J-Vault: How to Translate the Bible

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Since Jews worldwide are **beginning a new cycle of Daf Yomi** (one page per day Talmud study), BJPA will be dedicating our August Reader's Guide to the **topic of Jewish Text**. (Watch your email for our newsletter later in the month.) Meanwhile, as a preview, this installment of the J-Vault features an explanation of a major achievement in American Jewish text: **the 1917 JPS Bible.**

J•VAULT
The Berman Jewish Policy Archive (BJPA)

From the J-Vault: ***The New English Translation of the Bible*** (1918)

This article in the 1918 American Jewish Year Book, based on the preface to the JPS Bible released the previous year, explains the project's origins, process and results--all in quite a bit of detail. Excerpts:

> *With the Jews the need of a new translation is twofold. We, too, are naturally eager to have a translation based upon the most recent results of scientific research. At the same time it is our ardent desire that our translation should be prepared by representative scholars of the Jewish faith. All the various Christian denominations, Catholics, Protestants, and so forth, have issued translations of their own, and the Jewish people that produced the prophets, psalmists, and historical writers is certainly entitled to lay before the world its interpretation of the Sacred Book. It is unreasonable to expect that the Jew should allow other denominations to prepare for him the book for his religious needs. Moreover, there are technical difficulties which make it inconvenient for a Jew to use the English versions in his synagogue. The order of the biblical books according to Jewish tradition differs greatly from that adopted by the Church...*
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> *The Jewish Publication Society of America almost at the very outset of its career conceived the plan of the new English translation of the Bible. At its second biennial convention, held on June 5, 1892, the following statement was made: "We look forward to the time when the Society shall furnish a new and popular English rendition of the book which the Jews have given to the world, the Bible, that shall be the work of American Jewish scholars."...*
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> *Professor [Max L.] Margolis devoted himself entirely to the work, and prepared a manuscript draft of the new translation, taking into account*

תורה נביאים וכתובים

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

ACCORDING TO THE MASORETIC TEXT

A NEW TRANSLATION

WITH THE AID OF PREVIOUS VERSIONS AND WITH CONSTANT CONSULTATION OF JEWISH AUTHORITIES

PHILADELPHIA
THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA
5677–1917

the existing English versions, the standard commentaries, ancient and modern, the translations already made for the Jewish Publication Society of America, the divergent renderings from the Revised Version prepared for the Jews of England, the marginal notes of the Revised Version, and the changes of the American Revisers. Due weight was given to the ancient versions as establishing a tradition of interpretation, notably the Septuagint and the versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, the Targums, the Peshitta, the Vulgate, and the Arabic version of Saadya. Talmudic and midrashic allusions and all available Jewish commentators, both the great mediaeval authorities, like Rashi, Kimhi, and Ibn Ezra, and the moderns, S. D. Luzzatto, Malbim, and Ehrlich, as well as all the important non-Jewish commentators, were consulted. A copy of the manuscript was sent in advance to the members of the Board of Editors in order to give them ample time to consider the merits of every improvement proposed by the Editor-in-Chief and to enable them to make new suggestions not included in the draft. Sixteen meetings, each lasting ten days or more, covering a period of seven years (1908-1915), were held, at which the proposals in this manuscript and many additional suggestions by the members of the Board were considered. Each point was thoroughly discussed, and the view of the majority was incorporated into the manuscript. When the Board was evenly divided, the Chairman cast the deciding vote...

Before being sent to the printer the manuscript was once more examined in order to harmonize, as far as possible, the various suggestions made in the course of seven years. The first proof of the entire work was sent to each member of the Board for revision. The various corrections and suggestions made by the Editors were tabulated, and those which were supported by a majority or by a general rule of the Board were immediately inserted in the proof. There remained about three hundred cases for which the Editor-in-Chief and Chairman did not think it advisable to assume responsibility, and these were referred to the Board for discussion at the final meeting, the seventeenth, which took place in the autumn of 1915...

The new translation is the first for which a group of men representative of Jewish learning among English-speaking Jews assume joint responsibility, all previous efforts in the English language having been the work of individual translators. It has a character of its own. It aims to combine the spirit of Jewish tradition with the results of biblical scholarship, ancient, mediaeval, and modern. It gives to the Jewish world a translation of the Scriptures done by men imbued with the Jewish consciousness, while the non-Jewish world, it is hoped, will welcome a translation that presents many passages from the Jewish traditional point of view...

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