

THE BIBLE AND BIBLES IN AMERICA

edited by  
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Scholars Press  
Atlanta, Georgia  
1988

IV

Jewish Bible Scholarship and Translations in the  
United States

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and  
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For two thousand years, the Hebrew Bible has been studied by Jews not simply as a self-contained, sacred work on its own terms, but largely as a body of religious literature that has been filtered through a continuous process of rabbinic interpretation and reinterpretation within the community of practice and faith from which its immediate authority derived. Already in 553 C.E., the emperor Justinian (527–565 C.E.) took note of this fact in his *novella constitutio* concerning the Jews to whom he granted permission to read their sacred scriptures in Greek, Latin, or any other language. He stipulated, however, that they should “read the holy words themselves, rejecting the commentaries,” by which he clearly meant rabbinic exegesis. As he put it, “the so-called second tradition (*deuterosis*) we prohibit entirely, for it is not part of the sacred books nor is it handed down by divine inspiration through the prophets, but the handiwork of men, speaking only of earthly things and having nothing of the divine in it” (Baumgarten: 37).

Justinian’s motives and intentions are irrelevant to the present theme, for they belong within the category of medieval Jewish-Christian polemics. But his specified restriction does illustrate a historic fact of cardinal importance that differentiates the Jewish study of the Scriptures from the Christian approach, which, of course, has its own venerable tradition of theological reinterpretation of the Bible of the Jews. The educated, committed Jew to whom study of the Bible is at one and the same time a religious obligation, a spiritual exercise, a mode of worship, and a moral as well as an intellectual discipline, is confronted with a vast array of texts which, if not of equal authority, and most have no authority at all, yet command his attention, his concentrated thought and study. It is a literature that has long been endowed with a life and energy of its own, and in its independent

existence the light of the Hebrew Bible has become refracted through a thousand prisms. In discussing the role of the Bible in any Jewish community, this circumstance must be taken into account.

Another factor that requires recognition is the term "American Judaism." It is an appellation that well-nigh defies meaningful definition. The variable, restless, frequently chaotic, and always kaleidoscopic configurations of American Jewish life do not easily yield to procrustean generalizations. American Judaism is not, strictly speaking, simply a peer group of the Protestant and Catholic faith communities, for it encompasses a considerable number of individuals who possess no affiliation with religious institutions but whose sense of Jewish self-identity is strong and for whom "Judaism" carries with it a humanistic, secular nuance and/or nationalistic orientation. Nevertheless, it appears to be an incontrovertible fact that the ultra-Orthodox and the ultra-Reform, as well as those who represent the variegated shadings of religiosity between these poles, together with the secular Jew, all accept the Hebrew Scriptures as the bedrock of Jewish civilization, and all share a common recognition and conviction that the Hebrew Bible is a living force within the community of self-identifying Jews from which the structure of values to which Judaism subscribes ultimately derives. That this *consensus omnium* may also be accompanied by a commonality of ignorance of the biblical text itself is beside the point. What is pertinent is that the peculiar makeup of American Judaism distinguishes it from Protestantism and Catholicism in a very significant way.

Still another, no less important, singularity is that the received Hebrew text forever remains the sole authentic and valid basis for Jewish study and interpretation. Translations of the Bible have no authority for Jews. Particular English versions, like those of Isaac Leeser and of the Jewish Publication Society of 1917, achieved universal acceptance by English-speaking Jews, as will doubtless the new JPS translation. However, in no instance was the version initiated, sponsored, authorized or sanctioned by any official Jewish ecclesiastical body. In each case, the English version was a decidedly lay production even though learned rabbis representative of the three organized wings of American Judaism actively participated in the work.

#### *The Leeser Translation*

American Jewish Bible translations date back to the foremost Jewish religious leader in early America: Isaac Leeser (1806–1868).

Born in Westphalia and orphaned as a child, Leeser studied both at the gymnasium in Muenster and with Rabbi Abraham Sutro (Grossman). He arrived in this country in 1824 to work with his uncle, Zalma Rehine, a storekeeper in Richmond, Virginia. There he learned English, assisted on a volunteer basis at Congregation Beth Shalome, studied with Richmond's three most learned Jews, and in 1829 undertook to defend Judaism in print against the strictures of a British critic. Shortly thereafter, Congregation Mikveh Israel called him to Philadelphia to serve as its *hazan*. He spent the rest of his life in Philadelphia, first at Mikveh Israel, later on his own, and still later at Congregation Beth El Emeth. He never married and never made much money. His time, energy, and resources went exclusively to the congregation and the Jewish community, which he served faithfully as spiritual leader, writer, organizer, translator, and publisher. The magnitude of his achievements defies easy summary. Merely to read Bertram Korn's list of Leeser's "firsts," however, is to gain some appreciation of his formative role in American Judaism:

The first volumes of sermons delivered and published by an American Jewish religious teacher (1837); the first complete American translation of the Sephardic prayer book (1837); the first Hebrew primer for children (1838); the first Jewish communal religious school (1839); the first successful American Jewish magazine-news journal (1843); the first American Jewish publication society (1845); the first Hebrew-English Torah to be edited and translated by an American Jew (1845); the first complete English translation of the Ashkenazic prayer book (1848); the first Hebrew "high school" (1849); the first English translation of the entire Bible by an American Jew (1853); the first Jewish defense organization—the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859); the first American Jewish theological seminary—Maimonides College (1867). Practically every form of Jewish activity which supports American Jewish life today was either established or envisaged by this one man. Almost every kind of publication which is essential to Jewish survival was written, translated, or fostered by him. (1967: 133)

Leeser's scholarly equipment was somewhat limited. The more learned and often more religiously radical Jewish religious leaders who followed him to America's shores had no trouble confounding him with intricate Talmudic arguments. Leeser's energy, however, was boundless, and likewise boundless was his desire to strengthen the Jewish community against assimilation and protestantization. Reanimating Jews' "almost expiring desire for critical inquiry into the sacred text" formed part of Leeser's program for stimulating Jewish revival (Leeser, 1856: vii). His other activities—educational, religious, philanthropic and political ones—similarly related to his

broad mission, that of preserving Jewish identity in the face of Christian conversionism and Jewish apathy.

While Isaac Leeser's decision to translate the Bible largely stemmed from these domestic concerns, it was also partly influenced by Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Pentateuch from Hebrew to German (1780–1783), an epoch-making event whose reverberations spread throughout post-Emancipation Jewry (Weinberg; Billinghamer; Altmann). Mendelssohn served as one of Leeser's early role models, and when he first contemplated a Bible translation, the young *hazan* may have wanted to carry forward the master's work in a new language. But by the time he actually began his work in 1838, Leeser was less enamored with Mendelssohn, and he had a better conception of his own community's needs. Mendelssohn had translated the Bible as part of his program to enlighten the Jews of his day. Leeser's translation, by contrast, aimed to fight too much enlightenment; it sought to help Jews preserve their own identity intact.

The average American Jew in Leeser's day did not read Hebrew and, therefore, studied the Bible, if at all, from the venerable King James Version obtained cheaply or at no charge either from missionaries or from the American Bible Society. These Bibles contained the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament bound together, in one volume, according to the Christian canon, and in a thoroughly christological format. Every page and every chapter of the Bible society's Bible bore a brief summary heading, many of which read Christian interpretations into the text. Jews who used these Bibles often condemned, as Leeser did, the "unfairness" of those who chose such headings as "the Prediction of Christ" (Psalm 110), "A Description of Christ" (Song of Solomon 5), and "Christ's Birth and Kingdom" (Isaiah 9) (1867: 41). Innocent Jews seeing these headings had, Leeser feared, "no means of knowing what is Scriptural and what is not" (1867: 42).

Format aside, the King James Bible translated many verses in a manner that Jews found thoroughly objectionable. As Leeser saw it, (*Occident*, 1851: 480) "wherever it was possible for the translators to introduce Christianity in the Scriptures, they have uniformly done so," in order, he said on another occasion, (1853: iii), "to assail Israel's hope and faith." He found particularly galling what he called the "perversions" introduced into the standard English text of the Prophets and the Psalms.

