

Gender-Related Changes to NJPS

Methodology: Frequently Asked Questions

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NOTE: The following answers take as their starting point the discussion in the book's preface.

Assessing Translations

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- Q.** Is a gender-accurate rendering more interpretation than translation?
- Q.** Does a gender-accurate translation obscure underlying sexism in the text?
- Q.** If male language in Hebrew can have a neutral sense, shouldn't those terms generally be rendered into English with male language that likewise can have a neutral sense (such as "man" and "he")—as NJPS did?

Social Gender and the Torah Text

- Q.** Why not make the Torah's translation consistently gender neutral?
 - Q.** If the text's wording is fixed, how then could its translation change by being viewed through ancient eyes rather than contemporary ones?
 - Q.** Was the Torah's original audience attuned to gender issues in the text?
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 - Q.** When a biblical term means two things in context, and one meaning is gender neutral while the other is not, which gender sense prevails?
 - Q.** How did you decide the rendering in cases of doubt as to the gender sense?
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Assessing Translations

Q. Is a gender-accurate approach the only correct way to translate the Bible?

A. No. Translation always involves making trade-offs. All translations bring out certain aspects of the original text at the expense of other aspects. Translators choose what to emphasize. Thus scholars have classified Bible translations according to various dichotomies such as:

what the text says	<i>versus</i>	what the text means
literary approach	<i>versus</i>	philological approach
proliferates meanings	<i>versus</i>	establishes the plain-sense meaning
source-oriented	<i>versus</i>	audience-oriented
for academic use	<i>versus</i>	for devotional use

Actually, no translation effort ever can—or should—treat these poles as true opposites, yet the categorization is useful for comparison purposes. As for NJPS, it belongs near the right-hand pole. That is, it strove to convey the plain-sense meaning; it valued clarity of expression; it employed idioms that are familiar to the audience; and it emphasized a religious message.

In adapting the NJPS translation for gender accuracy, the translator’s task was the same as for NJPS: to stay as close as possible to the original text while conveying its plain sense clearly in idiomatic English. Furthermore, the rendering techniques were the same as those that NJPS used as a matter of course. At the same time, the result is less ambiguous than was NJPS in its ascriptions of gender. Thus the present adapted translation sits slightly closer to the right-hand pole than NJPS does. To borrow a software term, it is “optimized” for the setting of study during worship.

In contrast, translations that target the left-hand pole will better reflect other aspects of the Hebrew text, such as the key words and other rhetorical features that engage the reader, and the idioms used by the ancients.

In sum, the “best” translation must be evaluated in terms of what one wishes to accomplish. Bible professor Michael V. Fox has put it well: “Translation is a form of mapping. . . . There are different maps for different purposes, and recognizing this allows for a pluralistic approach to translation” (“Translation and Mimesis,” p. 211).

Q. Is a gender-accurate rendering more interpretation than translation?

A. This question presumes that it's possible for a translator to do something other than interpret.

To put the matter in perspective, let's look at the special nature of the biblical Hebrew text. The Bible's prose employs a remarkably limited vocabulary. Its language, as critic and translator Robert Alter has noted, "evinces a strong commitment to using a limited set of terms again and again" (p. xxxi). Relatively speaking, the Bible treats its words much like the individual tiles that a visual artist uses to compose a mosaic picture. That artist may use identical little blue tiles to represent the sky in one part of the mosaic, to form part of an ocean wave in another part, and elsewhere to stand in for the iris of a person's eye. In other words, the biblical text is fashioned so that its meaning inheres less in individual words and more in the patterning of words, how they are juxtaposed and grouped.

The NJPS translation approach—which I have emulated in adapting its rendering for gender accuracy—responds to such artistry by focusing on reporting the plain-sense meaning of the literary work. It gives a sense-for-sense rendering of the text. This approach is like describing a mosaic by saying, "If an ancient Israelite audience were viewing this picture, here they would perceive—given their own society's categorizations and artistic conventions—the 'waters above'; there, the 'waters below'; and over there, an eye."

