

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Volume 3
P-Z

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BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2013

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Translation of Hebrew in English Bible Versions

1. EARLY TRANSLATIONS FROM HEBREW

Before the 16th century, English versions of the Bible were translated from the Latin Vulgate; the first translation from the Hebrew was completed in 1530 by William Tyndale, who was led by a faithful approach "to Hebraize his English rather than always to provide an idiomatic English version of the Scriptures" (Hammond 1980:354). Indeed, features of Hebrew syntax and style (repetition, redundant personal pronouns, extensive use of infinitive, and paratactic syntax linking phrases with the conjunction 'and') are regularly reproduced. Passages where no element is omitted appear overburdened: 'And Abraham called his sonnes name that was borne unto him which Sara bare him Isaac' (Gen. 21.3). Hebrew word order is also followed very closely, even when resulting in unusual inversions, such as 'thy voice I harde in the garden' (Gen. 3.10).

Tyndale's version, which achieved a balance between formal equivalence and inventiveness (new phrases and words were coined, including 'Passover' and 'scapegoat'), formed the basis for subsequent English versions of the Old Testament. Miles Coverdale's version, the first complete Bible to be printed in English (1535), undoubtedly relied on it, though also on Luther's German Bible (Wansbrough 2008:546–547); from the latter, his version derived such calques as 'for the mornynge

shyne' < *auf den Schein* for לִיגְבוֹהוֹת *li-nḡōhōt* 'for brightness' (Isa. 59.9) and 'wyne suppers' < *Weinsäufer* for יַיִן שׂוֹתֵי יַיִן *šōtē yāyin* 'drinkers of wine' (Joel 1.5).

Produced by Protestant exiles during the reign of Mary Tudor, the *Geneva Bible* (GeB, 1560) became by far the most popular English version (and the one quoted by Shakespeare). Printed in roman type, divided into chapters and verses, available in all sizes, from folio to sextodecimo, and featuring illustrations, maps, and tables—it proved incomparably more attractive than the official *Great Bible* (1539) and *Bishops' Bible* (1568). Yet the strongly Calvinistic and anti-monarchic views expressed in its notes prompted the establishment to undertake a new official translation.

2. KING JAMES VERSION

Six companies of translators, based at Cambridge, Oxford, and Westminster, were appointed to produce the 'Authorized' *King James Version* (KJV, 1611). As set forth in its preface, entitled 'The Translators to the Reader', they did not "need to make a new Translation (...) but to make a good one better": the rules settled by the archbishop of Canterbury Richard Bancroft established that previous versions were to be followed, first of all the *Bishops' Bible*, which ultimately drew on Tyndale's, via a series of revisions (McGrath 2001:173–175, 269). This directive resulted in KJV's archaism. For example, the 2nd person singular pronoun 'thou'/'thee' and verbal endings in '-eth' are thoroughly retained. The possessive 'its' only appears once (Lev. 25.5) (in most cases, 'thereof' was used in order to avoid it), notwithstanding its increasing use as the regular neuter possessive pronoun.

With regard to the translation of Hebrew, a mechanical approach was avoided, as stated in the translators' introduction: "for there be some words that be not the same sense everywhere"; hence the translators did not render each Hebrew/Greek word always by the same English term. Nevertheless, the high priority given to fidelity rendered KJV a fairly literal translation, much more likely to retain Hebrew structure in comparison with GeB: e.g., the latter rendered בְּשָׂרִי גִדְלֵי בָּשָׂר *gidlē bāsār* (Ezek. 16.26) as 'have great members', whereas KJV stays literal with 'great of flesh'. Imagery is generally

reproduced by using common English verbs in figurative senses: אָחַז *'āḥaz* 'to grasp' is rendered by its English concrete equivalent even when it is used with an abstract subject, as in Ps. 48.6 *Fear took hold upon them* (cf. GeB: 'Feare came there upon them'). The literal rendering of idioms occasionally yields misleading translations: הָשָׁקֵם *haškēm* 'rising up early [and doing something]' (Jer. 7.13; 29.19) is retained as such, even though its idiomatic usage conveys the meaning 'to do something continually/repeatedly'. Elsewhere, the corresponding English usage is preferred: בְּעֵצֶם הַיּוֹם *bə-ʿešem hayyōm* lit. 'in the bone of the day' is adequately rendered 'in the selfsame day' (Gen. 7.13). Special phrasings were developed in order to render grammatical features of Hebrew, such as 'to cause to' for the causative *hif'il* and 'surely' for the nuance of intensity added by the tautological infinitive; an exception to the latter is the preservation of the Hebrew phrasing in Gen. 22.17: 'in blessing I will bless thee'.