Leeser was not alone in his wrath. English Jews, as early as David Levi, had penned critiques of the Authorized Version, while Selig Newman's *Emendations of the Authorized Version of the Old Testa-*

*ment* (1839) filled seventy-two closely-printed pages with examples of where "the translators were either decidedly wrong, or . . . have not given the happiest rendering" (iv). Particularly troubling from a Jewish point of view were such readings as "virgin" for the Hebrew *'almâ* (Gen 24:43, Isa 7:14), or young woman; repeated capitalization of the word "saviour," and the like.

Had Leeser's objections to the King James Version only been confined to these kinds of Christological biases, he might have composed a Jewish revision without undue difficulty, simply by deleting the headings, repairing offensive verses, and rearranging the order of the books to conform with Jewish tradition. Just as the Ferrara Bible of 1553 appeared in a Christian edition where *'almâ* in Isa 7:14 was translated "virgin," and a Jewish edition where the same word was rendered "young woman" or transliterated as "la alma," (Margolis, 1917: 62), so there could have been Jewish and Christian editions of King James. But a Judaized version of a Christian translation would not have satisfied Leeser. To his mind, Jews were the guardians of Scripture, bearers of a long interpretive tradition of their own. They had no reason to defer, as subordinates, to a translation authorized by, as he put it, "a deceased king of England who certainly was no prophet" (1856: v). Nor did he agree that the Authorized Version created the standard from which all subsequent revisions derived. He rather staked Jews' claims on the Bible in the original; that was their source of legitimacy. By publishing a translation "made by one of themselves," he placed Jews on an equal footing with Protestants. To the extent that his translation could claim to be a better approximation of the original, he could even insist that Jews were more than equals.

Leeser was not alone in seeking independent legitimacy through a Bible translation. His Philadelphia contemporary, Bishop Francis P. Kenrick, was making a new Catholic translation of the Bible at roughly the same time (1849–1860), though whether the two men knew each other is not clear. Kenrick's translation principles, of course, differed from Leeser's, since the Catholic translator, though informed by the Hebrew, "did not always feel at liberty to render closely where it would imply a departure from the Vulgate" (Fogarty: 171). But the two translators shared a common desire: to translate the Bible into an English version that was both visibly different from, and arguably better than, the Authorized (Protestant) Version that the majority of Americans held dear.

The translation that Leeser finally produced in 1853, after fifteen years of work, derived from the original Hebrew, and depended, according to the preface, only on traditional Jewish commentators and

“the studies of modern German Israelites” (including that of the German Reform leader, Ludwig Philipson). Leeser avoided making use of Christian or English language scholarship, boasting with only slight exaggeration that “not an English book has been consulted except Bagster’s Bible” (even this exception was deleted in a later preface.) Although he was more familiar with Christian works than he admitted, he wanted to stress that his was a *Jewish* translation. When he was done, he pridefully pointed to the many differences which distinguished his version from the authorized one. His only concession to the King James was to follow its old English style, which, he felt, “for simplicity cannot be surpassed,” and to conform to many of its spellings (Sussman, 1985).

Leeser strove to render the Hebrew text into English “as literally as possible,” even at the expense of stylistic beauty (1856: vi). This immediately set his translation apart from the flowery King James, and simultaneously ensured that it would face criticism on literary grounds, criticism that was frequently deserved. Leeser provoked Israel Abrahams’s scorn (1920: 254–59) by abandoning the standard translation of Ps 23:2: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,” for the awkward, if slightly more literal “in pastures of tender grass he causeth me to lie down.” “The heavens relate the glory of God; and the expanse telleth of the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1) rang similarly awkward, especially when contrasted with “the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork,” the King James reading. Leeser did carry over the standard and to his mind literal “until Shiloh come” for his translation of the controversial passage in Gen 49:10, which Christians have interpreted as foreshadowing Jesus. (The new Jewish Publication Society translation, by contrast, reads “So that tribute shall come to him,” following the Midrash.) Rather than deviating from the plain meaning as he saw it, he appended a long explanatory footnote, which concludes by asserting that “the pious and intelligent reader will have enough to satisfy all doubts.”

Matitiah Tsevat (1958) has pointed out that in his quest for literalism “Leeser wanted the impossible.” Translation by its very nature involves interpretation. Furthermore, all Bible translators are heir to interpretive traditions which, consciously or not, shape their scriptural understanding. Calls for “literalism,” or movements “back to the Bible,” Tsevat shows, really seek to cloak with legitimacy efforts aimed at replacing one mode of interpretation with another.

In Leeser’s case, literalism usually meant resorting to rabbinic exegesis. Thus, in Exod 21:6, dealing with the laws for servants, the

King James translation reads straightforwardly “his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him for ever.” Leeser, influenced by rabbinic interpretation of Lev 25:10 and, likely as not a raging American debate over the relationship between the biblical form of slavery and the Southern one,<sup>1</sup> translated the last clause “and he shall serve him till the jubilee”—which, of course, is not what the verse literally says. It must be admitted that this is an unusual instance. It was more often the case that Leeser encased his interpolations in parentheses. Instead of having Samuel “lying down in the temple of the Lord,” for example, he more demurely had him sleep “in (the hall of) the temple of the Lord” (1 Sam 3:3)—a bow to decorum that the commentators endorsed, but that literalists assuredly would not.

Isaac Leeser labored initially under the assumption that Jews alone would be interested in his translation. In 1845, when his Hebrew-English edition of the Pentateuch appeared, he presented the volume only to his “Jewish friends,” explaining that “I speak of my Jewish friends in particular, for however much a revised translation may be desired by all believers in the word of God, there is no probability that the gentiles will encourage any publication of this nature emanating from a Jewish writer” (1845: iii). Leeser, however, was mistaken. By the time his full Bible with notes appeared in 1853, he himself realized that those “who are of a different persuasion” might indeed find the work valuable “as exhibiting . . . the progress of biblical criticism among ancient and modern Israelites” (iv). When Rev. Charles Hodge, a leading Presbyterian theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary, recommended his (Leeser’s) translation in the *Princeton Review*, and called for “a work on a similar plan from a competent Christian scholar,” Leeser happily reprinted the review in the *Occident* (1854: 360), the Jewish monthly that he founded and edited.

Christian interest in Leeser’s work reflects yet another aspect of the Jewish-Christian relationship that deserves attention. More than it is generally recognized, American Protestants in the nineteenth century sought out and respected Jewish expositions of the Hebrew Scriptures. The roots of this interest, of course, lay in Europe, where Christian scholars had overtly or covertly been studying the Bible with Jews for centuries. They knew, as did their nineteenth-century successors, that Jewish religious leaders understood Hebrew, read the Bible in the original, and studied traditional Jewish commentators—or at least claimed to. But beyond this, especially in America, many Protestants saw Jews as lineal descendants of the biblical figures they

read and heard about. According to the *Richmond Constitutional Whig* in 1829:

When we see one of these people, and remember that we have been told by good authority, that he is an exact copy of the Jew who worshipped in the Second Temple two thousand years ago—that his physiognomy and religious opinions—that the usages and customs of his tribe are still the same, we feel that profound respect which antiquity inspires. (Ezekiel and Lichtenstein: 56)

Protestants who adhered to this view naturally assumed that Jews preserved special knowledge of the biblical world that others did not share. Acting on that basis, they often turned to Jews when Hebrew or Old Testament questions arose.

