

Gender-Related Changes to NJPS

Methodology: Frequently Asked Questions

Answered by David E. S. Stein, Revising Translator

NOTE: The following answers supersede the discussion in the book's preface.

Assessing Translations

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- Q.** Is a gender-accurate rendering a true translation—or an interpretation?
- Q.** Does a gender-accurate translation obscure a text's underlying sexism?
- Q.** If male language in Hebrew can have a neutral sense, why not generally render it into English with male language that likewise can have a neutral sense (such as “man” and “he”)—as NJPS did?

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 can 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 inclusive while the other is not, which one prevails in translation?
- Q.** How did you render in cases of doubt as to the intended gender?
- Q.** If *ish* means “man,” why did you translate it in so many different ways?
- Q.** What methodology do you use to analyze a term in a given verse?

Assessing Translations

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

A. Actually, 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, its translation committee strove to convey the plain-sense meaning; they valued clarity of expression; they employed idioms that are familiar to the audience; and they emphasized a religious message.

In adapting the NJPS translation for gender accuracy, my 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, my rendering techniques were the same as those that NJPS used as a matter of course. At the same time, the URJ translation’s ascriptions of gender are *both more accurate and more precise* (less ambiguous) than NJPS. To borrow an engineering term, the present adapted translation 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 a true translation—or an interpretation?

A. It's not possible for a translator to do anything other than interpret! Few if any Hebrew words or phrases have an exact equivalent in English, so translators can strive only to get “close enough” to the original.

Further, consider the special nature of the biblical Hebrew text. Its 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 the same blue tiles to represent the sky, to form part of an ocean wave, and to stand in for the iris of a person's eye. Like a mosaic, the biblical text is fashioned so that its meaning inheres less in *individual words* and more in *the arrangement of words*—their juxtaposition and groupings.

The NJPS translation approach (which I've 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 an art historian who interprets our hypothetical mosaic in terms of concepts and conventions in the artist's day. Rather than focusing on individual tiles, we learn what the original audience would have perceived.

The NJPS translation addresses itself to an audience that wishes to focus more on *the picture's message* than on each individual tile. Even so, NJPS avoids paraphrase whenever it can be more precise. It would not describe our hypothetical mosaic picture so broadly as to say, “A girl is standing at the shore.” (That would leave out too many interesting details.)

In contrast, some translators strive for word-for-word rendering. *Such an approach is a matter of interpretation, too*—in that it highly 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 given word hyperliterally, or they will employ a vague, general rendering. Such a decision presumes that the word is more important—more meaningful—than the phrase or passage in which it appears.

In short, when translating from one language to another, interpretation is unavoidable. Bible professor Adele Berlin has wisely described 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 a text’s underlying sexism?

A. On the contrary, my goal was to convey gender *if and when* the Torah text places gender in the foreground. In striving for historical accuracy, we wanted to convey the text’s clear gender distinctions forthrightly.

In preparing our translation, we regularly *avoided* broadly gender-inclusive wording if it was likely to mislead our readers into thinking that women were in view. Where the ancient audience would have perceived second-person language as addressing men only, the present translation reflects that. The same goes for passages where the text uses general terms when it refers to social institutions that were either all-male (the army) or typically male (the leadership council). In those passages, the URJ translation is actually less “inclusive” than NJPS.

As revising translator I did not pass judgment on how the Torah constructed gender. My renderings neither commend nor condemn how the ancients perceived the text. They merely attempt to convey it accurately and precisely.

Q. If male language in Hebrew can have a neutral sense, why not generally render it into English with male language (such as “man” and “he”) that likewise can have a neutral sense?

A. For several reasons. First, because *the two languages operate differently with regard to gender*. The gender implications of “male” language in Hebrew is actually often *more inclusive* than their so-called equivalent terms in English. Take, for example, the word *ach*, which literally means “brother” when it refers to a specific individual. However, when it refers to a *category* of persons, by default they can be either men or women—just not *solely* female. (See my article “[The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew](#).”) Yet today’s English does not use “brother” in that way; it always has a male reference. So a translation that renders *ach* with “brother” can sound more “male-oriented” than the original.

