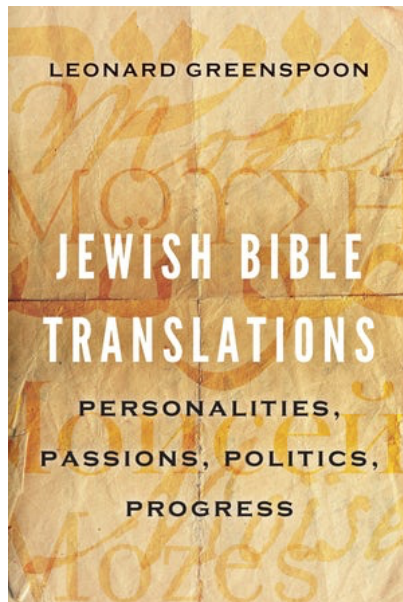


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Leonard Greenspoon

Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress

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Marvin A. Sweeney
Claremont School of Theology at Willamette University

Leonard Greenspoon wrote this volume, the first full-length work on Jewish Bible translations, in an effort to redress the problems and imbalances present in many prior studies concerning Bible translations, which have so frequently ignored Jewish translations, gave them short or inadequate attention, or gave excessive or inappropriate attention to missionary efforts to convert Jews to Christianity. He argues that translation of the Bible is foundational to Christian beliefs and practices, beginning with the New Testament, which presents accounts of Jesus's words and actions in Greek even though he actually spoke Aramaic. For contemporary Christians, the Bible is the Bible in translation, particularly since so many Christian clergy are only superficially acquainted with its original languages. Even the most nontraditional forms of Judaism, however, continue to make use of the Bible in its original Hebrew and Aramaic texts. Jewish translations supplement rather than supplant the Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Bible.

Greenspoon gives attention to the social, cultural, historical, political, and theological contexts in which Jewish Bible translations were written. His work is especially informed by an interest in enabling readers to see how the work of translation was intended to make the words of the Bible come alive to readers—and to have an impact on the cultures in which they were written—in much the same way as it did for the original readers of each version. To this end, he presents chapters on the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic Targums, Judeo-Arabic translations, Yiddish and German

translations, translations into other selected languages, English-language translations, and non-Jewish translations with Jewish features.

Greenspoon is especially known for his work on the Septuagint, and he takes special care to discuss the Septuagint as a work of Jewish translation even though it has come to function largely as Christian scripture. The Septuagint is the oldest known translation of the Bible, and its name is derived from the Latin word *septuaginta*, “seventy,” which recalls the tradition that seventy-two rabbis were gathered in Egypt by Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus (r. 285–247 BCE) at the instigation of the librarian, Demetrius, to produce a translation of “the lawbooks of the Jews” for use in the great library of Alexandria. He discusses the Letter of Aristeas, which recounts this tradition, and appropriately debunks its historical character. Greenspoon instead points to the needs of the Egyptian Jewish community as the contest for the creation of a Greek translation of the Torah and the rest of the Bible, citing especially the work of the Egyptian Jewish philosopher Philo, who did not know Hebrew but nevertheless wrote extensively on the interpretation of the Bible based on Greek translations. He discusses issues of translation technique, albeit without much in the way of example, which employed both literal and free translation to produce a text to be read by Egyptian Jews, in relation to the Hellenistic Egyptian culture of their own day. He also discusses the question of the *Vorlage*, or the underlying Hebrew text, from which the translation was made and points out how the traditional Masoretic Hebrew text might not always constitute the version from which the Hebrew was translated, as the Greek versions and many Dead Sea Scroll texts often display considerable differences from the Masoretic Text. A discussion of the Naḥal Ḥever Greek text of the Twelve Prophets would have been very useful here, as many contemporary scholars maintain that it is a witness to an early version of the Septuagint, although the Greek text appears to be a relatively crude translation of a proto-Masoretic Hebrew text by a scribe who did not know Greek well. Greenspoon further discusses revisions of the early Greek versions by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, the translations of books beyond the Torah, the Septuagint canon, and rabbinic understandings of the role of the Greek text in the Jewish community.

Greenspoon’s discussion of the Aramaic Targums begins with debunking of the traditional understanding that the Targums began in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra in which thirteen individuals together with the Levites “explained” the text of the Torah as Ezra read it publicly before the people in Persian-period Jerusalem (Neh 8). He provides a skilled overview of the various targumic texts, such as the relatively literal Targum Onkelos to the Torah; the expositionally oriented Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to the Torah, better identified as Targum Yerushalmi (the Jerusalem Targum); the Fragment Targums of the Torah; Codex Neofiti I; the Cairo Genizah fragments; Targum Jonathan to the Prophets; citations of a “Palestinian” Targum to the Prophets in the works of Rashi and David Kimḥi; and the Targums to the Writings. His work would benefit from some discussion of otherwise-unknown targumic verses that appear in rabbinic literature or the reasons that Sperber chose relatively late manuscripts as the basis for his critical edition of the

Targum texts. Greenspoon provides a number of examples of the Targums in English translation to illustrate his discussion.