The programmatic fidelity of KJV is particularly noticeable in the practice of visually marking those words that have no equivalent in the original text: e.g., the forms of the verb 'to be' connecting subject and verb, which are not expressed in Hebrew, are rendered in italics (the first editions had roman type distinguished from the surrounding black letter).

Person and place names are rendered according to the commonest English form; except for four instances in which 'JEHOVAH' is used (Exod. 6.3; Ps. 83.18; Isa. 12.2; 26.4), the tetragrammaton representing the divine name is replaced by 'the LORD' (uppercase). Such a rendering, which had considerable influence on the way of referring to God in English, perpetuated an ancient translators' choice that had made its way from the Septuagint (*kyrios*), to the Vulgate (*dominus*), and through various medieval Bible translations.

3. MODERN VERSIONS

"Appointed to be read in churches" (as stated on its title page), KJV gained enormous prestige; therefore, attempts to produce new translations up to the 19th century had little impact. Nevertheless, its archaism (Noah Webster's 1833 revision provided some 150 amendments for words that had shifted in their meaning or were no longer in use.), along with advances

in biblical scholarship, called for a thorough revision. Both the *Revised Version* (1885) and the *American Standard Version* (1901) stayed as faithful as possible to KJV's language and style; more significant changes were introduced by the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV, 1952). The *New English Bible* (NEB, 1970) furnished a completely new translation, no longer leaning on KJV and "intended to convey the meaning in natural English".

Whereas "the older focus in translating was the form of the message" (Nida and Taber 1969:1), the argument that a literal translation may obscure the meaning led to a new approach, namely, that of dynamic/functional equivalence. Grounded in the linguistic analysis of deep structures of meaning in units larger than single words, a new method was developed: the surface structure of elaborate sentences can be broken down into their underlying 'kernels', i.e., basic constructions more likely to be shared by different languages and therefore more effectively transferable (ibid.:39-41). New translations based on such principles were undertaken, notably the *Good News Bible* (GNB, 1976, revised 1992; formerly known as *Today's English Version*), aimed at a faithful translation of the meaning into natural English. A phrase such as *אֱלֹהֵי צוּר יִשְׁעֵי* 'ēlōhē sūr yiš'ī (2 Sam. 22.47) best exemplifies those principles: whereas KJV offered the strictly literal 'the God of the rock of my salvation', and NEB translated it as 'God my rock and safe refuge', GNB opts for 'the strong God who saves me', thus eschewing the original's imagery for the sake of clarity (cf. Hargreaves 1993:158-160).

While restructuring the form, the functional equivalence approach rejects cultural re-interpretations that skew the historical setting (Nida and Taber 1969:134). Nevertheless, the biblical representation of a male-dominated culture, along with masculine-oriented linguistic usage, became a sensitive issue in recent times; hence inclusive-language translations appeared, aimed at achieving a gender-neutral language. In the *New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition* (1996) the occurrences of *אֲבוֹתֵינוּ* 'ābōtēnū 'our fathers', *אָח* 'āh 'brother', and *אִישׁ* 'iš 'man', insofar as they do not necessarily denote male individuals (→ Gender Representation), are rendered, respectively: 'our ancestors' (Ps. 22.4), 'relative' (Prov. 18.19),

and 'one' (Prov. 18.24); the sentence *אָמַר נַבְלָא בְּלִבּוֹ* 'āmar nābāl bə-libbō 'the fool said in his heart' is made plural in order to replace the masculine pronoun: 'fools say in their hearts' (Ps. 14.1). Newer inclusive-language translations tend to reshape the text more radically: in the account of the creation as given by *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (1994-2007), *הָאָדָם* hā'ādām 'the man' is rendered as 'an earth creature' (Gen. 2.7) and the making of the woman from one of his ribs (Gen. 2.21-22) is described as follows: 'God divided the earth creature in two'. God is named 'mother and father' (Isa. 64.8) and masculine terms are avoided even when the reference to male individuals is obvious: 'our ancestor Israel' (1 Chron. 29.10).

