

## CHAPTER 32

---

# THE BIBLE AND JUDAISM IN AMERICA

---

JONATHAN D. SARNA

WHEREVER Jews migrate, the Bible follows them, for Jewish communal life is impossible without it. So late in 1655, perhaps a year after the first Jewish communal settlement in New Amsterdam (today New York), a Sephardic merchant named Abraham de Lucena (d. ca. 1670) arrived in town bearing a Torah, a handwritten parchment text of the Pentateuch, rolled up into a scroll, borrowed from the Jewish community of Amsterdam. The presence of this Torah scroll served as a defining symbol of Jewish communal life and culture. It created a sense of sacred space.<sup>1</sup>

Wherever Jews later created communities in North America, they either brought Torah scrolls with them from home, which is what the Jews who emigrated as a group to Savannah did in 1733, or they quickly borrowed Torah scrolls from elsewhere, as the Jews of Newport did in 1760. Some individual Jews are known to have brought privately owned Torah scrolls with them to the New World. Jewish religious life in smaller eighteenth-century colonial Jewish settlements like Lancaster and Reading revolved around these privately owned Torahs. Whenever a prayer quorum or *minyan* could be gathered, usually in the owner's private home, the presence of the Torah scroll defined the worship service as authentic, for the scroll contains the sacred teachings of Jewish religious life.<sup>2</sup>

While the ritualized public reading of the Torah from an ornamented scroll naturally focused attention on the first five books of the Bible, which Jews continue to privilege and know best, some early American Jews also possessed printed copies of all twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, imported from Europe. Others relied upon less expensive Christian editions of the Bible in English, even though these contained the Jewish Bible and New Testament bound together in one volume, according to the Christian canon, with headings that highlighted how the "Old Testament" prefigured the New.<sup>3</sup>

Millions of Christian Americans likewise possessed such Bibles, which they read, pondered, preached from, and debated. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, historian Mark Noll shows, belief in the "Bible alone" (*sola scriptura*) "constituted an anchor of religious authority in a churning sea of demographic, social and political turmoil."<sup>4</sup>

Even if they owned the same Bibles, however, American Jews never viewed them in precisely the same way as their neighbors did. They accorded sanctity only to the books that

formed part of the Jewish Bible, resisted Christological interpretations, and recalled that their own tradition ordered the books of scripture in a different way than did Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Jewish biblical exegesis, by its very existence, complicated American Christian ideas of following the "Bible alone." If, after all, there were multiple texts and interpretations of the Bible, how could all of them be true? The *sola scriptura* concept, moreover, ran counter to Jewish teachings concerning the "Oral Torah." Judaism holds that there is a wealth of tradition preserved by the ancient rabbis of the Talmud that had been handed down at Sinai but not found in the written biblical text itself.

The "hidden meaning" of biblical texts even underlay many a synagogue name in early America. For example, Shearith Israel, Mikveh Israel, and Jeshuat Israel (the official names of synagogues in New York, Philadelphia, Savannah, and Newport) all reflected mystical understandings of the biblical text. Drawing upon the language of Jeremiah (14:8), Micah (2:12), and Psalms (14:7), they all hinted that the dispersion of Israel's remnant to the four corners of the world (including the New World) heralded the long-awaited ingathering of far-scattered Jews to the Land of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

For their part, Christians viewed Jews as "keepers of the Old Testament" who obstinately misunderstood the Jewish Bible's central message. William McGuffey's *Eclectic Third Reader* (1836-37), for example, taught a generation of American schoolchildren that the "Old Testament" was the Jews' "own sacred volume, which contained the most extraordinary predictions concerning the infidelity of their nation, and the rise, progress, and extensive prevalence of Christianity."<sup>7</sup> To Jews, of course, such Christological readings of the Jewish Bible were anathema.

Simultaneously, then, the Bible served both as a bridge and as a boundary marker between Jews and Christians in America. It linked the two great faiths around commonly cherished biblical teachings. And it demarcated differences over what the term "Bible" comprehends, and how the Bible's sacred words should be understood.