Two early American Jews, Jonathan (Jonas) Horwitz and Solomon Jackson received non-Jewish encouragement when they sought to publish Hebrew texts of the Bible—a much needed task considering that in 1812, by Horwitz's estimate, fewer than a dozen Hebrew Bibles were available for purchase in the whole United States. Horwitz, a scholarly European immigrant who brought Hebrew type with him when he came to Philadelphia, collected recommendations from twelve Christian clergymen and numerous subscriptions for his work, but eventually transferred his rights to the edition to Thomas Dobson who completed the task based on the text of van der Hooght's Hebrew Bible that Horwitz had prepared. The Dobson Bible (1814) is the first independently produced edition of the Hebrew Bible in the United States (Vaxer; Wolf and Whiteman: 308–311; Fein: 75–76).

Jackson, better known as editor of *The Jew*, an antimissionary periodical and the first Jewish magazine in America, planned an even more ambitious undertaking: a Hebrew-English linear Bible. His earlier vituperative attacks on leading Protestants notwithstanding, three clergymen, including the Episcopal Bishop of New York, John Henry Hobart, joined six leading Jews in recommending him and urging support for his work. One of the clergymen specifically praised the fact that the “author and editor belong to the *literal* family of Abraham,” suggesting that this improved the proposed volume's credibility (Jackson). Apparently, the recommendation did not help, for the book never appeared.

Americans also looked to Jews from time to time to defend the Bible against “infidels.” *Letters of Certain Jews to Monsieur Voltaire* (1795), a French work defending both Jews and the integrity of Scripture, appeared in two American editions, as did England's David Levi's *A Defence of the Old Testament in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine* (1797). Thomas Jefferson, who read Levi's earlier

*Letters to Dr. Priestly*, noted in 1816 that Levi “avails himself all his advantage over his adversaries by his superior knowledge of the Hebrew, speaking in the very language of divine communication, while they can only fumble on with conflicting and disputed translations” (Lipscomb: 469–70; Abrahams and Miles). Three decades later, when the Bible was “threatened” by new discoveries in geology, Jonathan Horwitz, who since the appearance of the Dobson Bible had become a medical doctor, published *A Defence of the Cosmogony of Moses* (1839), a “vindication” of the Bible “from the attacks of geologists,” based on a close reading of the Hebrew text (which, he lamented, was so little known), a cursory reading of geological theory, and a firm conviction that “not the slightest foundation is to be seen in the Holy Record for any interpretation lengthening the age of the world beyond 6,000 years” (29). Later still, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the leading figure in American Reform Judaism, attempted to defend tradition against what he called the theory of “homo-brutalism,” as expounded by Charles Darwin (1876:47–69).

More commonly, Americans looked to Jews to teach them the language of the Bible: Hebrew and Hebrew grammar. Many of the Hebrew grammars used by Americans were composed by Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity, and numerous Jews taught Hebrew to Christian students (Chomsky; Fellman). Isaac Nordheimer, the most notable early American Hebrew grammarian, wrote the highly original *Critical Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (1838–1841) and was the first Jew to teach Hebrew at New York University (Pool; Neill). Joshua Seixas, son of the famous Shearith Israel minister and also the author of a Hebrew grammar (1833, 1834), taught Hebrew at various colleges in Ohio. His best known student was Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, who held Seixas in high regard (Davis, 1970: 347–54). Jews continued to be associated with Hebrew and Hebrew studies later on in the century, in a few cases at the university level.

The fact that these Jews were exceptional—most American Jews could not understand Hebrew—detracted not at all from the image of all Jews as biblical experts. McGuffey's *Eclectic Third Reader* taught school children to “consider the Jews as the keepers of the Old Testament. It was their own sacred volume, which contained the most extraordinary predictions concerning the infidelity of their nation, and the rise, progress, and extensive prevalence of Christianity” (Westerhoff: 139). Seeing Jews in this light, Christians periodically called on Jews to offer biblical views on questions of the day. Jewish leaders presented widely publicized testimony regarding “The Biblical view of Slavery” (the question divided Jews as much as it did non-

Jews), the biblical view of temperance, the biblical view of capital punishment, and even on the biblical view of baptism (Kalisch: 37). Biblical magazines, particularly late nineteenth-century ones like *The Old Testament Student*, welcomed Jewish participation. Jewish lectures and books on biblical subjects received respectful Christian attention. Even those who considered Jews misguided and doomed recognized that Jews preserved important traditions and could be valuable assets in the battle against infidelity. Not surprisingly, therefore, Leiser's Jewish Bible translation met with considerable approbation.

### *The Rise of Jewish Bible Scholarship in the United States*

The decades following the publication of Isaac Leiser's translation saw the first flickering of Jewish biblical scholarship on American shores. Harry Orlinsky, in his valuable survey (1974), highlights the pioneering efforts in this area of Isidor Kalisch, Adolph Huebsch, Isaac Mayer Wise, Michael Heilprin, and Benjamin Szold. All of these men were trained in Europe, all but Heilprin were active rabbis, and all immigrated with the great wave of central European Jews that swelled America's Jewish population from less than 15,000 in 1840 to about 250,000 just forty years later. A desire to strengthen the hands of the faithful against missionaries and biblical critics motivated some of these men, notably Kalisch in his *Wegweiser für rationelle Forschungen in den biblischen Schriften* (1853), and Wise in his *Pronaos to Holy Writ* (Kalisch, 1891: 14–18; Wise, 1954: 180; Sandmel). Others, especially Michael Heilprin, best known as an editor for *Appleton's Cyclopaedia*, "accepted, not grudgingly, but with enthusiasm and delight, those views of the Old Testament which have been defended by Graf and Kuenen and Wellhausen and Reuss" (Pollak: 9). Indeed, Heilprin's articles about biblical criticism in the *Nation* helped familiarize Americans with what these European scholars were doing, and his magnum opus, *The Historical Poetry of the Ancient Hebrews Translated and Critically Examined* (1879–1880), carried critical scholarship forward and won considerable academic acclaim.

The lonely efforts of these scholarly pioneers contrast with the widespread neglect of biblical studies on the part of the mass of American Jews. Heavily engaged as most were in mercantile pursuits, they found little time for any kind of study; critical scholarship was certainly beyond them. Immigrants did sometimes send their intellectually gifted youngsters back to Germany for advanced degrees, a

practice that continued down to World War I. Once there, however, few American Jews took the opportunity to gain mastery in biblical scholarship—and for good reasons.

First of all, they found the subject of the Bible heavily freighted with Christian theology, if not anti-Judaism, and particularly with the dogma of the Hebrew Scriptures as *praeparatio* for the New Testament. Second, they learned that the Jewish renaissance movement known as *Das Wissenschaft des Judentums* generally excluded biblical studies from its purview. It concentrated instead on rabbinic literature, which had been sorely neglected and stood in dire need of redemption for scientific research. Leopold Zunz, programmatic founder of the *Wissenschaft* movement, was content to leave biblical scholarship in Christian hands. Many American Jews followed suit, believing that the Bible was, as Max Margolis put it, "a non-Jewish subject" (Gordis: 2). Finally, American Jews knew that biblical studies held open to them almost no promise of gainful employment. Positions in biblical studies at major American universities remained generally the preserve of Protestants, many of them ministers. Jews—witness the case of Arnold Ehrlich or Israel Eitan—found themselves excluded, even if their contributions did win recognition elsewhere. This may help explain why no Jews numbered among the founders of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), and only a mere handful (notably the father and son teams of Rabbi Marcus Jastrow and Prof. Morris Jastrow and Rabbi Gustav Gottheil and Prof. Richard J. H. Gottheil) took out membership during its first decade, even though the regulations of the society explicitly specified that conditions of membership were to disregard what it termed "ecclesiastical affiliation." By the semicentennial meeting, the roster of members included at least forty-three Jews, of whom, it would seem, seventeen bore the title "Rabbi," and twenty were professional Jewish scholars. Whether the proportionately large number of rabbis may be taken as indicative of broader intellectual horizons and deeper scholarly interests on the part of the Jewish clergy of two generations ago than is the case with their modern successors or whether it means that a relatively large number of would-be Jewish biblical scholars turned to the rabbinate as the outlet for their thwarted aspirations in an era of complete lack of opportunity for academic employment is hard to say. What is worthy of more than the mere passing mention possible here, is that a half-century ago Jewish scholars in Talmudics and the traditional branches of medieval learning maintained an abiding and serious interest in biblical studies, something apparently made all but impossible today due to the unprecedented explosion of scholarship



and research, pursued with ever-increasing degrees of specialization. We refer to the presence on the 1930 membership rolls of such illustrious names as Cyrus Adler, Salo Baron, Israel Davidson, Alexander Marx, Ralph Marcus, Chaim Tchernowitz, Harry Wolfson and Solomon Zeitlin (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, ii, xvii, xx, lii).

