of the history of rendering God’s name in Bible translations, they explain that they “decided not to translate God’s name

<sup>2</sup> Bird, “Translating Sexist Language,” 91. In 1975, Chaim Stern, editor of *Gates of Prayer, The New Union Prayerbook*, wrote: “We have also been keenly aware of the changing status of women in our society. Our commitment in the Reform movement to the equality of the sexes is of long standing. In this book, it takes the form of avoiding the use of masculine terminology exclusively, when we are referring to the human race in general.” Stern, *Gates of Prayer*, p. xii. See also Plaskow, “The Right Question is Theological,” 227: “Here, we confront a great scandal: the God who supposedly transcends sexuality, who is presumably one and whole, is known to us through language that is highly selective and partial...[T]he qualities we attribute to God draw on male pronouns and male experience.... For a more complete discussion, see Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 21-169; Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, xxxiii, “Gender and the Translation of the Torah.”

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion in: Eskenazi and Weiss, editors, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, p. xxxiii, “Gender and the Translation of the Torah.”

<sup>4</sup> Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Orlinsky and Bratcher, *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution*.

<sup>6</sup> Falk, *Book of Blessings*, 266.

<sup>7</sup> Bird, “Translating Sexist Language as a Theological and Cultural Problem,” 91.

<sup>8</sup> Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*.

at all, but to preserve it the way the Torah itself does, using the same four Hebrew letters...in this way we encourage our readers to share in the struggle with how we address the Divine.”<sup>9</sup> They further explain that the Hebrew Bible ordinarily uses masculine verb forms, adjectives and pronouns when referring to God. The Hebrew language is gender-inflected, like French, meaning that all nouns are either masculine or feminine. Eskenazi and Weiss point out that while God in the Bible is often referred to in masculine language, many scholars argue that God is “beyond gender.” They point out that while the biblical writers often refer to God using male imagery (warrior, king, father), other biblical texts refer to God with female imagery (giving birth, nurturing). Further, other passages refer to God with imagery from animals (eagle) or inanimate objects (rock). Carol Meyers further observes the male imagery in the Bible “can produce the impression of God as exclusively male—the so-called patriarchal God of the Hebrew Bible.” Yet she points out that that this impression can also mislead. She notes that the Torah is silent about God’s gender, especially compared to descriptions of other Near Eastern deities. There are some female images, and non-gendered images abound.<sup>10</sup>

In the Revised Edition of *The Torah, A Modern Commentary*<sup>11</sup>, David E. S. Stein, the 2005 General Editor, discusses in depth the issues of how the translation treats gender issues in general and God-language in particular. Stein describes how he and his collaborators treated gender issues: In preparing their translation, they evaluated the cultural context and chose a translation that reflected the Hebrew idiom and the meaning of the words in the culture in which they were written: He writes, “...We searched for a modern English idiom that was equivalent to the Hebrew idiom...The resulting translation may best be termed ‘gender accurate,’ ...not ‘gender neutral,’ because that would have been unfaithful to the biblical text.”<sup>12</sup> In the Preface to the volume there are several tables showing how these translation issues are resolved and presented in the book, with references to both people and to God.<sup>13</sup> In the latest Reform Jewish prayer book, *Mishkan HaNefesh, Machzor for the Days of Awe*, the Introduction states, “The English versions of the prayers, Torah readings, and Haftarah readings...are original, faithful translations. This means that we render texts ‘idea for idea’ or ‘feeling for feeling’ instead of ‘word for word.’...Fidelity in the translation of a prayer book requires faithfulness also to the overall experience of Jewish worship.”<sup>14</sup>

The question of how to translate God’s name and references to God is hardly a twenty-first century concern. David Stein points out that one dominant feature of this latest translation, done in part by translator, liturgist, and poet, Chaim Stern, is to render the divine name, YHVH, as “the Eternal.”<sup>15</sup> This usage, Stein notes, dates back to 1783, with the German Bible translation of Moses Mendelssohn, who translated YHVH as “der Ewige,” the Eternal, which came to be accepted by the German Jewish community. This makes considerable sense, since the root meaning of the divine name in Hebrew is the verb “to be,” so the translation is based upon the meaning rather than the sound of the word.