The vast majority of American Jews, until comparatively recent times, privileged the Jewish Bible over the Talmud, which few could read and which would not even be printed in the United States until 1919.<sup>8</sup> This distinguished American Jews from the mass of Eastern European Jews, whose educational priorities were precisely the reverse. In nineteenth-century America, it was the Bible and not the Talmud that bound Jews together and linked them to their neighbors. Leading Jews, like the editor, politician, and dramatist Mordecai Noah (1785-1851), believed that God's word, as found in the Jewish Bible, was "our safest guide." He once advised the American Jewish religious leader Isaac Leeser (1806-1868) to "shut the Talmud and open the Bible."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, it was a Jew, Jonathan (Jonas) Horwitz (d. 1852), who, in 1812, "proposed the publication of an edition of the Hebrew Bible," the first of its kind in the United States. Many Christian clergy subscribed to the project, and it was brought to fruition two years later by the Scottish printer, Thomas Dobson.<sup>10</sup> In 1826, another Jew, printer Solomon Jackson (d. ca. 1847), proposed the publication of a Hebrew-English linear edition of the Pentateuch. Six leading Jews and three Christian clergy recommended the project, one of the latter highlighting the fact that the "author and editor belong to the *literal* family of Abraham."<sup>11</sup>

While Jackson's volume never appeared, Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia, the foremost traditionalist Jewish leader in America for over three decades, published numerous editions of the Bible, both in English and in Hebrew, during his lifetime. They formed part of his larger project aimed at educating American Jews so that they might understand and preserve their

religion while luxuriating in the freedom that characterized the American setting. Having witnessed how effectively Christian evangelicals harnessed the printing press to spread the Gospel, and having experienced the joy as a young immigrant of seeing an article of his own in defense of the Jews widely distributed and reprinted, Leeser embraced the printed word with a vengeance.

Nobody in American Jewish life grasped the religious and educational potential of the printing press sooner or more effectively than Leeser. He wrote, translated, and edited more than one hundred volumes, including textbooks, prayer books, polemics, sermons, a wide-ranging journal (*The Occident*), a handsome five-volume Hebrew-English edition of the Pentateuch (1845), the first vocalized Hebrew Bible (*Biblia Hebraica*) ever printed in America (1848), and most significantly of all, the world's first full-scale English translation of the Hebrew Bible by a member of the Jewish community: *The Twenty-four Books of the Holy Scriptures; Carefully Translated According to the Massoretic Text, on the Basis of the English Version, After the Best Jewish Authorities; and Supplied with Short Explanatory Notes* (1853).<sup>12</sup>

The "Leeser Bible," as it came to be known, signified the arrival of Jews on the American scene. By the time it appeared, the number of Jews in the United States—most of them recent immigrants from Central Europe—was approaching 150,000, and Jewish communities had sprung up from coast to coast. Just as the construction of new synagogues announced the presence of Jews in places where none had previously reached, so too did the new Leeser Bible. No longer, Leeser exclaimed in 1856, would Jews have to defer to a translation authorized by "a deceased king of England [King James] who certainly was no prophet." His translation, made for Jews "by one of themselves," became in many ways, a Declaration of Religious Independence.<sup>13</sup>

Leeser's translation not only freed Jews from their reliance upon Christian translations of the Bible, it also taught the Christians who consulted it much about the Jewish view of scripture. Indeed, Leeser's biographer, Lance Sussman, characterized the translation and accompanying notes as nothing less than "an *Apologia Judaica*." It highlighted the views of traditional and modern Jewish Bible exegetes, rebutted Christian renderings that Jews found offensive, particularly in the case of controversial passages such as "until Shiloh come" (Gen. 49:10), and, as Sussman documented, "frequently explained biblical passages that might have appeared objectionable to a modern person in a way that made them more acceptable."<sup>14</sup> Modern critics have understandably complained that "Leeser's English was rather wooden and at many points essentially devoid of literary distinction."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, once Leeser's text appeared in a more affordable quarto edition with abbreviated notes, it stood as the standard Anglo-Jewish translation on both sides of the Atlantic for more than six decades.