4. JEWISH VERSIONS

In Judaism, lower priority was given to translations of the Bible, given the significance of Hebrew as the sacred language and the fact that its study was a major part of Jewish education; translations were nonetheless needed by Jews in the Diaspora as early as the 3rd century B.C.E. (the Septuagint). Since the 2nd century C.E. (Aquila's Greek Bible), specifically Jewish versions replaced the ones adopted by Christians; henceforth, their distinctive features have been the avoidance of Christological interpretations and a greater use of traditional Jewish exegesis.

Preceded in the 19th century by several Jewish versions of the Bible in English, all of which were the work of individual translators (most notably Isaac Leeser's), the first committee-produced translation was organized and published by the Jewish Publication Society of America (JPS, 1917). Far from being a new modern-language translation, JPS closely adhered to KJV and its revisions, differentiating itself in some choices: the occurrence of *עַלְמָה* 'almā in Isa. 7.14 is rendered as 'young woman', whereas Christian translations retained an alternative reading based on the Septuagint and referring to a 'virgin' (KJV: 'a virgin shall conceive'). Some KJV phrases are retained, yet presented differently in order to excise Christian views. For example, the uppercase 's' in 'the Spirit of God' (Gen. 1.2), a reference to the Trinity, is made lowercase.

JPS was superseded by *JPS Tanakh* (NJPS, 1962–1985), a new version translated “directly from the traditional Hebrew text into the idiom of modern English”. Obsolete words and phrases are avoided, while literal renderings give way to more natural-English equivalents: ‘face of waters’ is replaced by ‘water’ (Gen. 1.2); the phrase ‘a woman of valour’, coined for JPS as a rendering of אִשְׁת־הַיִּיל *ēšet-hayil* (Prov. 31.10) and eventually evolving into an idiom within the Jewish community (Greenspoon 2004:2017), is replaced by ‘a capable wife’. New interpretations are also provided, most notably for the opening of Genesis: accepting the thesis of the 11th-century Jewish commentator Rashi, and reflecting the openings of other ancient Near Eastern creation stories (Greenspoon 2004:2015), a passage traditionally seen as a complete sentence (KJV/JPS: ‘In the beginning God created...’) is rendered as a temporal clause (NJPS: ‘When God began to create...’; RSV offered this phrasing in a footnote as an alternative rendering. Cf. also NEB: ‘In the beginning of creation, when God made...’). In line with other contemporary translations, though to a lesser extent, NJPS moved toward gender neutrality.

The *ArtScroll Tanach* (1976–1996) targets more traditional segments of the Jewish community: the tetragrammaton is thus represented by ‘HA-SHEM’ (‘the Name’, an expression regularly used in Orthodox milieus) and clarity on ritual matter takes priority over literal rendering; e.g., הַשַּׁבָּת *haš-šabbāt* in Lev. 23.11, following rabbinic interpretation, is understood as ‘the rest day’ (the first day of Passover) rather than ‘the sabbath’.

The Living Torah (1981) introduces legal interpretations that are not explicit in the Hebrew wording: עִוְרָה *‘iwwēr* ‘blind’ (Lev. 19.14) is specified as ‘morally blind’; the idiom עֲרוּהָ גִלְיָהּ *gillā ‘erwā* ‘to uncover the nakedness’ is explained through explicit mentions of ‘sexual offense’ or ‘incest’ (Lev. 18.7); and a specific prohibition of ‘premarital sex’ is introduced (Lev. 19.29).

The Five Books of Moses (1995) by Everett Fox endeavors to preserve the flavor of ancient Hebrew; phrasing and style are rendered as literally as possible, the Hebrew form of biblical names is retained, and puns are reproduced in the text rather than explained in notes.

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Translations: Medieval Period

In the 11th–15th centuries, more than 570 works about philosophy, science, and medicine were translated into Medieval Hebrew. Most of them (approximately 350) were translated from their original Arabic text; some others (approximately 220) were translated from Latin, especially from 1350 onwards. Most of these translations were made in various places in Spain, Provence, and Italy; they demonstrate the interest and ability of some Jewish scholars in diffusing the main contents of non-Jewish thought among their coreligionists. Some translators belonged to the same family or circle, or to the same geographical area; this fact might suggest that there existed specific ‘translator groups’, like that of the Tibbonids in Provence. Of course, the translation movement greatly contributed to the development of Medieval Hebrew: a number of new terms, most of which were calqued upon or even borrowed directly from Arabic or from Latin, were introduced into Hebrew language.

A first group of translations (no more than a dozen) was made between the end of the 10th century and the middle of the 12th century,