An alternative approach, dating back two thousand years to the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, employs “Kyrios,” or “the Lord,” as substituting for the actual name of God. Stein notes that the Greek translators, living in Hellenistic Egypt, “wanted to emphasize that their Deity was not merely one more named god among many.”<sup>16</sup> In Jewish circles, we read “Adonai” (meaning “my Lord”) when we come to the Tetragrammeton or its abbreviation in a biblical or prayer Hebrew text. Consequently, for many traditional Jews, “Adonai” became the equivalent of a name of God, rather than just a substitute for God’s

9 Ibid., p. xxxiii

10 Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 526, cited in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 1274-1275. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Feminist Biblical Studies in the 20th Century*, 7: “Feminist studies in general, and feminist religious studies, in particular, must confront this problem of gendered language. Grammatically masculine language functions as so-called ‘generic’ language, a ‘conventional’ language function that obscures the presence of wo/men.” See also Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*.

11 Plaut, *The Torah, A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition

12 Ibid., xxviii-xxvix.

13 Ibid., xxvii, xxx, xxxi.

14 Goldberg et al., *Mishkan HaNefesh, Machzor for the Days of Awe*, vol. 2, xv.

15 Ibid., xxv.

16 Ibid., xxv, n. 11.

name. Traditionally minded Jews today will not say the words Adonai or Elohim, except in a prayer setting, but may substitute for them an altered version of the name (e.g. “Adoshem,” “Elokim”) or use “Hashem” (the Name) where God’s name appears in the text and they are not reading in a worship setting, so as not to take God’s “name” in vain.

The standard convention in Bible translation in the Jewish community is to read the Tetragrammaton as “Adonai” and to translate it as “Lord” and to translate “Elohim” as “God.” This convention is based, of course, on theological understanding that God’s actual name is unpronounceable and that a substitute word is used in place of the name. Based on these well-established practices, some Bible and liturgy translators have simply used the Hebrew original “Adonai” to represent God’s ineffable name.<sup>17</sup> “Adonai” was seen as a substitute name and therefore gender-neutral. In the quest to conceive of God or people without gender bias, we change nouns and pronouns, but not names. We do not, for instance, change the name “Johnson” to “Johnchild” nor “Longfellow” to “Longperson.”

Hence one translation of Psalm 23 employing this convention reads “Adonai is my shepherd.” Recognizing the changes underway in Bible translation and liturgy, the Rabbi’s Manuals in the Reform (1988), Conservative (1998), and Reconstructionist (1997) movements in Judaism have all included “gender sensitive” translations of Psalm 23.<sup>18</sup>

While most of the translation and liturgical changes have been accepted in congregations almost unanimously, some have complained that the familiar translation of Psalm 23 was gone—as demonstrated by the inclusion of the older (“traditional”) and newer translations. Many individuals knew this psalm by heart, and the traditional words had brought them great comfort. Indeed the translation itself seemed “authorized” and unchangeable in the minds of many.

How can we bridge this gap between the comfort of the “traditional” translation and the benefits of a “gender-neutral” version of another? Should we be willing to sacrifice the comfort of a very familiar text—at a time of vulnerability—for the larger theological issues? Is the translation a marker of how we conceive of God, or is it just there for its message of consolation? These are the questions that we deal with in deciding which translation to include in a liturgical setting. For every change we make, after all, there are those who may applaud the stand we apparently are taking on a theological issue, while there are others who deplore the changes we make to a sacred liturgy or a beloved translation.

In the latest Reform Jewish prayer book, for the holiday of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), there are four translations of Psalm 23 included on a two-page spread.<sup>19</sup> One is the “traditional” familiar translation (Jewish Publication Society, 1917), with its masculine imagery and language. The second is an adaptation, rendering that translation “gender-sensitive,” yet remaining faithful to the familiar 1917 version. Another (#3) is a feminist offering, by Phyllis Appell Bass. A fourth (#4) is done by a contemporary rabbi and was published in 1978. The editors of this latest prayer book have decided that instead of choosing one version, they would provide options and let the leader of the service, or the reader, decide.