Thanks in part to Leeser, many in America came to look upon Jews as experts on everything connected to the Hebrew Bible. When controversies arose over such topics as temperance and slavery, the Jewish view of scripture was often solicited, especially since leading rabbis could read its text in the original Hebrew and cite a chain of traditional Jewish authorities concerning what that text meant.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of slavery, Rabbi Morris Raphall (1798-1868) of New York, an ordained Orthodox rabbi with impressive university credentials, delivered a celebrated address in early 1861 that tried to prove, based on learned quotations from the Hebrew Bible, (1) that slavery had existed since antiquity; (2) that it was "no sin" as slave property was expressly

placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments; and (3) that the slave should be considered a person with rights "not conflicting with the lawful exercise of the rights of his owner." He argued that this "Bible view" of slavery offered a sound basis for sectional reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> Raphall's address echoed familiar Protestant arguments, but nevertheless received wide circulation, coming as it did from a learned rabbi. One enthusiastic Protestant minister was so persuaded by the rabbi's close textual reading, based on the Hebrew original, that he declared the rabbi's lecture to be "as true almost as the word of God itself."<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, opponents of slavery, significant Jewish leaders among them, condemned Raphall's literal reading of the biblical text and insisted on a more contextualized reading or one that focused on the spirit rather than on the letter of Divine law. Rabbi David Einhorn (1808-1879), a Reform rabbi and fierce opponent of slavery, argued vehemently, for example, that "the spirit of the law of God" enshrined in the creation story, where "God created man in his image" (Gen. 1:27), "can never approve of slavery."<sup>19</sup> What is significant is that both sides in this debate appealed to the Jewish Bible, as interpreted by rabbis who could read it in Hebrew and were familiar with its traditional commentaries.

Americans continued to look to Jews as experts on the Hebrew Bible long after the Civil War. Popular nineteenth-century Bible magazines, such as *The Old Testament Student*, welcomed Jewish participation and brought Jewish teachings concerning the Bible to non-Jewish readers. Chautauqua and other lecture forums regularly featured Jewish speakers on biblical subjects. Thanks to the Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff (1847-1920), Harvard University created its Semitics Museum and funded the first American archeological excavation in Palestine, which Schiff saw as the fountainhead of Semitic civilization.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, in many parts of the country, Christians consulted with knowledgeable Jews concerning what the Hebrew of the Jewish Bible originally meant and how Jews understood difficult biblical passages.<sup>21</sup>

These developments went hand-in-hand with the first flickers of Jewish Bible scholarship on American shores. These pioneering Jewish Bible scholars, trained in Europe, 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, and with the exception of Michael Heilprin (1823-1888) were active rabbis. Some, like Isidor Kalisch (1816-1886) and Isaac M. Wise (1819-1900), sought to strengthen the hands of the faithful against missionaries and higher biblical critics. Others, like Benjamin Szold (1829-1902), whose commentary on Job was the first commentary on a book of the Bible by an American Jew, wrote primarily for his peers abroad; he has been described as a "conservative critic." Michael Heilprin, meanwhile, enthusiastically promoted biblical criticism and did much to familiarize Americans of all faiths with the fruits of German scholarship. Perhaps the most creative of all the early Jewish Bible scholars in America was the eccentric Arnold Bogumil Ehrlich (1848-1919). His scholarly writings in German and Hebrew, replete with suggested emendations of the biblical text, continue to be widely consulted.<sup>22</sup>

The lonely efforts of these scholarly pioneers contrast with the pediatric knowledge of the Bible that characterized the mass of American Jews at that time. Like so many of their Protestant and Catholic peers, they revered the Bible more than they actually knew it. They formally studied the Bible for only a few years as youngsters in supplementary schools that met mostly on Sundays.

The textbooks Jews employed to teach the Bible were also similar to Christian volumes. Instead of word-for-word translations from the original Hebrew, common in traditional

Jewish pedagogy, American Jewish textbooks mostly relied upon catechisms with posed questions and memorized answers, as well as moralistic Bible stories (including folk legends such as the story of Abraham smashing his father's idols), and, for older children, abridged translations known as "junior Bibles." For all that these resembled Christian textbooks in form, the Jewish texts defiantly stood their ground against Christian interpretive traditions. They emphasized Jewish interpretations in place of Christian ones and sought to ensure that Jewish children identified the Bible as a Jewish book and the source of Jewish law. For example, the popular Protestant *Child's Scripture Question Book* (1853) depicted the prophet Malachi as foretelling the coming of John the Baptist, "to prepare the way before Christ." Its closely related Jewish counterpart, *Elementary Introduction to the Scriptures for the Use of Hebrew Children* (1854) depicted Malachi instead as one who came to "reform the people" and who foretold the coming of "Elijah the prophet."<sup>23</sup>