A second reason to avoid using a generic “man” or “he” is that *contextual precision is the NJPS hallmark*; for that reason, readers reasonably expect its

male terms to refer to males. Especially in NJPS, such words, when used generically, are liable to be misread, especially upon first encounter.

Let's look again at the word *ach*. When it refers to a *category* of persons, NJPS variously renders it as “neighbor,” “kin,” and “kinsman.” Given the existence of gender-neutral options (“neighbor” or “kin”), a reader who encounters “kinsman” has good reason to infer that only the male gender must be in view. Yet such is not always the case. The ambiguity can be confusing.

A third reason to avoid using a generic “he” (and the like) is that *readers today are all too likely to misread it*, because we tend to perceive the translated Bible as more male-oriented than the original audience perceived the Hebrew text to be. We imagine the Israelites as having been more “patriarchal” (or as some would put it, unrelievedly sexist) than they actually were.

Such bias means that a substantial number of readers overlook that a male pronoun is being used generically. The clearly inclusive noun to which that “he” points 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, this Hebrew wording's reference 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.

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. “Surely a male was the only ‘person’ who counted in the patriarchal past.” In short, they understand the NJPS translation incorrectly to mean “that man shall be cut off from his kin.”

Gender and the Torah Text

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

A. That would be appropriate for liturgical purposes. 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 they would have understood even fairly similar terms as having different gender implications.

For example, the Hebrew noun *av* literally means “father” when it refers to a specific individual. When it refers to a *category* of persons, however, by default they can be either men or women—just not *solely* female. Thus the plural form, *avot*, can refer to either “fathers” or “ancestors.”

The plural appears occasionally in the expression *elohei avotecha* (literally, “your *avot* deity”). In the contexts of loyalty and of communication, the Israelites would have viewed that phrase in light of how they were raised: their God was first of all their household’s patron deity, their *elohei av*. (Their main sense of personal identity was as a member of their respective household—a corporate organization that was known as a *beit av*.) This is evident in the book of Genesis, which relates that the matriarchs worshipped the same God as the patriarchs; it quotes each of the foremothers as invoking the Eternal by name. Therefore the URJ translation generally renders *elohei avotecha* as “God of your ancestors.”

Meanwhile, a similar expression refers to the covenantal promises of land, *asher nishba la-avotecha* (“as [God] swore to your *avot*”). The Israelites would have viewed that phrase in light of how they managed real estate: patrimonially. Certain men were entrusted with the knowledge of local soil and climate, in order to husband the land. Typically they passed down the land’s title to another male who had been raised on that same piece of property. The paterfamilias represented the entire household.

The ancient audience would have understood that any promise of land acquisition was directed to the household’s head. The entire household would of course work the land and benefit from it—but in the foreground was the paterfamilias. This explains why the book of Genesis relates that God made all promises of Canaan’s land specifically to such householders: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore our translation generally renders the noun *avot* in the expression *asher nishba la-avotecha* as “fathers.”

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

A. When we read, we construct a text's meaning partly out of our background assumptions. Readers with different assumptions can thus perceive a text quite differently.

Consider this 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* ("a party") designates anyone who sells a daughter into slavery. Grammatically speaking, two features are worth noting. First, when referring to a *category* of persons (as here), *ish* is as close to a gender-inclusive term as Hebrew grammar allows, for it does not specify the gender of those persons to whom it refers (except to require that they cannot be *solely* female). Second, the pronominal suffix *-o* that refers back to the noun *ish* is masculine, but that form is simply a matter of proper grammar (because the syntactic gender of nouns and pronouns must match); it says nothing about the human referent's gender.

Meanwhile, in ancient Israel, the idea that not only a father but also a mother might sell their child would not have been surprising. (A last resort, yes, but not surprising.) My translation note adduces evidence that the Bible's ancient audience would have been well aware that in the absence of a father, a mother had the legal authority to sell a child, and that some mothers in fact did so. That audience would have taken this social reality into account when interpreting the biblical law. They would have known not to exclude women from view.

In contrast, many contemporary readers fail to conceive of a mother's selling a child; they imagine that only a father would do so, or that only fathers had such legal authority over children in ancient, "patriarchal" societies. When they read "when a man sells his daughter as a slave," they think only of men.

That difference in conception was a deciding factor in our determination to render inclusively: "when a parent sells a daughter as a slave."