The NJPS translation addresses itself to an audience that wishes to focus more on the picture itself than on every last tile. It is a matter of emphasis. Even so, NJPS avoids paraphrase whenever it can be more precise. That is, it would not describe the mosaic picture so broadly as to say, "A girl is standing at the shore."

In contrast, some contemporary translators specialize in word-for-word rendering. Such an approach is interpretive in that it values a one-to-one correspondence between Hebrew words and English words. It does so because it wishes to attend to the original artistry, pointing out each of the tiles employed. In order to show us that identical tiles are used in more than one place, those translators often render a word hyperliterally (even when they admit that it has an idiomatic sense in context) or they will employ a general rendering (even when they believe that the term has a technical sense in context). Such a decision is itself an interpretive move, for it presumes that the word is more important—more meaningful—than the phrase or passage in which it appears. It is *a matter of interpretation* to presume that the work's creator wanted us to pay minute attention to how the message is being conveyed, at the expense of the message itself.

In short, when translating from one language to another, interpretation is unavoidable. Not for nothing has Bible professor Adele Berlin described the product of translation as “an abbreviated form of exegesis: exegesis that does not have the space to explain or justify itself” (“Text, Translation, Commentary,” p. 141).

Q. Does a gender-accurate translation obscure underlying sexism in the text?

A. What this translation approach does is distinguish between the Torah’s literal wording, and its idiomatic sense in context: it conveys not what the Torah *says* so much as what it *means*. Those two facets can be quite different in terms of their apparent gender bias.

The Torah does contain predominantly male language (that is, grammatically masculine terms, and terms that refer literally to men). Yet the text’s original audience would have understood such terminology as a convention of the language—rather like a dead metaphor, not literally, as if it was a living affirmation of sexism. Because the present translation focuses on rendering according to the understanding of the ancient audience, it reflects the Hebrew’s male orientation in English only where the full weight of the evidence shows that such wording is referring to male social gender.

Our gender-accurate approach concerns itself with much more than creating gender-inclusive wording. Sometimes the result makes the text sound more male-oriented. In passages where the ancient audience would have perceived second-person language as addressing men only, the present translation reflects that situation more clearly than did NJPS. The same goes for passages where the text is referring to male-only social institutions.

As revising translator I did not pass judgment on how Israelite society and the Torah constructed gender. My renderings neither commend nor condemn the ancient perception of the text. They merely attempt to convey it accurately.

Q. If male language in Hebrew can have a neutral sense, shouldn’t those terms generally be rendered into English with male language that likewise can have a neutral sense (such as “man” and “he”)—as NJPS did?

A. Certainly that strategy is appropriate in one type of translation, the word-for-word type. However, our translation is a sense-for-sense type (which is better suited to the setting of Torah study during worship). It conveys the text’s plain-sense meaning, not its ambiguity. I chose not to mix the two approaches in the same translation, to avoid inconsistencies in rendering that can trip up readers.

NJPS often rendered male Hebrew language using male English language in a neutral sense. That approach has the advantages of familiarity (being standard translation practice at the time), simplicity, and close correlation with the Hebrew text. However, in NJPS—which professes to be a sense-for-sense translation—it can confuse readers. For the very nature of NJPS argues against readers’ taking male language as neutral. Contextual precision in rendering is the NJPS hallmark; for that reason, readers reasonably expect male terms to carry a male gender sense. In short, NJPS set up a situation wherein its male words, when used generically, are liable to be misread, especially upon first encounter.

For example, NJPS renders the word *ach* (literally, “brother”) variously as “neighbor,” “kin,” and “kinsman.” Given the gender-neutral options (“neighbor” or “kin”), then “kinsman” would seem to imply that only the male gender is meant in that context. Yet such is not always the case. This can be confusing.

Moreover, with its ambiguous usage, NJPS in effect placed a small stumbling block before its audience. Readers today are all too likely to trip over ambiguity regarding gender, because we make our way through the translation while burdened by an inaccurate picture of the past. Namely, many contemporary readers tend to perceive the translated Bible as more male-oriented than the original audience perceived the Hebrew text to be. We imagine the Israelite past as having been more patriarchal (or as some would put it, unrelievedly sexist) than it was.