The mass migration of over two million Eastern European Jews to America's shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought to America a community of Jews who knew and respected the Jewish Bible; many of them could read it in the original. Their numbers elevated the American Jewish community into one of the world's largest, with a new responsibility to advance Jewish learning at all levels. Publication in New York of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901-6), a grand summary of Jewish scholarship, reflected this responsibility and heralded American Jewry's cultural arrival. The encyclopedia devoted substantial attention to biblical subjects, making available to lay English readers traditional Jewish approaches to the Bible as well as the fruits of modern critical scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

The Jewish Publication Society (JPS), established in 1888, likewise committed itself to advancing knowledge of the Bible among Jews.<sup>25</sup> It was born amid signs of a Jewish religious revival, including newly popular adult education classes focused on the Bible sponsored by synagogues and Jewish organizations. The Leeser Bible failed to satisfy these eager students. In part, it was too expensive, many times more costly than the Bibles sold by the Protestant-sponsored American Bible Society. Even more important, in comparison with the sparkingly up-to-date scholarship of the 1885 "Revised Version" of the King James Bible, published in England, it seemed musty and obsolete. So, in 1893, the JPS began a long effort to produce a new Jewish translation of the Bible into English. After several false starts, the project came to successful fruition under the editorship of the Russian-born Max Margolis (1866-1932), one of America's foremost biblical scholars.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than basing his translation on the Leeser Bible or the original Hebrew text, Margolis began with the state-of-the-art Revised Version. He greatly admired its sound scholarship and majestic English. He then introduced changes—upward of 40,000 of them, by his count—to scrub away Christological readings, bow to traditional Jewish interpretations of scripture, and correct what he saw as scholarly or literary errors made by the Protestant translators. A committee of six scholars and rabbis—some traditional, some liberal—reviewed Margolis's draft and introduced further changes. Finally, in 1917, the translation was published to great fanfare. Along with 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, and its quest for preeminence. America's Jewish population had surpassed three million thanks to rapid immigration, and the community's scholarly reputation was growing.

A majority of the members of the translation committee for the new Bible, including Margolis, had received at least an important part of their formal Jewish education in the

United States, a signal of how quickly serious study of the Jewish Bible in the country had developed.<sup>27</sup> "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," the translators boasted in their preface.<sup>28</sup> Looking back, in 1940, historian Abraham Neuman grasped the magnitude of their achievement: "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. . . . 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 the non-Jews it opened the gateway of Jewish tradition in the interpretation of the Word of God."<sup>29</sup>

The new Jewish Bible translation spawned renewed interest in the Bible at the popular level. The *American Jewish Year Book*, in 1923, provided a list of some sixty volumes on Bible and Biblical Literature, which it described as "standard books in English" on the subject, numbers of them written by American Jews. The Jewish Chautauqua Society produced educational materials on the Bible for teachers. Educator Joseph Magil (1871-1945) created a series of linear Bibles to facilitate word-by-word translations from biblical Hebrew into Yiddish or English. For Yiddish-speaking Jews, the poet Yehoash Solomon Bloomgarden (d. 1927) also produced a lyrical Yiddish translation of the Bible ("the greatest single achievement of American Yiddish poetry" according to David Roskies) that began to appear serially in the New York daily *Der Tog* from 1922.<sup>30</sup>

Popular interest in the Bible soon spilled over into American Jewish literature and popular culture. The poet Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966), for example, wrote a series of dramatic monologues expounding on the biblical stories of Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob. The prolific novelist Sholem Asch (1880-1957) produced, late in life, novels on Moses and Isaiah. Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976) penned *By the Waters of Manhattan*, as if reimagining Psalm 137 for a new diaspora land. Later, under the influence of the Holocaust, novelists like Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) drew upon themes from the book of Job.<sup>31</sup>

Filmmakers likewise turned to biblical themes. The world's first Yiddish talkie film, produced in the United States by Joseph Green (1900-1996), was entitled *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* (1932). Other Yiddish-language films featured titles like *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, recycled from biblical epics originally produced for the silent screen. These stories from the Jewish Bible proved popular with Jewish audiences. They reinforced Judaism's central narratives and helped to legitimate film as an acceptable form of mass entertainment.<sup>32</sup>