Theoretically, of course, Jews and Christians could join together on a scientific basis to study the Bible. Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal made this clear in 1884 when, in an article in *The Old Testament Student*, he declared that "a Bible scholar should free his mind from all misleading preconceptions, from all sectarian bias;—truth, nothing but the truth, should be his aim." In fact, however, this proved easier said than done. William Rainey Harper, although agreeing with Felsenthal's "principle . . . that, whether Jews or Christian, we are to seek the truth" nevertheless reminded the rabbi that "Our paths diverge. Our conceptions of the Old Testament must, of necessity, be largely molded by what we find in the New."

American Jewish scholars found themselves more easily welcomed as fellows in the broader realm of Semitic studies, a field which was from a theological point of view far safer than biblical studies, yet did nevertheless still bear on the biblical text and history. Cyrus Adler (1926), in his cursory survey of "The Beginnings of Semitic Studies in America," mentions several very early American Jewish contributions to the subject, most of them dealing with language and grammar, as well as the valuable if amateurish pre-Civil War work of Mendes I. Cohen who brought to America a large collection of Egyptian antiquities, later deposited at Johns Hopkins University. More rigorous works of scholarship began to appear only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when, as part of a larger movement to upgrade American higher education, Semitics programs were initiated, first at the graduate level at Johns Hopkins, and later at other major universities. At Hopkins, under the direction of Paul Haupt, brought over from Göttingen in 1883, such Jewish students of Semitics as Cyrus Adler, William Rosenau, and Aaron Ember embarked on their first serious scholarly endeavors. At the same time, Maurice Bloomfield, already a professor at Hopkins, was beginning his pioneering studies of Sanskrit, which also held important implications for students of Semitics. Other Jewish Semitists of this period included Richard J. H. Gottheil, who became chairman of the Semitics Department at Columbia University; Morris Jastrow, who became Professor of Semitic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania; and Max L. Margolis, of whom more below, who from 1909 until his death occupied the chair in biblical philology at Dropsie College. Gottheil, Jastrow, and Mar-

golis all served terms as president of the Society of Biblical Literature: Gottheil as its first Jewish president, in 1903, and the other two, respectively, in 1916 and 1923.

That so many Jews found a home in Semitic studies is not accidental. Jews, particularly the great Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff, supported Semitic studies with liberal endowments in the belief that Jews were, in Schiff's words, "the modern representatives of the Semitic people." To combat "social prejudice and ostracism" against Jews, Schiff felt that "opportunities should be created for a more thorough study and a better knowledge of Semitic history and civilization, so that the world shall better understand and acknowledge the debt it owes to the Semitic people" (Adler, 1929: 21). To this end, Schiff supported archeological acquisitions and excavations in the Near East, built the Harvard Semitics Museum, and founded the Semitic and Hebrew departments of the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress. Other Jews supported Semitic studies at Yale and the University of Chicago (Chiel; Feuer: 433). Although for the time being biblical studies remained a separate domain, outside the realm of Semitic studies, in fact, albeit through the backdoor and under the guise of a more acceptable rubric, the groundwork for Jewish Bible scholarship in America had been laid. A new era was about to begin.

#### *The First Jewish Publication Society Translation*

As biblical and Semitic studies developed in Jewish scholarly circles, popular pressure mounted within the American Jewish community for a new Bible translation to replace Isaac Leeser's. The late nineteenth century witnessed a great upsurge of general interest in the study of the Bible. In Jewish circles, as also in Christian ones, the demand for Bibles that embodied "the Jewish point of view" reached unprecedented levels. A Jewish cultural revival took place—a fact that the onrush of East European Jewish immigration during this period usually overshadows—and during one stunning decade the Jewish Publication Society, the American Jewish Historical Society, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Jewish Chautauqua Society all came into being, while at the same time preparations began for publication of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Except for the American Jewish Historical Society every one of the above had as one of its aims the furthering of biblical scholarship or the encouraging of Bible study by the laity. "There has been, during the past ten years, a great awakening among our people," Daniel P. Hays correctly noted in

1901. He considered the change “a realization that the Jew has not become great by his material achievements, but by his contribution toward the higher ideals of life and by his endeavors toward the uplifting of the race” (*American Jewish Year Book*, 1902: 216).

Christian interest in Jewish work on the Bible also reached new heights during this period. Rabbis, notably Emil G. Hirsch, Bernhard Felsenthal, and Gustav Gottheil received invitations to teach the Bible to Christian audiences, while Rabbi Moses Gries in Cleveland reported having “many requests from non-Jews who wish to secure a translation accepted by Jewish scholars” (*JPS Annual Reports*, 1897: 24).

In the face of all this popular interest in Jewish biblical exegesis, the Leeser Bible, although it had become the standard Anglo-Jewish Bible, nevertheless proved totally inadequate. First of all, it was too expensive. The smallest edition cost one dollar, much more than the equivalent Protestant edition, and more also than many people were apparently willing to pay. Over and over Jews called for “a cheap edition of the English Bible.” The Central Conference of American Rabbis, in 1909, thought that a fifty-cent Bible was all that the market could bear (*CCAR Year Book*, 1895: 25; 1909: 155).

Even had the price been right, however, the Leeser Bible would still have proved unsatisfactory. Its English style was embarrassing and in some cases unintelligible. Its “literal” approach to the Bible along with Isaac Leeser’s professed belief “in the Scriptures as they have been handed down to us, as also in the truth and authenticity of prophecies and their ultimate literal fulfillment” (1856: v) found fewer and fewer adherents. It was also antiquated; biblical scholarship had advanced enormously since Leeser’s day, permitting new translations of formerly obscure passages. Most important of all, a new Protestant translation of the Bible had appeared, the (Anglican) English Revised Version (1885), which was produced by some of the greatest Christian scholars of the day, and from the point of view of biblical studies was relatively up-to-date. Leeser’s translation paled by comparison.

It did not follow, however, that a whole new Jewish translation had to be produced from scratch. As had been true with the King James, so too with the English Revised Version Jews could simply have issued a “Jewish revised version,” repairing offensive renderings (the ERV continued such christological King James readings as “virgin” for Isa 7:14), and putting the biblical books into a traditional Jewish order and format. The Jewish Religious Education Board in London made the task of composing a Jewish revision easier by publishing sixteen

pages of corrections titled *Appendix to the Revised Version* (1896). In 1907, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) resolved to carry out the project:

Be it resolved, that in view of the immediate need of a cheap edition of the English Bible in the best available translation, the C.C.A.R. enter into negotiations with the publishers of the Revised version for an issue of the Old Testament exclusively (*CCAR Year Book*, 1907: 35).

Negotiations proceeded, and before long, Oxford University Press agreed to issue a special edition of its translation, complete with a sixteen-page appendix prepared by the CCAR, containing “corrections and emendations of the text necessary from the Jewish standpoint” (*CCAR Year Book*, 1908: 149).

Rabbi Samuel Schulman of Temple Beth El in New York, rejoiced at the “implied recognition of a Jewish body by the Christian world, in so important a matter as changes in a widespread version of the Bible.” But at the last minute, the CCAR backed out of the undertaking. Instead, it accepted an invitation from the Jewish Publication Society to cooperate in “issuing an English translation of the Bible under Jewish auspices” (*JPS Publication Committee Minutes*, 5 April 1908). Whatever benefits cooperation with Oxford University Press might have promised faded before the renewed possibility of a translation produced by Jews independently.