Greenspoon's discussion of Jewish Arabic translations is an especially important chapter, because so little is known about these texts in the Jewish community or by scholars at large. He focuses especially on the work of R. Saadiah Gaon (R. Saadiah ben Joseph al-Fayyumi, 882–942 CE), a controversial Egyptian rabbi who became Rosh Yeshivah of the Babylonian Rabbinic academy in Sura. Saadiah is a very influential Jewish scholar in the Muslim-dominated Jewish world of his time who produced the first philosophy of Judaism, organized the standard Jewish prayer book, wrote on Hebrew grammar and Jewish mystical texts, and produced portions of the Tafsir, or Jewish translation of the Bible into Judeo-Arabic, in his efforts to defend rabbinic Judaism against the Karaite movement and Judaism in general from Muslim (and Christian) challenges. Saadiah's Tafsir is both a translation and a commentary insofar as it works rabbinic understandings of the Bible into its translation. Only a few of Saadiah's Bible translations are extant (portions of the Torah, Isaiah, Five Scrolls, Psalms, Proverbs, Job), but Greenspoon provides examples of Saadiah's free, functionally equivalent translation. Other texts are wrongly attributed to Saadiah (Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah) or remain anonymous (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), but Greenspoon correctly argues that Saadiah laid the basis for a comprehensive Jewish Arabic Bible translation that would serve Arabic-speaking Jewish communities, such as the Yemeni Jewish community, and provide the basis for the modern development of Judaism at large.

Greenspoon's discussion of Yiddish and German translations wisely reminds readers that Yiddish is not simply a language of entertainment, such as what one might have experienced in Yiddish vaudeville, but it was—and, in some quarters, still is—the primary language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews from the tenth through the twentieth centuries CE. He discusses the Tsena Urenea (Come Out and See; Song 3:1), the classic Yiddish Bible written by Yaakov ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yarnow (ca. 1550–1650), which especially served the needs of Jewish women who did not always know Hebrew. He treats several other Yiddish Bibles, including those written for the purpose of proselytizing Jews, as well as German translations, such as those by Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), Ludwig Philippson (1811–1889), Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), Simon Bernfeld (1860–1940), and the translations by Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), each with its distinctive characteristics and examples. Greenspoon points to a rich variety of translation technique as well as the role that these translations played in the emergence of the Reform and Neo-Orthodox Jewish movements in Germany and to a certain extent in the United States as well.

Treatment of other selected languages includes those written in Spanish, French, Italian, Hungarian, and Russian, all of which shared a vision of disseminating Jewish tradition in the languages of the larger societies of which Jews were a part. One might also note the efforts of Refuseniks in the

Soviet Union to equip themselves with knowledge of Hebrew due to the deliberate repression of Jews by the Soviet Union in the latter twentieth century.

Greenspoon's chapter on English-language versions will attract the attention of many readers with its informative and authoritative treatment. Greenspoon treats the role of Christian Hebraism in the translation and revision of the King James Version, which would serve as the Authorized Version of the British Empire (including, in many cases, for Jews as well); a large number of Anglo-Jewish versions written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Isaac Leeser's 1853 translation, which preceded the Jewish Publication Society versions; the 1917 Jewish Publication Society Version, chaired by Max Margolis, which was based in many respects on the King James Version; the JPS Tanakh, or the New Jewish Publication Society Version of 1985, initially produced by Harry Orlinsky, H. L. Ginsburg, Ephraim Speiser, Max Artz, Bernard J. Bamberger, Harry Freedman, and Solomon Grayzel (Torah and Prophets) and later by Moshe Greenberg, Jonas Greenfield, Nahum Sarna, Saul Leeman, Martin S. Rozenberg, David Shapiro, and Chaim Potok (Writings). Other versions included the JPS Hebrew English Tanakh, which Greenspoon twice states is the first Hebrew-English diglot edition, although he also acknowledges the 1917 JPS Hebrew-English edition that preceded it; the Artscroll Tanach, the Living Torah, the Schocken Bible, the Steinsaltz Humash, Friedman's Commentary on the Torah, Alter's Hebrew Bible, and others.

A chapter on non-Jewish translations with Jewish features examines Yiddish New Testaments meant for proselytization of Jews, Bible Society translations meant for the same purpose, so-called Messianic translations produced by Jews who follow Jesus and actually represent Christianity in Jewish guise, and others.

A final chapter reflects upon Jewish translation of the Bible as a now viable and vigorous enterprise that is based largely on revision of earlier work designed to continue to meet the needs of Jewish communities in their various cultures. The volume might have benefited from treatment of the Syriac Peshitta, which some scholars argue originated as a Jewish translation in antiquity, and the Ethiopian Bible, which is actually derived from Christian Coptic translations of the Septuagint, although it was highly influential for the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia before they made their move to Israel.

Altogether, this is a very useful study, especially for rabbis, cantors, and other Jewish professionals; Christian clergy; lay readers; and in some cases scholars of the various Jewish communities treated here. It might also be useful for biblical specialists and students, although more technical volumes are readily available for versions such as the Septuagint and the Targums.