The religious revival that followed World War II led to a series of film epics from the Jewish Bible for broader English-speaking audiences, notably such titles as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *Esther and the King* (1960). All three, according to film scholar Patricia Erens, employed biblical themes to "provide a commentary on the recent suffering of the Jewish people, their miraculous survival and their hope for reconstitution in the new State of Israel." To date, more than fifty films based on themes from the Jewish Bible have been produced in the United States. Their subjects, selected both for their dramatic power and for their familiarity to viewers, include widely known stories from Genesis and Exodus, the tale of Samson and Delilah from the Book of Judges, episodes from the lives of King David and King Solomon, and the thrilling story of Esther.<sup>33</sup>

The postwar revival also witnessed new interest on the part of Jews in the study of the Jewish Bible, paralleling renewed Christian interest in the "Book of Books." Rabbis in the 1950s spoke of the need "to reclaim the Bible for the Jews." Sales of the 1917 Jewish Bible translation boomed. A new Hebrew-English Bible was produced. An introduction to the Jewish Bible by Rabbi Mortimer Cohen (1894-1972), entitled *Pathways through the Bible* (1946), illustrated with Jewish themed "biblical pictures" by artist Arthur Szyk (1894-1951), became a Jewish bestseller. Synagogue Bible classes and home study programs (some of them linked to Cohen's book) proliferated. Bible-themed art books and illustrated Jewish editions of individual books of the Bible, such as *Jonah and Ruth*, sold thousands of copies.<sup>34</sup>

Against this background, the JPS decided, in 1953, to undertake a new Jewish translation of the Bible, on different principles than the 1917 translation.<sup>35</sup> Protestants had produced the highly successful Revised Standard Version (1952) and Catholics had likewise begun to translate the Bible anew (their New American Bible appeared in 1970). The Jewish translation promised to take full advantage of all modern scholarship, to render the Bible into modern (as opposed to King James) English, and to print the Bible according to the highest standards of contemporary typographical design. Harry Orlinsky (1908-1992), Professor of Bible at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, spearheaded the new effort. He had been the lone Jew on the committee that produced the Protestant Revised Standard Version, and he insisted that the Jewish People now needed an up-to-date English translation of the Bible as well.<sup>36</sup>

The scholars and rabbis (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) who worked alongside him on the new translation were, for the most part, American-born and trained. Several taught at major universities, reflecting 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. The goal of these rabbis and scholars was to produce a Jewish Bible translation, based on the canonical Hebrew text and sensitive to Jewish interpretive tradition, that would be respected by Jews and non-Jews alike.

That, in the end, proved easier said than done. The committee members' problems, perennial ones for Bible translators, concerned matters of principle. Should they strive above all to explain each word faithfully, or should they favor, instead, an idiomatic translation? Should they be guided by what they thought the Bible meant, or only by what the text actually said? Should their highest priority be accuracy, readability, or majesty of expression? And what about when ancient versions, like the Greek Septuagint, preserved variant readings? Might those be substituted for the traditional Hebrew text if they seemed to make more sense?

On the final point, the committee was unequivocal. Unlike its Catholic and Protestant counterparts, it undertook faithfully to follow the traditional (Masoretic) text. Every word was translated from the Hebrew original. Where committee members deviated from their Jewish predecessors was in their enthusiastic embrace of the idiomatic over the mechanical word-for-word translations that once had been normative. Instead of "Laban departed and returned unto his place," for example, the new translation crisply substituted, "Laban left on his journey homeward" (Gen. 32:1). Still, achieving agreement and compromise took years. The translation of Genesis alone went through thirteen different revisions before it won final committee approval.