The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) had been talking about a new Jewish Bible translation since 1892. Three years later, in the very midst of the heady revival already described, it proudly announced that a new translation was underway. Specialization and division of labor, concepts much discussed at the time, seem to have left their impact on the JPS, for it decided to produce its translation as a series of independent volumes, each one by a different person—mostly rabbis with European training. Marcus Jastrow, who had immigrated to America in 1866 and become one of American Jewry’s leading luminaries (author of a Hebrew-Aramaic-English dictionary that is still in print) was appointed general editor. He was aided by Kaufmann Kohler and Frederick de Sola Mendes: both rabbis, both trained abroad. Rhapsodic reports of progress—descriptions of editors “busily pursuing the work of revising and editing the books of the Bible as they came to them from the hands of the translators”—had to be tempered annually by tedious reminders that “the work is necessarily slow, and . . . a considerable time must elapse before the entire Bible can be ready for publication” (*JPS Annual Reports*, 1899: 17). By the time Jastrow died in 1903, only Kaufmann Kohler’s translation



of Psalms, revised by the editors, had actually been published. Although work on a few other books had proceeded, a new translation of the whole Bible seemed more distant than ever.

Solomon Schechter, freshly arrived from Cambridge University and viewed in his day as America's preeminent Judaic scholar, replaced Jastrow as translation chairman, but he soon wearied of the task. The endlessly complex and hopelessly disorganized manner in which the translation was being pursued and a chronic scarcity of funds led him to submit his resignation in mid-1907. But just as the project seemed in danger of collapse, the CCAR overture to Oxford University Press became public. At first, Judge Mayer Sulzberger (1843-1923), chairman of the JPS Publication Committee and a lay scholar in his own right (Davis, 1965: 362-65), considered the CCAR scheme a good one, and wrote to Rabbi David Philipson that "it might be well for the Publication Society to consider the question of joining the Central Conference in its project of disseminating the Revised Version as widely as possible." A few months of reflection, however, convinced him that "official recognition" by Jews of the English Revised Version could be inappropriate (Philipson Papers). Since Philipson was coming around to the same view, Cyrus Adler, long the power behind the throne at JPS, stepped in and hammered out an agreement that both the JPS and the CCAR accepted.

Both sides agreed on "the desirability of issuing an English version of the Bible under Jewish auspices," and both sides agreed on the need to produce the new Bible as quickly as possible ("two years would be an outside limit"). Secretly, both sides also agreed that the only way to accomplish this feat was "that the text of the Revised Version be used as the basis, and that the revision of it . . . be primarily of such a nature that it will remove all un-Jewish and anti-Jewish phrases, expressions, renderings and usages" (JPS Publication Committee Minutes, 5 April 1908). The new Bible, in short, would conform to the latest Protestant fashion but would still be distinctive enough to bear a separate Jewish label.

Although it is likely that nobody noticed the fact at the time, the discussions between Adler, Sulzberger, and Philipson evidenced the growing Americanization of Jewish scholarship in the New World. All three of the men were products of the American educational system (Sulzberger, though born abroad, immigrated with his parents as a young boy) and had obtained the bulk of their Jewish knowledge in the United States. Perhaps it is not surprising that the man selected to be the new editor-in-chief of the Bible translation was also, at least in

part, American trained: Max L. Margolis. Born in Russia, Margolis immigrated to America from Berlin in 1889 at the age of twenty-three, and two years later under Richard Gottheil received the first Ph.D. in oriental studies ever awarded by Columbia University. His subject was "an attempt to improve the damaged text of the Talmud through reference to variant readings in Rashi's Commentary on the Talmud, demonstrated through the tractate Erubhin," and Margolis wrote the thesis in Latin. But given the difficulty of obtaining rabbinic sources in the United States, he then shifted his focus to Semitics, and quickly gained scholarly recognition. The depth and breadth of his learning, coupled with his fine command of the English language, made him the ideal person to head up the translation effort (Gordis; Orlinsky, 1974: 305-10).

As editor-in-chief, Margolis singlehandedly prepared all of the first drafts of the Bible translation "with the aid of previous versions and with constant consultation of Jewish authorities." More than anyone originally expected, he also proceeded to deviate from the English Revised Version, sometimes on scholarly, not just religious, grounds. Only when he was done did he submit his drafts to an editorial committee consisting of six scholars, perfectly balanced so as to span both the Jewish academic world (two each from the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College, and Dropsie College) and the spectrum of Jewish observance. Cyrus Adler, well known for his administrative capabilities, chaired the translation committee, thereby ensuring that the work progressed and that the deliberations remained at least relatively peaceful.

Viewed retrospectively, the Bible translation committee, aside from Margolis himself, represented much less than the best that Jewish Bible scholarship in America had to offer. Morris Jastrow, Casper Levias, William Rosenau, Moses Bottenwieser, Julian Morgenstern, Jacob Hoschander, and, the most talented of all, Arnold Bogumil Ehrlich (Kabokoff), although recognized by their peers as qualified biblical and Semitic scholars, were conspicuously absent (several had contributed to the abortive 1895 JPS translation effort). Scholarly rabbis representing the CCAR (Samuel Schulman, David Philipson, and Hebrew Union College President Kaufmann Kohler), and wide-ranging Jewish scholars (Solomon Schechter, Joseph Jacobs, and Cyrus Adler) representing the JPS were deemed more suitable for the task. Religious politics, personality factors, facility in the English language, and, above all, the desire to move ahead expeditiously without becoming bogged down in scholarly fine points may

explain this decision; evidence is lacking. Still, and despite all good intentions, unforeseen, highly delicate problems continually cropped up.

To cite just one example, at the very end of the translation process, a fierce and quite revealing dispute broke out over how best to render Isa 9:5 (9:6 in Christian texts). The King James translation exuded Christology:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son, is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

The English Revised Version followed suit, with only minor modifications in style. Jewish translators properly insisted that nothing in Isaiah's original referred to the future (Leeser's text read "government is placed on his shoulders and his name is called . . ."), but they had trouble with the translation of "*sar šālôm*." Leeser employed the phrase "prince of peace," using the lower case to avoid (presumably) misinterpretation. Samuel Schulman of the JPS translation committee urged his colleagues to follow the same practice, since "it calls attention to the fact, that we wish to avoid any possible Christological interpretation of the phrase." Max L. Margolis and Cyrus Adler, by contrast, insisted that using the lower case would imply that the "prince of peace" was a human being, "exactly the thing we wished to avoid." Strongly worded letters flew back and forth. The final translation, clearly influenced more by the desire to instruct Christians and defend Jews than by considerations of scholarship, banished "prince of peace" altogether:

For a child is born unto us,  
A son is given unto us;  
And the government is upon his shoulder;  
And his name is called  
<sup>a</sup> Pele-joez-el-gibbor-Abi-ad-sar-shalom  
That is, Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the  
everlasting father, the Ruler of peace.<sup>2</sup>

Many similar compromises had to be hammered out by the committee before it could, as a group, pronounce itself satisfied.

Seven years after it was promised, The Holy Scriptures finally appeared in print in 1917. The event received considerable publicity and this was fitting, since the Bible would sell more copies than any other JPS volume: over one million to date. The impact of the new Bible, however, went much further. As Abraham Neuman put it retrospectively:

It was a Bible translation to which American Jews could point with pride as the creation of the Jewish consciousness on a par with similar products of the Catholic and Protestant churches. It was a peace-offering to the Jewish and the non-Jewish world. To the Jews it presented a Bible which combined the spirit of Jewish tradition with the results of biblical scholarship, ancient, mediaeval and modern. To non-Jews it opened the gateway of Jewish tradition in the interpretation of the Word of God. (156)

Neuman's comment encapsulates the major reasons why Jews felt that the enormous expenditure of time, energy, and money that the Bible translation represented had in the end been thoroughly justified. Having a Bible they could proudly call their own, the product of their community's scholars, in some cases native born and native trained, American Jews felt better both about themselves and about their relations with non-Jewish neighbors. The new Bible translation served, in a sense, like a rite of passage. With its completion, Jews looked forward hopefully toward a coming new era.

