Choosing the 'Right' Bible Translation for You

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1. Six modern Jewish translations

Aryeh Kaplan (1934-83), *The Living Torah* (1981), translator's introduction
(*The Living Nach*, vols 1-2, *The Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets*, by Yaakov Elman (1994, 1996);
vol. 3, *Sacred Writings*, by Moshe Shapiro, M. H. Mykoff, and Gavriel Ruvin (1998)
Source of translation: new, using traditional Jewish literature; single author (Torah)
Source of Hebrew text: unstated, probably the 'traditional' MT from the Second Rabbinic Bible

… The philosophy of this translation has been to treat the Torah as a living document. Our sages teach that 'every day the Torah should be as new'. This indicates that even a translator may not treat the Torah as an archaic document. It also implies that archaic or obsolete language must not be used when translating the Torah, because the language gives the impression of the Torah being old, not new. …
        …whenever there is a dispute regarding the meaning of a passage, the decision as to which interpretation to use has been based primarily on literary judgments. The fact that one opinion is favored over another is not meant to imply that we consider that opinion the most accurate. … If we have chosen the opinion of one commentator, it is only because his interpretation provides the simplest and clearest translation. The only exception to this has been where Torah law is concerned. Here, we have consistently translated the passages so that they reflect the final decision in Jewish law. For the most part, this means following Maimonides' code (the *Yad*).

New Jewish Publication Society translation (1985), preface
Source of translation: new, committee, using all available material
Source of Hebrew text: 'traditional', but Leningrad Codex text used from 1999 in bilingual edition

A further obvious difference between this translation and most of the older ones is in the rendering of the Hebrew particle *waw*, which is usually translated 'and'. Biblical Hebrew demanded the frequent use of the *waw*, but in that style it had the force not only of 'and' but also of 'however', 'but', 'yet', 'when', and any number of other such words and particles, or none at all that can be translated into English. Always to render it as 'and' is to misrepresent the Hebrew rather than to be faithful to it. Consequently, the committee translated the particle as the sense required, or left it untranslated…
… The prophetic books contain many passages whose meaning is uncertain. Thus, in order to provide an intelligible meaning, modern scholars have resorted to emending the Hebrew text. Some of these emendations derive from the ancient translations, especially of the Septuagint and the Targums, who had before them a Hebrew text that sometimes differed from today's traditional text. Where these ancient versions provide no help, some scholars have made conjectural emendations of their own. Many modern English versions contain translations of emended texts, sometimes without citing any departure from the traditional Hebrew text. Like the translation of the Torah, the present translation of the prophetic books adheres strictly to the traditional Hebrew text; but where the text remains obscure and an alteration provides marked clarification, a footnote is offered with a rendering of the suggested emendation … Sometimes … it was deemed sufficient to offer only a change of vowels, and such modifications are indicated by 'Change of vocalization yields'. In all cases, the emendation is given in a footnote, which may be readily disregarded by those who reject it on either scholarly or religious grounds.

<u>Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (1995), translator's preface</u>
Source of translation: new, single author, following Buber-Rosenzweig principles
Source of Hebrew text: 'traditional' MT text, with departures mentioned in the notes
Note: in 2014 he published *The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings*

Once the spokenness of the Bible is understood as a critical factor in the translation process, a number of practical steps become necessary which constitute radical change from past translation practices … First … the translated text is printed in lines resembling blank verse. These 'cola' are based primarily on spoken phrasing. … Second, personal and place names generally appear in Hebrew forms thoughout this translation. … This practice stems from the central role that names play in biblical stories … The meaning of a name is often explained outright in the text itself. In *The Five Books of Moses* this is represented by a slash in the text … A third important technique with which biblical literature often conveys its message, and which must influence the translation of the text, is what Buber called the 'leading-word' (*Leitwort*) principle. Key ('leading') words are repeated within a text to signify major themes and concerns, like recurring themes in a piece of music … A leading-word operates on the basis of sound: the repetition of a word or word root encourages the listener to make connections between diverse parts of a story (or even of a book), and to trace a particular theme throughout. … Such an understanding of the role of leading-words as crucial to biblical style rarely makes itself felt in translation. Bible translators are reluctant to reproduce repetitions of Hebrew words in the text because they are generally fearful of creating a tedious English style.

<u>Artscroll Stone Tanach (1996), preface</u>
Source of translation: revision of earlier ArtScroll translations by different authors
Source of Hebrew text: 'traditional' MT text, derived from the Second Rabbinic Bible (1523-4)

The first goal of a translation must be accuracy; no effort was spared in the successful quest of that goal. Scriptural Hebrew is laden with nuance and meaning. The language is replete with allusion. The scholars involved in this task were consumed with the sense of mission—that they were dealing with the sacred and eternal word of God, not mere 'literature'; that their task was not to rewrite the text, but to convey its meaning faithfully. The translation balances the lofty beauty of the Hebrew with the need to provide a literate and comprehensible English rendering. Where a choice had to be made, we preferred fidelity to the text over inaccurate simplicity, but occasionally we had to stray from the literal translation or Hebrew syntax in order to capture the essence of a phrase or to make it intelligible in English … In the Chumash portion of this work, the translation follows Rashi, 'the 'Father of Commentators', because the study of Chumash has been synonymous with Chumash-Rashi for nine centuries. In the Prophets and the Writings, however, following the guidance of our great mentors, we are more eclectic… While the translation always follows an authoritative opinion, we tried to choose the interpretation that would best fit the text and be as clear as possible to the reader.