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

A. Yes, but they didn't need to think about it as consciously and carefully as we analyze the text today. Typical Israelites would have instantly recognized certain behaviors as inappropriate for their gender. As mentioned in the preface, so-

cial scientists 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 arise daily that challenge the idea of what is truly “manly” or “womanly” behavior, prompting the revisiting of gender definitions.

Furthermore, the Israelites were constantly sorting out the implied gender of individuals or groups under discussion. Surely they learned to do this as children. When listening to another person speak, Israelites often inferred a referent’s gender indirectly, from (for example) the type of reference and the accompanying verbal inflections. They attended not only 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.

Contemporary students of Bible agree that the ancient audience listened to sacred texts discriminatingly, 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]. In the same way, that audience used contextual clues—grammatical, rhetorical, and topical—to apprehend a given term’s referential gender. Surely the ancient audience was as subtle in their reading of gender clues as we currently imagine them to have been in all other aspects of comprehending literature.

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 elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the Mesopotamians recognized more than two genders [McCaffrey; Asher-Greve].)

The factors that most would have 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, ancient Near Eastern so-

ciety was organized by patrimonial households. Certain men featured as householders and in formal communal leadership, representing the populace at large. Most men were subordinate to them. 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, but not on the battlefield.

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.” (Hoffner, p. 327)

“Weaponry is strongly emblematic of the male gender throughout the ancient Near East.” (McCaffrey, p. 383)

SYMBOLS OF GENDER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

“The symbols for virile manhood were the bow and arrow . . . and those of womanhood the spindle or distaff.” (Hoffner, pp. 328–329)

WOMEN AS MANAGERS OF PRODUCTION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

In . . . Israelite households, older women served as household managers, instructing . . . daughters, daughters-in-law, nieces, slaves, servants, and other dependents in the array of women's tasks. . . . A senior woman would have had some authority over male servitors as well as over children.”

(Meyers, “Women in Ancient Israel—An Overview,” in *TAWC*, pp. xlv–xlvi)

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. . . .

“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.”

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 . . . 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. When did the Israelites take the Torah's male language as neutral?

A. They used an established, matter-of-course convention of reading. It depended upon the nature of the *reference*. Here's the rule that they followed: *whenever male language refers to a category of persons, it functions effectively as gender neutral*. That is, judging only from the wording that refers to such persons, they could be either male or female. This rule holds true equally for utterances couched in the grammatical first person, second person, and third person.

How do we know that the audience read so-called masculine language and male terms according to that rule? The proof is that certain passages in the biblical text are written in such a way that they make sense *only when read according to that rule*. Meanwhile, the rest of the text is written in a manner that is *consistent* with this rule (although it's not so obviously required there). Surely the Bible's composers knew their audience and wrote according to shared conventions of reading, so that their texts would be properly understood. Therefore we can safely infer that the audience followed that rule. It must have been taken for granted.

See further my article "[Gender Representation in Biblical Hebrew.](#)"

Q. Why is it hard to tell whether a given Hebrew term is gender-inclusive?

A. Languages are not that precise. In ancient Hebrew, the generic usage of masculine forms was the normal way—and almost the *only* way—to convey a gender-neutral reference. This was *a matter of convention*, as in many languages besides Hebrew. The Torah's writers did make regular and repeated recourse to that normal way of referring to persons without regard to gender.

At the same time, the biblical writers often used *gender-neutral* language to refer to a *male-only* group. They would do because they knew that in their audience's minds, the referents' gender was already understood from the situation. Nowadays we do much the same thing in English without giving it a second thought. We use gender-neutral terms like "athletes" or "players" to refer to members of teams in the NFL—an all-male sports league. In other words, just because the *wording* is gender neutral doesn't mean that women are in view.

Both in English and in ancient Hebrew, it's left up to the audience to sort out the gender implications of a reference that's couched in gender-neutral terms. Whenever the Torah used masculine forms to refer to *categories* of persons, its

composer(s) could rely upon the audience to assess the implicit gender of those categories *in light of their daily experiences of life* and of language.

In other words, a given Torah text draws upon both its *co-text* (surrounding text) and its cultural *context*. They supply implicit information. Indeed, in order to convey meaning, Hebrew by its nature relies more on the co-text than English does. And like all speakers and writers, the Torah communicates plenty by what it does *not* say. (Why spell out what could go without saying? Why waste words?)