With respect to non-Jews, the community proved with its new Bible that it could successfully compete. The fact that Jews actually formed only three percent of the population made no difference. They acted as if they held complete parity with Protestants and Catholics. The others had long had official English Bibles; now Jews had an "official" Bible too. It took only a few more decades for this myth of the "triple melting pot"—Protestant-Catholic-Jew, all three equivalent—to gain acceptance on a broad level, a development of enormous importance in American and American Jewish history (Herberg).

The new Bible translation also allowed Jews to compete with Christians on the level of religious scholarship. The scholarly trappings of the English Revised Version had formerly given its christological renderings an air of authority, which Leeser's "old fashioned" Bible could not pierce. In the formidable scholarship behind the new Jewish version, however, the English Revised Version met its match. Indeed, the Jewish translators, by boasting in their preface that they "took into account the existing English versions," as well as "the standard commentaries, ancient and modern, the translations already made for the Jewish Publication Society of America, the divergent renderings from the Revised Version prepared for the Jews of England, the marginal notes of the Revised Version, . . . the changes of the American Committee of Revisers, . . . the ancient versions," "Talmudic and midrashic allusions, . . . all available Jewish commentators, [and] all the important non-Jewish commentators," implied that their translation was even better than the Christian

version. This triumphalist magniloquence was somewhat tempered by the pluralistic expression of gratitude, also found in the preface, "for the work of our non-Jewish predecessors, such as the Authorized Version with its admirable diction, which can never be surpassed, as well as for the Revised Version with its ample learning." But it still remained distant indeed from the near syncretism propounded by those who had earlier advocated that a modified version of the authorized Anglican revision be given a Jewish imprimatur.

Beyond competition lay the matter of internal Jewish pride. Solomon Schechter had long insisted that the Jew needs "his own Bible, not one mortgaged by the King James version" (*American Jewish Year Book*, 1914: 173). Though he was dead by the time that the JPS Bible appeared, its preface echoed his sentiments: "The Jew cannot afford to have his Bible translation prepared for him by others. He cannot have it as a gift, even as he cannot borrow his soul from others" (vii). More clearly than before, Jews stressed here their belief in a special, deeply spiritual Jewish relationship with the *Tanakh*, one that set Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible apart from one another. Since, as we have seen, American Christians had long before accepted the notion that the Old Testament was the Jews' "own sacred volume," for Jews to defend their separateness on this basis was thoroughly acceptable. Separateness, of course, did not imply strict exclusiveness. Indeed, the new Bible translation's preface specifically hoped that "the non-Jewish world" would "welcome" the translation. Instead, the Jewish Publication Society's Bible translation, like Leiser's before it, reflected the ambivalent nature of Jewish-Christian relations in America, the countervailing forces that on the one hand pushed Jews and Christians together and on the other hand kept them separate and distinct.

As a symbol, the new Bible also went further. It boldly announced the American Jewish community's emergence on the world stage as a center of Jewish life and creativity. "The historical necessity for translation was repeated with all the great changes in Israel's career," the new Bible's preface significantly declared. Then, with growing exuberance, it proclaimed that "the greatest change in the life of Israel during the last two generations" had taken place in the New World:

We have grown under providence both in numbers and in importance, so that we constitute now the greatest section of Israel living in a single country outside of Russia. We are only following in the footsteps of our greatest predecessors when, with the growth of our numbers, we have applied ourselves to the sacred task of preparing a new translation of the Bible into the English language, which, unless all signs fail, is to become the current speech of the majority of the children of Israel (vi).

The "sacred task" alluded to, akin to the biblical injunction that a king write for himself a copy of the law (Deut 17:18), signified legitimacy, seeming confirmation of American Jewry's momentous destiny. Along with the publication of *Jewish Encyclopedia* completed in 1906, the founding of the American Jewish Committee in the same year, and other developments in the years immediately before and after World War I, the new Bible translation reflected American Jewry's changing self-image, its growing cultural independence, its quest for preeminence. The community had arrived and was seeking the recognition that it thought it deserved.

#### *The New Jewish Publication Society Translation*

The years that followed the publication of the JPS translation confirmed the prescience of those who had predicted that a new era in American Jewish scholarship was aborning. The development of great Jewish libraries in the United States, the availability of positions in Jewish studies at American Jewish institutions of higher learning, particularly Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dropsie College, Yeshiva University, the Jewish Institute of Religion, and Hebrew Theological College, and the mass migration of Jewish scholars from Europe to America's shores, particularly in the 1930s, adumbrated America's emergence as *the* center of Jewish scholarship in the diaspora even before the destruction of European centers of Jewish scholarship in World War II. After Hitler had wreaked his terrible toll, the only question remaining was how well American Jewry would measure up.

In terms of biblical scholarship, the answer was quite well. As early as 1930, Jews comprised some nine percent of SBL members (by contrast, they formed three and one-half percent of the population), and as indicated above, these were about evenly divided between professional Jewish scholars and scholarly-inclined rabbis. To be sure, few of these scholars actually held positions in biblical studies. Most were either Semitists or scholars of later periods of Jewish life, who nevertheless maintained an abiding and serious interest in biblical studies. Still, biblical studies had acquired a greatly elevated status among American Jews, far outstripping Talmud and rabbinics, which had held pride of place among traditional Jews in Europe. Indeed, the first full set of the Talmud was not printed in America until 1944 (Eidelberg), and not a single native-born professor of Talmud could be found in this country until recently. By comparison, Bible scholarship fared well.

At least three factors account for this interest in biblical studies among American Jews. First, Reform Judaism laid heavy stress on the Bible, particularly the prophetic writings, which were held up as ethical exemplars to contemporary Jews and non-Jews alike. Having declared themselves independent of rabbinic legislation, Reform Jews sought legitimacy in the Bible, frequently using it in proof-text fashion against conversionists on the one hand and traditional Jews on the other. This, of course, sometimes made for tendentious scholarship, but it did at least direct greater Jewish attention to the Bible than had hitherto been the case (Plaut: 224–31; Agus: 282–33).

The Zionist movement was the second factor that lay behind the revival of biblical studies among American Jews. Although Zionists tended to stress different chapters from the Bible than did Reform Jews, they too turned to the Bible for inspiration and ideological justification. The Bible legitimated the Jewish claim to a homeland. Biblical archaeology linked the Jewish past and the Jewish present. Spoken Hebrew, revived by the Zionist movement, was modeled on biblical Hebrew, not rabbinic Hebrew. Secular Zionists may have disdained works of Jewish law and scorned theology, but they respected the Bible. They also respected biblical scholars.

Finally, the interfaith movement led to greater Jewish attention to the Bible. As it emerged in the post-World War I era, the interfaith movement stressed elements common to Jews and Christians, particularly the Hebrew Bible. Not only did the Bible serve to legitimate efforts aimed at promoting “better understanding,” it also frequently provided the central themes for dialogue groups and clergy institutes. Bible study led Jews and Christians to better appreciate the roots of what was termed “Judeo-Christian civilization.” Indirectly, it also stimulated Jews to deepen their own knowledge of what the Bible was all about (Sussman).

Notwithstanding American Jews’ growing interest in the Bible, Jewish Bible scholarship still remained largely the preserve of those born and trained abroad. There were already some important exceptions to this rule, among them Julian Morgenstern, Sheldon Blank, H. L. Ginsberg, and Harry M. Orlinsky (the last two were born in Canada, and all but Orlinsky received their advanced degrees abroad), but as late as 1948 only six of twenty-five prominent American Jewish scholars in the field of Bible, as enumerated by Ralph Marcus, could actually be termed both native-born and native-trained—the last time this would be true. The growth of academic opportunities in the postwar period, coupled with the coming-of-age of American-born children of immigrants soon resulted in a prepon-

derance of locally produced scholars. Of thirty-one Jewish contributors to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), for example, all but four were Americans. In the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, published in Jerusalem in 1972, the divisional editor, associate divisional editor, and half of the departmental editors in Bible were all American Jews, and the other half was Israelis—an accurate reflection of the two mutually interacting centers of Jewish Bible scholarship in the world today.