<u>Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (2019), introduction</u>
Source of translation: new, single author, using all available material
Source of Hebrew text: 'traditional' MT text; emendations considered in the commentary

… in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew. The present translation is an experiment in re-presenting the Bible … in a language that conveys with some precision the semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew and at the same time has stylistic and rhythmic

integrity as literary English. … The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for explaining the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible. This impulse may be attributed … also to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible—indeed, transparent—to all. …

… Biblical Hebrew, in sum, has a distinctive music, a lovely precision of lexical choice, a meaningful concreteness, and a suppleness of expressive syntax that by and large have been given short shrift by translators with their eyes on other goals. The present translation, whatever its imperfections, seeks to do fuller justice to all these aspects of biblical style in the hope of making the rich literary experience of the Hebrew more accessible to readers of English.

New Koren translation (Magerman Edition) (2021), publisher's preface
Source of translation: R. Jonathan Sacks translated the Torah and Psalms; R. Dr Tzvi Hersh Weinreb translated Jeremiah and Mishlei; other translators ('scores') include Jessica Sacks and Sara Daniel
Source of Hebrew text: based on edition of Wolf Heidenheim (1757-1832, Germany), and Leningrad Codex; prepared in the 1950s by a team of Jewish scholars led by Eliyahu Koren; approved by R. Moshe Feinstein and R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Our [translation] aims to stand out through its emphasis on authentically conveying the *hadrat kodesh*, the sacred majesty, of the original Hebrew. More specifically, we have created a translation that:

- is readable and stylistically sound to the modern eye and ear, without compromising accuracy or scholarly integrity,
- whispers the tonality of the Hebrew original,
- maintains the beauty and the majestic quality of the poetry and prose of Tanakh,
- is faithful to the classical Jewish interpretive tradition, while cognizant of contemporary scholarship,
- invites the contemporary reader to experience afresh the timeless stories and wisdom contained in the Hebrew scriptures.

... The translators who took part in this project ... were chosen primarily for their uniformly superb literary abilities. After translation, each text was edited and reviewed several times by leading scholars of biblical history, language, and literature to ensure the high level of accuracy and integrity readers should expect ... With consummate skill and close attention to style, our literary editors helped craft the translations in dialogue with the translators, followed by the attentions of copy editors and consistency editors, as well as multiple rounds of proofreading. Throughout, we have prioritized the experience of the English, with the aim that those holding this volume will forget that they are reading a translation ... Every translation is an interpretation. While we have made use of contemporary approaches to understanding Tanakh, we are also committed to the way the Tanakh, and in particular the Torah, has been received and understood in the Jewish tradition. ... In the instances where a rabbinic reading was chosen against the apparent grain of the literal one, we have marked this with a footnote.

2. The problem of poetry and literal meanings: Song of Songs 7: 1-4

שׁוּבִי שׁוּבִי הַשּׁוּלַמִּית שׁוּבִי שׁוּבִי וְנֶחֱזֶה־בָּךְ מַה־תֶּחֱזוּ בַּשּׁוּלַמִּית כִּמְחֹלַת הַמַּחֲנָיִם: מַה־יָּפוּ
פְעָמַיִךְ בַּנְּעָלִים בַּת־נָדִיב חַמּוּקֵי יְרֵכַיִךְ כְּמוֹ חֲלָאִים מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָמָּן: שָׁרְרֵךְ אַגַּן הַסַּהַר
אַל־יֶחְסַר הַמָּזֶג בִּטְנֵךְ עֲרֵמַת חִטִּים סוּגָה בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים: שְׁנֵי שָׁדַיִךְ כִּשְׁנֵי עֳפָרִים תָּאֳמֵי צְבִיָּה:

<u>Artscroll Stone Tanach (1996)</u>

[1] The nations have said to me, 'Turn away, turn away from God, O nation whose faith in Him is perfect, turn away, turn away, and we shall choose nobility from you.'

But I replied to them, 'What can you bestow upon a nation of perfect faith commensurate even with the desert camps encircling?'

[2] But your footsteps were so lovely when shod in pilgrim's sandals, O daughter of nobles. The rounded shafts for your libations' abysslike trenches, handiwork of the Master Craftsman. [3] At earth's very center your Sanhedrin site is a crescent basin of ceaseless, flowing teaching; your national center an indispensable heap of nourishing knowledge hedged about with roses. [4] Your twin sustainers, the Tablets of the Law, are like two fawns, twins of the gazelle.