When published in 1963, the translation of the Torah (Pentateuch) was warmly welcomed by Catholic and Protestant as well as Jewish scholars. Its appearance was judged an

important historical event and it sold briskly. Harry Orlinsky went so far as to boast that it marked “a revolutionary breakthrough in Bible translation.”<sup>37</sup>

The translation’s opening words marked it as distinctive: “When God began to create,” rather than “In the beginning.” The translation avoided obsolete words and phrases and sought to render Hebrew idioms by means of their normal and most accurate English equivalents, regardless of how familiar the “standard” English of earlier translations was. In the Ten Commandments, for example, it rendered the third commandment as “You shall not *swear falsely* by the name of the LORD your God” (Exod. 20:7). The more familiar “take in vain,” like other familiar but now discarded renderings, appeared only in a footnote. It also banished mechanical renderings of Hebrew particles, and archaic words like “thou” and “thy.” In keeping with the linguistic spirit of the original Hebrew as well as contemporary usage, even God became a “You.”<sup>38</sup>

Twenty more years would pass before the JPS celebrated the translation of the whole Bible in 1982, and that only came about because a second committee of translators, consisting of younger scholars, was recruited to translate the third section of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Writings. Three years later, in 1985, all three parts of the Bible translation, with revisions, were brought together in one volume entitled *Tanakh*—from the Hebrew acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Kethuvim* (Writings). That title, carefully chosen, underscored the Jewishness of the new translation. A “Judeo-Christian” title like “The Holy Scriptures” was consciously rejected. *Tanakh* thus encapsulated an important message about the JPS Bible translation as a whole: that even though Jews had the Hebrew Bible in common with their Christian neighbors, they understood much of it differently, and even called it by a different name. A Hebrew-English edition of *Tanakh* followed in 1999.

*Tanakh*, unlike its Protestant and Catholic counterparts, was never an “authorized” Jewish translation. Although widely accepted by English-speaking Jews, no Jewish ecclesiastical body ever formally authorized it. Nor has it escaped competition and criticism.

Fervently Orthodox Jews, for example, criticized the translation for privileging modern scholarship over sacred tradition, and for deviating from classical Jewish interpretations of difficult words and passages. In 1996, *Mesorah* (“tradition”) publications issued a rival translation, often called the *Stone Tanach* after the Cleveland family that funded it, that advertised itself as “faithful to the interpretation of the Sages and to the classic commentators.” Part of the “ArtScroll” series, characterized by fidelity to Orthodox tradition and innovative formatting and design, it consciously eschewed critical scholarship. It also introduced Hebrew transliterations into its text, notably the word HA-SHEM, “the name,” as the translation of the tetragrammaton, rendered by many English translations, including JPS, as LORD and by others as YHWH.<sup>39</sup>

Other critics faulted the JPS translation for its lack of attention to the aural aspects of the Hebrew text: the wordplay, the repetitions, the alliterations, the puns, and so forth. Influenced by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber’s translation of the Bible into German, Professor Everett Fox of Clark University created a new translation for Schocken Books—covering, so far, Genesis through Kings—that privileged the sound of the English. Although characterized in places by German-style compound adjectives and controversial neologisms, it is, more than many recent translations, one that is meant to be read aloud.<sup>40</sup>

Still others, most notably Professor Robert Alter (b. 1935), professor emeritus of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California-Berkeley, criticized the JPS



translation on literary grounds. "Again and again," he charged, it "exhibits a tin ear for English." The Jewish translation, like its Protestant and Catholic counterparts, erred in his view in repackaging biblical syntax "to make it look as though it were composed in the twentieth century." By making the Bible's English thoroughly modern, he believes that translators sacrificed the rhythms and purposeful ambiguities of the original Hebrew. His own translation, now covering the bulk of the Bible, seeks to remedy that. Its goal, which he understands "can be only distantly realized," is "to fashion an English Bible that feels like the Hebrew, recovering the earthiness and the previous concreteness of the biblical language," with all its complexities and subtleties.<sup>41</sup>

More recently, the JPS Bible translation has also been criticized on feminist grounds, by those who consider the translation patriarchal, particularly since it genders God as masculine. David E. S. Stein and Carol L. Meyers, in response, published a "gender-sensitive" translation of the Pentateuch (2006), based on the JPS original, that changed words and phrases, particularly references to God, into gender-neutral terms. "Every man as he pleases," for example, became "each of us as we please" (Deut. 12:8). "Man and beast" became "human and beast" (Exod. 8:14). LORD was replaced with the word "God" along with the unvocalized tetragrammaton in Hebrew letters.<sup>42</sup>

Such contemporary debates over how the Bible should properly be translated and interpreted underscore the continuing relevance of the Bible to twenty-first-century American Jews. Regardless of how much they know of the Bible, and whether or not they can read it in the original, they appreciate, much as the first American Jews did back in the seventeenth century, that the Bible forms the foundation for Judaism and that Jewish communal life is impossible without it.