This latter point deserves more notice than it is usually given. There exists today a huge and ever-increasing body of high caliber scholarly literature in the Hebrew language produced by Israeli-trained scholars, mainly native born, who think and express themselves naturally in Hebrew, and whose researches appear in a variety of Hebrew scholarly journals, in the various annuals of the five universities, in the multivolumed *Encyclopaedia Biblica Hebraica*, in a large number of doctoral dissertations, and in the numerous volumes turned out annually by Israeli publishing houses. The Israelis are in daily contact with the land, its geography, topography, and geology, its climatic conditions, the nature of its soil, its flora and fauna, its natural resources. Archaeology of the biblical period is a national Israeli pastime. Inevitably, all this must leave, and it surely does, its impress on the direction and coloration of biblical scholarship in Israel. The history of the Hebrew language, the history of the land (especially geopolitical conditions), biblical history, military history, the realia of biblical life, the literary artistry of the narrative, masoretic studies—all these topics are fruitfully pursued with a vigor and a passion that is characteristic of those exploring their own civilization on their and its native soil.

American Jewish scholars take it for granted that a knowledge of modern Hebrew is today as essential a tool of scholarship as is the ability to handle French and German. They are in continuous communication with their Israeli colleagues on social, intellectual, and scholarly levels. They send their students to study in Israel. There is frequent intercontinental travel in both directions. There is no doubt about the powerful impact that Israeli biblical scholarship will increasingly have on its American Jewish counterpart. The point may be illustrated by random reference to one aspect of research that is a specifically and typically Jewish contribution to the field, namely, the study of the biblical cult.

That nineteenth-century German Protestant theological presuppositions colored the study of this subject and predetermined the parameters and approach of research everywhere is hardly deniable.

Since Yehezkel Kaufmann reopened the topic, Menahem Haran in Israel and Baruch Levine and Jacob Milgrom in the United States have powerfully challenged the prevailing theories and reconstructions. They have shown how the sacrificial system, the laws of purity and impurity, and the notions of sin and atonement must all be understood within a broad framework of religious ideas, inside a structure of biblical theology and law. They have demonstrated that the pure and the impure are complementary to the moral and the immoral and are not in opposition to them, and they have been progressively uncovering the ethical supports upon which the sacrificial system was raised. Furthermore, very constructive use has been made of rabbinic sources in the exploration of these themes. In short, Jewish scholars would emphasize that biblical theology is not just story and prophecy but is equally law and cult.

Another development that needs to be recounted is that Jewish Bible scholarship in America is no longer restricted to those who teach at Jewish-sponsored institutions of higher learning. A large percentage of those presently engaged in Jewish studies generally, and biblical studies in particular, now teach at secular institutions—a function of the proliferation of Jewish studies during the 1960s and 1970s. Over ninety North American colleges and universities currently offer undergraduate concentrations in Jewish studies and almost fifty sponsor programs of graduate study. The Association for Jewish Studies, the professional organization devoted to the advancement of the academic standing and scope of Judaic studies, boasts one thousand members (1982), including emeriti, associate members, and students. Many of these members specialize in the Bible, as evidenced both by the large number of sessions devoted to biblical subjects at the association's annual meetings and by a survey of the fourteen largest graduate programs in Jewish studies in North America (1980), which found that "Bible and Ancient Near East" was the most popular of all fields of specialization for Ph.D. candidates. Harry M. Orlinsky (1974: 331), who has monitored the state of the field for many years, summarized succinctly the situation as he found it in the early seventies, and his words hold equally true a decade later: "Jewish biblical scholarship . . . is currently flourishing in America-Canada as never before."

The Jewish Publication Society's new translation of the Bible, completed in 1982, stands as one of the great achievements of modern American Jewish Bible scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Appearing as it did in the very midst of the Jewish cultural efflorescence already described, a burgeoning Jewish religious revival (Sarna, 1982), and heightened nation-

wide interest in the Bible and its teachings, it seemed a most natural development, one almost to have been expected. In fact, however, the Bible translation was planned long before any of these developments were envisaged.

Although the full history of the New Jewish Publication Society's translation cannot be recounted here, we need look no further than Harry Orlinsky's famous 1953 address at the annual meeting of the Jewish Publication Society—"Wanted: A New English Translation of the Bible" (Orlinsky, 1974: 349–62)—to see that the original call for a new Jewish translation of Scripture stemmed from many of the same motivations that had precipitated earlier undertakings. For one thing, the 1917 translation had become, in Orlinsky's words, "no longer as intelligible as it should be." Old-fashioned King James English had lost the last of its appeal; what was needed, Orlinsky said, was a "simplified and modernized" style and vocabulary, "without undue loss of majesty and dignity." In addition, Orlinsky pointed to "the increased knowledge which archaeology and refined methodology have made available." New discoveries had cleared up old mysteries; the 1917 translation no longer reflected the best scholarship available. Finally, and perhaps what was most important, a new Protestant translation had appeared, the Revised Standard Version (1952), and a new Catholic translation (published as the New American Bible) had been announced. Just as the 1885 English Revised Version stimulated Jews to prove that they could do as well or better, so too did these new revisions. The new Protestant Bible still contained Christological elements (a capital "S" in "spirit," for example), and it still remained Christian in origin. "The Jew," Orlinsky said, echoing Max Margolis before him, "cannot afford to have his Bible translation prepared for him by others" (361).

In retrospect, Orlinsky has admitted (1970: 10) that there was "strong sentiment among several important members of the Jewish Publication Society's Board of Trustees" for the society to issue only a "modest revision of . . . the Revised Standard Version of 1952" (1970: 10). It was predictable, however, that those sentiments went unheeded. Most American Jews, in the 1950s as before, used the Bible to demonstrate their apartness, their insistence on a Jewish identity separate from Protestants and Catholics. Consequently, in 1955, after years of discussion, the Jewish Publication Society finally set up a committee of seven—three scholars, three rabbis (one representing each of the major wings of American Judaism), and the editor of the JPS translation, Solomon Grayzel—and mandated it to translate the Bible afresh from a Jewish point of view.



The composition of the new translation committee is instructive. Two of its three scholars, Harry Orlinsky (editor-in-chief for the Pentateuch) and H. L. Ginsberg, were born in North America, and the third, Ephraim A. Speiser, immigrated to the United States in his teens. Orlinsky and Ginsberg, who taught respectively at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Jewish Theological Seminary, both in New York, held chairs in Bible. Speiser, who taught at the University of Pennsylvania, was Professor of Semitic Languages and Literatures. All three of the rabbis on the committee (Max Arzt, Bernard Bamberger, and Harry Freedman) trained in the United States. Grayzel, an accomplished historian, immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve and received all his degrees in this country. The contrast with the earlier translation committee, which had a much larger number of immigrants and only one biblical scholar, Margolis himself, is striking indeed.