<u>New Jewish Publication Society (1985)</u>

[1]   Turn back, turn back,
        O maid of Shulem!
        Turn back, turn back.
        That we may gaze upon you.
        'Why will you gaze at the Shulammite
        In[a] the Mahanaim dance?'
[2]   How lovely are your feet in sandals,
        O daughter of nobles!
        Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
        The work of a master's hand.
[3]   Your navel is like a round goblet—
        Let mixed wine not be lacking!—
        Your belly like a heap of wheat
        Hedged about with lilies.
[4]   Your breasts are like two fawns,
        Twins of a gazelle.

[a] With many manuscripts and editions; others read 'like'. Meaning of entire line uncertain.

<u>Moshe Schapiro, M.H. Mykoff and Gavriel Rubin, *The Living Nach* (1988)</u>

[1] Return, return, O perfect maiden! Return, return, and let us look after you.
How will you look after the perfect maiden? – with rings of dancers!

[2] How lovely are your feet in sandals, O daughter of nobles. Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the handiwork of a craftsman. [3] Your navel is a round goblet which never lacks blended wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat hedged in with roses. [4] Your two breasts are like two fauns, like twin deer.

<u>Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (1995)</u>

1   *Again, O Shulamite,*
       dance again,
       that we may watch you dancing!
       Why do you gaze at the Shulamite
       as she whirls
       down the rows of dancers?
2   How graceful your steps in those sandals,
       O nobleman's daughter.
       The gold of your thigh
       shaped by a master craftsman.
3   Your navel is the moon's
       bright drinking cup.
       May it brim with wine!
       Your belly is a mound of wheat
       edged with lilies.
4   Your breasts are two fawns,
       twins of a gazelle.

<u>Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol 3 (2019)</u>

1   Turn back, turn back, O Shulamite,
         turn back, that we may behold you.
       - Why should you behold the Shulamite
         in the dance of the double rows?
2   - How fair your feet in sandals
         O daughter of a nobleman.
       The curves of your thighs like wrought rings
         the handiwork of a master.
3   Your navel a crescent bowl,
         let mixed wine never lack!
       Your belly a mound of wheat
         hedged about with lilies.
4   Your two breasts like two fawns,
         twins of a gazelle.

<u>New Koren translation (Magerman Edition) (2021)</u>

1   [*He*] Turn back, turn back, Shulamite;[9] turn back, turn; let us see you. Why do you gaze at the
2   Shulamite, as if she were a Maḥanayim[10] dancer? How lovely are your steps in sandals,
3   prince's daughter; the turn of your thighs like jewelry, work of the artist's hands; your navel a
       circular bowl - may it never want for wine; your belly curved like baled wheat, bounded
4   round with lilies. Your two breasts are like young twins of a she-gazelle.

9   Possibly a woman from the town of Shunem, or alternatively, a feminine version of the name Shlomo.
10   Literally 'two camps', Maḥanayim may be the name of a place or a dance.

Translation	Content	Type	Diction	Sources used	Notes	Commentary
Old Jewish Publication Society (1917)	Tanakh (no Hebrew)	1	archaic	All available, ancient & modern	-----	-----
Jerusalem Bible (Koren) (1977)	Tanakh (with Hebrew)	1	archaic	Traditional Jewish, KJV, ?others	-----	-----
Kaplan, *Living Torah* (1981) [others], *Living Nach* (1994-8)	Tanakh (no Hebrew)	3	modern	Traditional Jewish, some others, e.g. Septuagint, KJV	Extensive, explanatory; mostly derived from classical Jewish sources	-----
New Jewish Publication Society (1985)	Tanakh (with Hebrew), also editions without Hebrew	1	modern	All available, ancient & modern	Very short; indicate difficulties & alternatives	Extensive introduction (commentary in *Oxford Jewish Study Bible* version)
Fox, *Five Books of Moses* (1995), *Early Prophets* (2014)	Torah, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings (no Hebrew)	2	modern	All available, ancient & modern	Short, explanatory in nature	Between books and sections
Artscroll Stone Tanach (1996)	Tanakh (with Hebrew)	3	modern	Only traditional Jewish, selected	Short, often homiletic; exclusively derived from classical Jewish sources	Only in single book version; charts & maps at back in single volume edition
Alter, *The Hebrew Bible* (2019)	Tanakh (no Hebrew)	1/2	modern	All available, ancient & modern	----	Introductions, running commentary on translation issues
Chana & Ariel Bloch, *The Song of Songs* (1995)	Song of Songs (Hebrew in commentary)	1	modern	All available, ancient & modern	----	Extensive introduction & detailed commentary
New Koren Tanakh (Magerman Edition)	Tanakh (with Hebrew)	1/3	modern	Traditional Jewish sources, 'contemporary approaches'	Short, often noting linguistic features & problems of Hebrew	Maps, timelines, genealogies at the back

Type 1 = traditional contextual translation, academic base
Type 2 = Buber-Rosenzweig type 'rhetorical' translation
Type 3 = 'traditionalist Orthodox' translation