Such bias means that a substantial number of readers take a male term in its literal, male sense—regardless of the translators’ intent. Indeed, clearly inclusive words can be drawn into the error and mistaken as referring to males only, too.

For example, take the clause *v’nichr’tah ha-nefesh ha-hi me-ameha* (“that person shall be cut off from his kin”; Lev. 7:20b). Grammatically speaking, in the context of the passage this Hebrew wording is unmistakably gender neutral. So is the topic: ritual impurity at a sacred meal. Thus the text’s ancient Israelite audience would have entertained no doubt that this language was gender-inclusive—as NJPS correctly indicated by its rendering *nefesh* as “person.”

Yet some of today’s readers see the context and infer from it—specifically, from its mention of slaughter, sacrifices, and male-only priests—that women were not part of this ritual scene. “Surely women did not do those sorts of things,” they think to themselves. So then they take the word “his” literally, and discount the word “person” as being a false generic term. That is, they think: “Surely a male was the only ‘person’ who counted in the patriarchal past.” In short, they understand the NJPS translation to mean “that man shall be cut off from his kin.”

Social Gender and the Torah Text

Q. Why not make the Torah's translation consistently gender neutral?

A. Some translations for liturgical purposes have done so, which is defensible in a ritual setting. Our translation, however, is intended mainly for study during worship—that is, for Jews to encounter honestly the sacred literature of their ancestors. In this setting, our goal is to see the text through the eyes of the ancient Israelite audience; and in their view, the Torah was not always gender inclusive. Rather, they construed the text according to their own sense of gender, while (typically) being attuned to context.

Their nuanced approach would have led them to understand even fairly similar terms as having different social-gender meanings—some gender neutral, some not. For example, the Hebrew term *avot*, which can mean either “fathers” or “ancestors,” appears in an expression common in the Torah, *elohei avotecha* (literally, “God of your fathers”). The Israelites would have viewed that phrase in light of how they were raised: their God was first of all their mother’s God. (In their society, it was the mother who oriented young children to the world. And in pre-modern societies, people explained the workings of the world in terms of deities.) Furthermore, the Book of Genesis relates that the patriarchs and the matriarchs worshipped the same God. It states that each of the foremothers explicitly and loyally invoked the Eternal by name. On both grounds, the text’s ancient audience would have understood *elohei avotecha* inclusively as “God of your ancestors.”

In contrast, a similar common expression refers to the covenantal promises of land, *asher nishba la-avotecha* (literally, “as [God] swore to your fathers”). The Israelites would have viewed that phrase in light of how they managed real estate: It was men who were entrusted with the knowledge of local soil and climate, in order to most effectively husband the land. Typically they passed down the land’s title to another male who was raised on that same piece of property. Thus promises of land acquisition would of course have been directed to a man. Furthermore, the Book of Genesis relates that God made all of the promises of land specifically to men: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On both grounds, the ancient audience would have understood *asher nishba la-avotecha* in terms of “fathers,” not “ancestors.”

Q. If the text's wording is fixed, how then could its translation change by being viewed through ancient eyes rather than contemporary ones?

A. When we read, we construct the meaning of a text out of the interaction of the wording and our background assumptions as readers. Readers with different assumptions can thus perceive a text quite differently. For an idea of how this affects gender accuracy, let me give an example from the realm of law: *v'chi yimkor ish et bito l'amah* (NJPS: "when a man sells his daughter as a slave"; Exod. 21:7). Here the noun *ish* refers to someone who sells a daughter into slavery.

That not only a father but also a mother might do such a thing would not have been surprising in ancient Israel. My translation note adduces evidence from both outside and inside the Bible that its ancient audience would naturally have taken *ish* in a generic sense in the present context. Similarly, they would have taken the masculine verbal inflection and possessive pronoun that refer to *ish* as a matter of proper grammar rather than of social gender. Thus they would have read this clause inclusively: "when a parent sells a daughter as a slave."

In contrast, a substantial number of contemporary readers will fail to conceive of the possibility of a mother selling a child; they will imagine that only a father would do so, or that only fathers had such legal authority over children in ancient, "patriarchal" societies. In short, they would render literally, in male terms: "when a man sells his daughter as a slave."