Sometimes we decide thorny issues by not deciding. In the case of preparing Bible translations or liturgy, clearly some editors have thought it best to provide service leaders with options rather than deciding on a consistent path. We can understand how some worshippers may well be comforted by a familiar, well-established translation, even if it is inaccurate or strays from some values that the group holds. Sometimes the words of a passage or prayer have a life of their own, even if inaccurate or misleading, as in the case of “Good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me...” Sometimes the words we speak or read also guide our thoughts and images. As George Orwell taught us that language choices influence our thought, values,

<sup>17</sup> In *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, Eskenazi and Weiss explain: “In the present translation, we decided not to translate God’s name at all, but to preserve it the way the Torah itself does, using the same four Hebrew letters...[W]e encourage our readers to share in the struggle with how we address the Divine.” (xxxiii)

<sup>18</sup> The Reform Rabbi’s Manual (New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1988) includes both the “traditional” translation, “The Lord is my shepherd...” and “God is my shepherd...,” (117-118). The Conservative Rabbi’s Manual (New York, The Rabbinical Assembly, 1998) also includes both translations (“The Lord is my shepherd... (p. E-16), with a note referring to a “contemporary rendering of Psalm 23 (“Adonai is my shepherd...,” p. E-48). The Reconstructionist Rabbi’s Manual (Wyncote, Pennsylvania, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, 1997) includes only “THE ETERNAL is my shepherd...” (p. D-13).

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg et al., *Mishkan Hanefesh, Machzor for the Days of Awe*, vol. 2, 594-595.

and understanding,<sup>20</sup> so the way we translate the Bible and use its words in prayer, shapes and guides our deepest values. We also know that any translation is also a commentary. It is not a mechanical process, but an artistic one that should capture not just the words, but also be faithful to the imagery and culture of the writers. At the same time, the language we use to translate prayers also leads us to our own concept of God, who protects and nurtures us all.

The instruction in Hebrew translation examinations is often stated to translate: “As literally as possible and as idiomatically (or figuratively) as necessary.” But translating for a test is very different from translating for worship. In worship we are mindful of the emotional and evocative elements of the words we present. In worship we may be less interested in accuracy and more interested in the God-concept that is implied, or the comfort brought by repeating well-known words. Clearly in some liturgical settings, such as funerals or memorial services, the comfort that the words bring is primary. Some of those words may lead us to faith or consolation; others may be jarring to our beliefs or values. In worship we deal with figurative language, metaphor, and nuance, which become more important than accuracy. Still, we want our prayers to be honest renderings of the words of our tradition. Many worshippers carry their closely held beliefs or their God-concept to all worship, regardless of the tone of the liturgy or service.

Here, then, are my answers to the core questions I have posed:

- How can we bridge the gap between the comfort of one translation and the “gender-neutral” version of another? While service leaders need to retain flexibility to respond to the needs of individuals and families, we can certainly select a “gender-sensitive” translation as our customary choice.
- In making these choices, should we be willing to sacrifice accuracy for familiarity or comfort for theology? Again, we need to make selections of what translation we would ordinarily use and still be willing to change in response to the requests and feelings of those we serve, the setting or circumstances of the service.
- Is the translation a marker of how we conceive of God, or is it just there for its basic message? Service leaders need to be mindful of how the translation is not only used, but also heard. In some settings, and in some services, the theology is centrally important; in others, the message of consolation or expression of joy is clearly more important than the implicit theology.

Most importantly, we need to recognize that the translations we make or choose can have a great power beyond the service in which we speak them. Sometimes the words are less important than the melody or the memory they evoke. Sometimes the mistakes we make, the “Good Mrs. Murphys,” as John Hollander calls them, provide the first pathway to the prayers of our hearts.

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<sup>20</sup> Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.” Orwell writes: “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better.”

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