The mechanics of producing the Torah translation also were quite different from what they had been in Margolis's day. Harry Orlinsky has described the process in a recent interview (1982: 39–40):

(W)e would work one day, usually a Thursday, usually in my office at the Jewish Institute of Religion in Manhattan. . . . I prepared the draft of the entire *Chumash*. I hardly ever would prepare more than two or three chapters ahead of the committee so that I would be able to benefit from the decisions that the committee members reached. Unlike the Revised Standard Version, I would prepare a draft of a chapter or part of a chapter with a tremendous amount of commentary culled from the readings and translations from sources going back to the ancient Near East, the Septuagint, Targum, Vulgate, Syriac translation, Talmud, the medieval commentators, medieval grammarians, Sa'adia's translation, the rationalist Protestant translation of the 16th century, the Catholic, and of course, the modern translations. So that, for example, when I handed in the draft of the first five verses of Genesis, the first day of creation—and believe me I worked much harder than God did, the first day anyway—I had a half a page of the text and about 12 or 13 pages of all kinds of notes for my other six colleagues to consult. So that they didn't have to, unless they wanted to, go and examine these things. I would send that off to the JPS where it would be run off and sent out to my colleagues. They, in turn, would react, verse by verse or word by word, with counter suggestions. They would type that up and send that into JPS where, again, it would be run off and sent out, so that when we got together to do Genesis, and then all the way through, we would have the draft, we would have the comments of each of the committee members, as many as had reacted. We had it all before us, and we could all study it before we came. On the other hand, however, once we got together, the argument and the discussion pro and con would go far beyond what anybody had on any sheet of paper. We were very stimulated by the oral arguments back and forth. Not infrequently what came out as our final draft was something that none of us had envisaged to begin with. It was

often quite different. Maybe not always necessarily better, but different. More than once, I was convinced that my draft was not as good as I had thought originally—but my committee colleagues would disagree with me and outvote me in favor of my draft. Not infrequently, it was the other way around. No one is every fully satisfied with a translation because no one ever gets all his ideas accepted. It is a compromise translation.

Two principles underlay every facet of this translation process. First, the translators insisted on basing their work strictly on the original Hebrew Masoretic text. Although they consulted other versions, translations, and commentaries, they refused to see themselves as “revisers” of any previous translation, not even the previous Jewish one. In this they openly distinguished their effort from that of the Revised Standard Version, which *was* a revision in name and in fact.

Second, the translators insisted on rendering their text into English idiomatically, rather than mechanically and literally. Convinced that word-for-word translation did violence to the spirit of the Hebrew original, the translators permitted themselves wider latitude than their English language predecessors ever had. They spoke of their fidelity to the deeper meaning of the biblical text, in contradistinction to the surface meaning, which they in some cases felt free to ignore.

In 1962 the new translation of the Torah appeared, after seven years of unstinting labor. (A revised version appeared in 1967, and to date over 350,000 copies have been sold.) The preface paid ritualistic tribute to “the work of previous translators,” and praised earlier scholars. But having done that, the editors insisted that this translation—*The Torah: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*—was not only different but better. In an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, for example, Harry Orlinsky argued that the new translation's rendering of the initial verses in Genesis was the first “correct rendering”: “We are now, finally, in a position to understand exactly what the writer of the first three verses of the Bible meant to convey to his readers” (1974: 402).

Orlinsky also boasted, both in his article and in his published *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, that the new translation's policy on textual criticism (“translate the Hebrew text directly, and offer in a footnote the proposed emendation and its translation”) was “best,” and that its manner of translating Hebrew particles improved upon all that preceded it. To his mind, the New Jewish Version marked “a complete break with the past history of Bible translation.” He compared it to Spinoza's philosophical revolution in that it “set out to discard” a 2,200 year tradition “of literal, mechanical translation,” in order to capture the text's original meaning. Speaking in the name of the entire translation committee, he hoped that this “break with



the past" would "set a new pattern which authorized Protestant and Catholic translations of the future will tend to follow" (1970: 12-14).

The trailblazing image that Orlinsky's comments conjured up found no parallel in earlier American Jewish versions. Expressions of pride and distinctiveness, claims of superiority, evocations of destiny, and hopes for Christian approval had, as we have seen, all been heard before, but in no previous translation had American Jews so triumphantly expressed the belief that Protestants and Catholics might follow their lead. That, as Orlinsky himself realized reflected American Jewry's heightened self-confidence, its "verve, growing maturity, and optimism," "its new status . . . unprecedented in the two and one-half millennia of Jewish Diaspora life" (1970: 11, 14). Whereas the 1917 translation announced American Jews' cultural emergence, the new translation displayed heady awareness of their cultural influence and impact, their capacity as innovators and leaders on the national and religious scenes. The Prophets translation, published in 1978 by the same committee with H. L. Ginsberg as senior editor, though E. A. Speiser was no longer alive, carried forward this mood of self-confidence in its very language. It then went further, boldly proposing in footnotes a host of possible emendations designed to render texts judged to be corrupt more intelligible than they had ever been before.

Having monitored the pace of the Bible translation for a full decade, the trustees of the Jewish Publication Society realized, in 1965, that the undertaking would be both more arduous and more time-consuming than anyone had originally envisaged. Determined that the translation should nevertheless appear within "a reasonable time," they decided to create a new committee, charged with the task of translating the third division of the Bible, known as the Kethubim (the Writings), with the exception of the five Megilloth, which had already been translated by the original committee.

In 1966, the new committee, younger by a full generation than the earlier one, and overwhelmingly American trained, came into being. Like the earlier committee, it consisted of three scholars (Moshe Greenberg, Jonas C. Greenfield, and Nahum M. Sarna), three rabbis, one representing each major wing of American Judaism (Saul Leeman, Martin Rozenberg, and David Shapiro), and the editor of the Jewish Publication Society, later better-known as a bestselling novelist, Chaim Potok. It is revealing that all of the scholars selected taught at secular universities, a fact that reflected both the growing acceptance of Jewish studies as a legitimate academic discipline and the increased willingness on the part of universities to permit biblical studies to be taught by Jews. It is also revealing that two of the three

scholars on the committee (Greenberg and Greenfield) eventually assumed positions at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This illustrates the point made above that American Jewish Bible scholarship has in the last three decades been in close touch with its Israeli counterpart on social, intellectual, and scholarly levels. The fact that the new committee met in Jerusalem on numerous occasions both symbolized and reinforced this spirit of harmony.

In its procedures, the Kethubim translation committee generally adhered to the practices established for the translation of the Torah and Prophets. Each professional scholar undertook the preparation of an annotated draft, which was circulated to all concerned, and everyone then had an opportunity to criticize the rendering and to offer detailed suggestions at the regular, periodic gatherings of the committee. In its style, however, the new committee struck a decidedly more cautious and conservative stance. Unlike the older committee, it stressed (in the preface) the inherent difficulties in translating the Hebrew, and the "as yet imperfect understanding of the language of the Bible." It refused to hazard emendations, and its favorite footnote read "meaning of Heb. uncertain." Instead of exuding confidence, it admitted right from the beginning that its translation had "not conveyed the fullness of the Hebrew, with its ambiguities, its overtones, and the richness that it carries from centuries of use." It made no triumphalistic claims.

From a broader perspective, the scholarly caution expressed in the translation of the Writings may be more in harmony with the new mood that overtook Americans generally in the 1970s and 1980s, a mood at once both more hesitant and less self-confident. Americans seemed less self-assured in 1982, when the translation of the Writings appeared, than two decades earlier, at the time of the publication of the Torah. The translation of the Writings seems to have reflected this fact, even if those involved may not have realized it.

In light of past experience this should not prove surprising. As we have seen, a Bible translation is much more than just a scholarly effort to render a sacred text into a form easier for all to understand. Since it is created by human beings, a translation is also a child of history, a product of its times. It cannot escape the impact of contemporary concerns.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

/1/ Leeser, like Rabbi Morris Raphall, believed that the Bible sanctioned slavery but mandated better treatment of the slave than was practiced in the South (*Occident*, 1861: 267-68, 274; Korn, 1970: 15-55; D. Davis, 1975: 523-56).

/2/ The New Jewish Publication Society translation reads, "For a child has been born to us, /A son has been given us. /And authority has settled on his shoulders. /He has been named/"The Mighty God is planning grace; /The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler."

/3/ The Yehoash translation of the Bible into Yiddish, by Solomon Bloomgarden, first published in 1937, is a tribute to Yiddish scholarship in the United States, but stands outside the scope of this essay; see Orlinsky (1974: 418-22).

/4/ Part of the research for this essay was supported by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

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