These two conflicting translations show the importance of historical accuracy. That is why—before rendering the Hebrew text into English—I ask how the ancient Israelite audience would have understood that text in its context.

(By the way, this example also illustrates how a reader, by being convinced that women are largely absent from the biblical text, will tend to overlook women even when they are present.)

Q. Was the Torah's original audience attuned to gender issues in the text?

A. Typical Israelites may or may not have been able to discuss "gender" as a topic of conversation. Surely, however, they would have instantly recognized certain behaviors as inappropriate for one's gender. As mentioned in the preface, anthropologists and sociologists have learned from comparing many cultures that gender is not a fixed human trait. Rather, it is a social construct; and so it must be continually constructed anew. Situations repeatedly arise in life that challenge the idea of what is truly "manly" or "womanly" behavior, prompting the revisiting of gender definitions.

Furthermore, practice in sorting out the social-gender sense of language must have been a normal, everyday matter for the Israelites. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that they learned to do this as children. When listening to another person speak, Israelites inferred unstated social gender indirectly (for example, they heard verbal inflections and inferred from them the gender of the unstated subject). As clues to the intended gender, they not only attended to the speaker's wording—the terms and the rhetoric—but also the topic. Certain activities were marked by convention as “belonging” to one gender or the other. The mere mention of those activities would signal gender indirectly.

Contemporary students of Bible agree that the ancient audience read texts closely in order to decide, for example, that in different contexts the noun *basar* variously means “flesh” (Lev. 13:16), “[male] member” (15:2), “body” (15:7), and “[female] genitals” (15:19) [Robert Alter's renderings]. My position is that in the same way, that audience used contextual clues—grammatical, rhetorical, and topical—to apprehend a term's social-gender sense.

Why presume that the ancient audience regularly made sophisticated distinctions in nuance with regard to every other aspect of literature *except* gender? I concluded that the ancient audience was as subtle in their reading of gender clues as we currently imagine them to have been in all other respects.

Q. What was the ancient Israelite audience's view of gender?

A. The people of Israel shared in the larger culture of the ancient Near East. Thus the region's way of construing gender, when cautiously assessed, serves as important background for understanding the Bible—and even more so, for understanding the text's Israelite audience.

Ancient Israelite society appears to have had two genders, male and female. (Some scholars have hypothesized that the ancient Near East recognized more than two genders [McCaffrey; Asher-Greve]. I have not seen similar evidence for the people of Israel.)

The factors that would have most affected Israelite gender perceptions of the biblical text remained quite stable over the 800-year-long period in which the Torah appears to have come together: Throughout that era, it was men who featured in formal communal leadership and in military endeavors. Meanwhile, women continued to make major contributions to the economy and its management, owning property of all types; and they were often highly visible in some public communal settings.

For this project, I combined various scholars' observations to form a mental picture of Israel's perceptions of gender, which then informed my adaptation of NJPS. In the translation notes themselves, I discuss many aspects of Israel's view of gender, as each was relevant to a particular passage. What follows here are a few scholarly summaries and generalizations, for the reader's convenience.

MASCULINITY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

“The masculinity of the ancient was measured by two criteria: (1) his prowess in battle, and (2) his ability to sire children. . . . Those symbols which primarily referred to his military exploits often served to remind him of his sexual ability as well.”
(Hoffner, p. 327)

“Weaponry is strongly emblematic of the male gender throughout the ancient Near East, symbolizing masculinity in birth rites and rites designed to cure impotency. Weaponry is also particular to male burials throughout the region.”
(McCaffrey, p. 383)

SYMBOLS OF GENDER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

“The symbols for virile manhood were the bow and arrow (II Sam. 1:22; 22:35; II Kings 13:15 ff.; Hos. 1:5; Ps. 127:4–5), and those of womanhood the spindle or distaff (Prov. 31:19; II Sam. 3:29).”
(Hoffner, pp. 328–329)

EVERYDAY LIFE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Ancient Israelite society was rural and agricultural. Daily life centered on a household that was self-sufficient for most of its basic economic needs. The majority of Israelites spent most of their time within their household's boundaries.