## NOTES

1. Isaac S. Emmanuel, "New Light on American Jewry," *American Jewish Archives* 7 (January 1955): 17–23, 56; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 10.
2. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Torah," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010), 4:2194–97.
3. Jonathan D. Sarna and Nahum M. Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship and Translations in the United States," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988), 86–87.
4. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 373.
5. For a convenient guide to Jewish approaches to the Bible, see *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
6. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Mystical World of Colonial American Jews," in *Mediating Modernity: Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer*, ed. Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 187–88.
7. William H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Third Reader* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Truman and Smith, 1837; repr., Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1982), 69, 75; John H. Westerhoff, *McGuffey and His Readers: Piety, Morality, and Education in Nineteenth-Century America* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1978), 139. Lindley Murray's *The English Reader* (York: Longman and Rees, 1799; Stockbridge, Mass.: Charles Webster, 1822), another well-known textbook,

- provided a much more positive biblically based view of the Jews; see Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 4.
8. Sharon Liberman Mintz and Gabriel M. Goldstein, *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein* (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 2005).
  9. *The Occident* 3 (April 1845): 34; Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 139, 206n54.
  10. M. Vaxer, "The First Hebrew Bible Printed in America," *Journal of Jewish Bibliography* 2, no. 1 (1940): 20–26; Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry 1776–1985* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 360–61; Sarna and Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship," 90.
  11. Solomon H. Jackson, *Proposals for Printing, by Subscription . . . the Hebrew Pentateuch, with the Literal Translation of Each Word in English, Above the Hebrew Word*, broadside (New York: 1826); on Jackson, see Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 193–94, emphasis in original.
  12. Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1995) is the standard biography. For a complete bibliography of Leeser's works, see the index to Robert Singerman, *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900*, 2 vols. (New York: Greenwood, 1990).
  13. Sarna, *American Judaism*, 64–111, esp. 81.
  14. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser*, 186–93; Lance J. Sussman, "Another Look at Isaac Leeser and the First Jewish Translation of the Bible in the United States," *Modern Judaism* 5 (May 1985): 176.
  15. Leonard Greenspoon, "Jewish Translations of the Bible," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2098.
  16. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Passover Raisin Wine, the American Temperance Movement, and Mordecai Noah: The Origins, Meaning and Wider Significance of a Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Religious Practice," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988): 269–88.
  17. Morris J. Raphall, "Bible view of slavery: A discourse, delivered at the Jewish synagogue, 'Bnai Jeshurum,' New York, on the day of the national fast, Jan. 4, 1861" (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t6ko76d64>.
  18. Rev. Hugh Brown, as quoted in Sarna and Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews*, 71.
  19. "David Einhorn's response to 'A Biblical View of Slavery,'" trans. from the German in *Sinai* 6 (1861): 2–22, <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>.
  20. Rachel Hallote, "Jacob H. Schiff and the Beginning of Biblical Archeology in the United States," *American Jewish History* 95 (September 2009): 225–47.
  21. Sarna and Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship," 89–95.
  22. Sarna and Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship," 89–95; S. David Sperling, *Students of the Covenant: A History of Jewish Biblical Scholarship in North America* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholar's Press, 1992), 33–67.
  23. Jonathan D. Sarna, "'God Loves an Infant's Praise': Cultural Borrowing and Cultural Resistance in Two Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Sunday-School Texts," *Jewish History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 73–89, doi 10.1007/s10835-012-9168-0; Penny Schine Gold, *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).
  24. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1991), 134–45.

25. Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).
26. Leonard Greenspoon, *Max Leopold Margolis: A Scholar's Scholar* (New York: Society of Biblical Literature, 1987).
27. For the full story of the 1917 translation, see Sarna, *JPS*, 95–116.
28. *The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917), vi, viii.
29. Abraham A. Neuman, "Cyrus Adler—A Biographical Sketch," *American Jewish Year Book* 42 (1941): 107, <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=19828>.
30. David Roskies, "Coney Island, USA: America in the Yiddish Literary Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 84.
31. Schwartz's poems and many others are conveniently collected in Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Sholem Asch, *Moses* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951) and *The Prophet* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955); Charles Reznikoff, *By the Waters of Manhattan* (New York: Boni, 1930); Bernard Malamud, *Novels & Stories*, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 2014); Ita Sheres, "The Alienated Sufferer: Malamud's Novels from the Perspective of Old Testament and Jewish Mystical Thought," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 4, no. 1 (1978): 68–76; see also Victoria Aarons, *What Happened to Abraham: Reinventing the Covenant in American Jewish Fiction* (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 2005).
32. J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 71, 183, 236–37.
33. Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 225–28, 355–56; see also Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
34. Sarna, *JPS*, 205–7, 233–34.
35. For what follows, see Sarna, *JPS*, 233–47.
36. Harry M. Orlinsky, "Wanted: A New English Translation of the Bible for the Jewish People," in *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 349–62.
37. Quoted in Sarna, *JPS*, 242. See Orlinsky's *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969) for his perspective on the translation.
38. Greenspoon analyzes various passages from the translation in his "Jewish Translations of the Bible," 2100–103.
39. Nosson Scherman, *The Stone Edition of the Tanach* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1996), quote is from p. xii. On ArtScroll, see Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics and the ArtScroll Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
40. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Schocken, 1995) and *The Early Prophets: The Schocken Bible*, vol. 2 (New York: Schocken, 2014).
41. Robert Alter, "Translating the Bible Again," *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2015): 6–7. Alter's translations from the Bible include *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004); *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Norton, 2007); *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets* (New York: Norton, 2013); *The Wisdom Books* (New York: Norton, 2010); and *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah and Daniel* (New York: Norton, 2015).
42. E. S. Stein, ed., *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarons, Victoria. *What Happened to Abraham: Reinventing the Covenant in American Jewish Fiction*. Dover: University of Delaware Press, 2005.
- Fox, Everett. *The Five Books of Moses*. Vol. 1 of *The Schocken Bible*. New York: Schocken, 1995.
- . *The Early Prophets*. Vol. 2 of *The Schocken Bible*. New York: Schocken, 2014.
- Gold, Penny Schine. *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-Century America*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Greenspoon, Leonard. "Jewish Translations of the Bible." In *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2005–20. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Orlinsky, Harry M. "Wanted: A New English Translation of the Bible for the Jewish People." In *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation*, edited by Harry M. Orlinsky, 349–62. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974.
- Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004.
- . "'God Loves an Infant's Praise': Cultural Borrowing and Cultural Resistance in Two Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Sunday-School Texts." *Jewish History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 73–89, doi 10.1007/s10835-012-9168-0.
- . *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981.
- . *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- . "The Mystical World of Colonial American Jews." In *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World*, edited by Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner, 185–94. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2008.
- Sarna, Jonathan D., and Benjamin Shapell. *Lincoln and the Jews: A History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015.
- Sarna, Jonathan D., and Nahum M. Sarna. "Jewish Bible Scholarship and Translations in the United States." In *The Bible and Bibles in America*, edited by Ernest S. Frerichs, 83–116. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988.
- Scherman, Nosson. *The Stone Edition of the Tanach*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1996.
- Schwartz, Shuly Rubin. *The Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1991.
- Sperling, S. David. *Students of the Covenant: A History of Jewish Biblical Scholarship in North America*. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholar's Press, 1992.
- Stein, E. S., ed. *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006.
- Sussman, Lance J. "Another Look at Isaac Leeser and the First Jewish Translation of the Bible in the United States." *Modern Judaism* 5 (May 1985): 159–90.
- . *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1995.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

THE BIBLE  
IN AMERICA

*Edited by*

PAUL C. GUTJAHR

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

© Oxford University Press 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gutjahr, Paul C., editor.

Title: The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America / edited by Paul C. Gutjahr.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press USA, 2017. | Series: Oxford handbooks

| Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016059216 (print) | LCCN 2017039301 (ebook) | ISBN 9780190258856 (updf)

| ISBN 9780190684839 (epub) | ISBN 9780190258849 (hardcover : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—History. | Bible—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—United States.

| Bible—Influence. | Religion and culture—United States—History.

Classification: LCC BS4475.U6 (ebook) | LCC BS4475.U6 O94 2017 (print)

| DDC 220.09—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016059216>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America