“Whereas male farmwork is often characterized by activities requiring sustained efforts and physical strength, women's labor features a series of sophisticated and intricate operations. . . .

“In the division of labor by gender characteristic of agricultural systems, it is not efficient for both women and men to become proficient at the full array of operations necessary for survival. Both the intricacy and the time-consuming aspects of women's farm labor thus meant that Israelite women exercised control over critical aspects of household life. . . .

“At least in some periods, families must have been multigenerational. That is, a senior couple would have resided with their adult sons, their unmarried

daughters (for daughters left home upon marriage), their sons' spouses, their grandchildren, and perhaps also an orphaned niece or nephew or a widowed sibling." The household's senior woman was responsible for managing the tasks of those junior to her, including adult children in multigenerational households. "Women thus figured prominently as authority figures in intrafamily matters."

Women were responsible for:

- participation in the planting, weeding, and harvesting of field crops
- cultivation of orchards, vineyards, and vegetable gardens
- preservation of the harvested foodstuffs
- routine care (feeding, milking) of animals (sheep, goats, cows, oxen)
- making most items of clothing, starting with preparation of the fibers
- probably making many of the household's utensils (pots, baskets)
- the socialization, education, and training of young children

(Meyers, "Everyday Life," pp. 253–256; the text not in quotes is my own synopsis)

"When the whole family offered sacrifices [in the sanctuary], certain functions would be fulfilled by their social representatives. . . . That would usually be the privilege of the father as head of the family. He slaughtered the animal and gave the members of his house their portions of the meal. If there was no father of the house in a family [or if he was ill or caught up in war, etc.], then it stands to reason that his functions during the sacrifice were taken over by the mother of the family."

(Braulik, pp. 922, 936)

"The Woman of Substance [Prov. 31:10–31] is arguably a composite image of real women [of the early post-exilic period]. . . . [She] manufactures and trades in textiles. She buys and sells in the marketplaces and brings food 'from afar' to her household. She manages workers. She acquires real estate and develops it for income. In short, her socioeconomic activities mirror those of Persian-period women [as shown by epigraphic evidence], particularly those of affluence or position."

(Yoder, p. 446)

Q. Would the ancient Israelites ever have taken some of the Torah's male language as gender neutral?

A. Biblical Hebrew clearly sometimes employs male terms to refer to both genders (e.g., Exod. 21:21; Lev. 13:29–33; Num. 5:7–8; Deut. 13:7–11). In those instances the ancient Israelite audience could not have avoided reading the text

inclusively. Such cases in the text also establish that neither literally male words (e.g., *banim*, “sons”) nor grammatically masculine inflections are enough to determine that the social gender being referred to is also male.

In other words, male terms can legitimately be read as if gender neutral. The real question is how often throughout the Torah such a reading is warranted. The answer is not immediately obvious for the many instances in which the text uses male terms yet does not specify male social gender explicitly—either by naming a particular man, or by using a gender-definitive term such as *gever* (“man”) or *ish milchamah* (“warrior”).

In such cases, the ancient Israelites had other resources upon which they could rely in making sense of the text. If the particular activity being described was something in which—in the audience’s own time and place—a woman did take part without being considered exceptional, then they had reason to read the text’s male language inclusively. If the Bible itself elsewhere mentions instances that include women, this would also have been grounds for an inclusive reading of the passage in question. Other such grounds were if the topic was a societal subject of concern that applied regardless of gender, or if the force of a figure of speech was not restricted to only one gender. (For examples of how it would have been reasonable for such considerations to have been weighed in practice, see the translation notes.)

Q. If the Torah had wanted to be gender inclusive, why didn’t it just say so?

A. It did not need to, in order to be understood by its audience. Rather, the creator(s) of the Torah quite reasonably believed that its Israelite audience would view the biblical text in light of their daily experiences of life and of language. For example, if the text mentioned a sword, the audience would know—without needing the fact to be spelled out—that the person wielding it was a man. Additionally, in the absence of a signal that gender was at stake, the audience could construe passages inclusively even without explicit statements that women were involved (see my answer to the previous question).

If the text’s authors and editors had the opportunity to imply a gender sense via the context, why then should they have been explicit about gender? Why spell out what could go without saying? Why waste words? Furthermore, gender’s very nature—it is supposed to seem like part of the natural order—suggests that rhetorically speaking, direct statements would be inappropriate to the task.

In sum, it makes more sense to expect that the Bible would send its gender signals via indirection: by folded-up clues rather than by flashing neon signs.

Q. How does literary genre affect the audience's reading of gender in the text?

A. Literary genre influences the determination of whether or not an ambiguous term has a gender-neutral sense. A genre's conventions can create certain expectations with regard to gender. For example, narratives, parables, and poetry tend to rely upon definite characters. With these genres, the audience expects concreteness. So all other things being equal, the readers will tend toward a more restrictive, gendered reading.

In contrast, legal material by its nature deals in generalizations. Students of law logically expect its rules to apply broadly and consistently unless the particulars of a situation make that case exceptional. Thus whenever men and women act in the same capacity doing something that the society does not mark as uniquely male or female, the rules should apply equally to both.

In Mesopotamia, certain activities in which women occasionally participated in real life (such as creditor or slave owner) were treated in the laws only in male terms. It thus appears that the Mesopotamians at least sometimes understood the masculine language of their laws in a gender-inclusive sense (Carolyn Pressler, "Wives and Daughters," pp. 166–167).

The Torah's law collections likewise treat many legal topics in male terms. Today we cannot prove whether the framers of any Near Eastern laws originally intended the masculine language in a neutral sense. Yet we can reason that in a society where women sometimes functioned in the capacities to which the laws refer, the audience would tend to take the legal texts juridically. They would construe those laws as if they had to apply more broadly than merely to the typical case that a narrow reading might perceive. They would think about the women they know—their newly married niece whose dowry included a slave, or their sister who has begun to manage her late husband's estate, or the prostitute in the next village who owns a troublesome ox—and wonder how the text's civil and criminal laws applied to those situations.

For that reason, I concluded that in a legal text, for a case in which gender was not at stake, the Torah's ancient audience was inclined to take male language in a neutral sense.

Q. When a biblical term means two things in context, and one meaning is gender neutral while the other is not, which gender sense prevails?

A. The one that is most in the foreground in that context is what prevails in the rendering. In a plain-sense translation, as a rule, only one meaning can appear at a time. Thus the translator's charge is to decide which sense the text's ancient audience would have perceived as sitting in the foreground of their mental image, for each instance of the word. Then the translator makes sure to convey the foreground sense of the term. A consistent report of the imaginary foreground is precisely what yields the "plain sense" of the text.

To the ancient Israelites, that foreground sense often had a male meaning component. They experienced as real and concrete their society's gendered social institutions: the male head of the household; the male inheritance of land; the male participation in the militia; the male leadership of the tribes; etc. In the minds of the audience, any textual allusion to such an institution tended to conjure up an image of men carrying out their responsibilities as men.

Generally speaking, the mental picture of those men acknowledged that they were representing their family, village, or nation—which of course were gender-inclusive bodies. That aspect was meaningful and significant yet tended to be relatively less salient or palpable. To that extent, it served as background in the audience's mental picture.

Q. How did you decide the rendering in cases of doubt as to the gender sense?

A. When the gender sense was not clear—usually because of contemporary ignorance about the conditions in ancient Israel—I attempted to decide based on "the preponderance of the evidence." Even so, a number of gray areas remained. One example is the auxiliary ritual functionary (not specified as being a priest or Levite) who administers the waters of lustration (Num. 19:18). Another example is those who are instructed to wear tassels on the "corners" of their garment (Num. 15:37–41). I do not know how the ancient audience would have ascribed a gender sense in those cases and a few others. Consequently, after making my best guess, I resorted (either in the printed commentary or in my online note) to an equivalent of the phrase employed so forthrightly and so often in NJPS footnotes: "Meaning of Hebrew uncertain."