Today, in order to comprehend the Torah in the same way as our ancient ancestors, we have to learn to read the text as they did.

Q. How did literary genre affect the audience’s reading of gender clues?

A. A genre’s conventions can create certain expectations with regard to gender. In particular, legal statements deal 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 social roles (such as creditor or slave owner) were treated in the laws only in so-called male terms. And yet women occasionally participated in those activities in real life. 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 masculine terms. As I explained above, whenever that language refers to *categories* of persons, it functions as gender neutral. The text’s audience would then parse the legal categories in terms of their own experience. They would think about the women they know—say, their newly married niece whose dowry included a slave, or their sister who has begun to manage her late husband’s estate, or the harlot in the next village who happens to own a troublesome ox—and be interested in how the text’s civil and criminal laws applied to those situations.

In a society where women sometimes functioned in the capacities to which the laws refer, the audience would tend to construe the legal texts *juridically*—that is, inclusively.

For that reason, I concluded that in a legal text, for any case in which gender was not at stake, *women were in view unless it could be shown that the situation categorically did not apply to them.*

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

A. The one that is most *in the foreground*. In a plain-sense translation, as a rule, only one meaning can appear at a time. Thus the translator's charge is to decide what the text's ancient audience would have perceived as occupying the foreground of their mental image. Then the translator makes sure to convey that sense of the term.

To the ancient Israelites, the foreground often had a male aspect. They experienced as real and concrete their society's gendered social institutions: the typically male head of the household; the typically male inheritance of land; the typically male leadership of the tribes; the male participation in the militia; etc. In those roles, certain men would represent a family, village, or nation. So in the minds of the text's audience, any reference to such an institution tended to conjure up an image of *certain men carrying out their responsibilities.*

For this reason, the URJ translation's rendering of some passages is more explicitly gendered than in the original NJPS translation.

Q. How did you render in cases of doubt as to the intended gender?

A. When the references were non-specific and when the intended gender of those persons was not clear, I tended to err on the side of *gender-neutral* language in translation, because (as explained above) that was how the Israelites construed the Hebrew wording by default. Nevertheless it remains possible that the audience knew enough from the situation that it was obvious to them that women were excluded from view. Today, however, we are relatively ignorant about the conditions in ancient Israel, so we may never know for sure.

One example of a gray area is the auxiliary ritual functionary (designated by the noun *ish*, literally “participant”) who administers the waters of lustration (Num. 19:18). Although according to the Bible only cadres of men handled sacrificial blood and served as guards, we hear only vague generalities about the participation of women in other aspects of the cult (that is, the Tabernacle and the Temple rituals). Is it significant that this particular functionary was not specified as being either a priest or a Levite? Or did such an affiliation go without saying? I simply don’t know.

Another example of a gray area is those who are instructed to wear tassels on the “corners” of their garment (Num. 15:37–41). I do not know what warrant the ancient audience might have had, if any, to exclude women from view.

In those cases and a few others, after making my best guess, I resorted (either in the printed commentary or in my online note) to some equivalent of the phrase employed so forthrightly and so often in NJPS footnotes with regard to other aspects of the text: “Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.”

Q. If *ish* means “man,” why translate it in so many different ways?

A. For two reasons. First of all, because the premise is wrong. The noun *ish* does not actually denote “man.” Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the Bible treats it instead as a relational term. It is used to affiliate the noun’s direct referent (the person being pointed to) with the situation, or with another person or a group. When referring to human beings, the basic sense of *ish* is roughly equivalent to the English words “participant” or “member.”

When a given situation calls for the presence of an intermediary, such as the delivery of a message from one party to another, that context evokes a specialized meaning of *ish*: “one who is representing the interests of another party.” Often *ish* is used conspicuously to designate that agent—whom we can think of as a special kind of “participant” in the situation.

(Even though “man” is not our noun’s denotative meaning, it can still connote a “man” or point to a man. Sometimes *ish* is counterposed with a feminine equivalent noun, *ishah*; such phrasing implicitly indicates that *ish* is pointing only to a non-womanly referent—i.e., a man. At other times, *ish* is used to designate a

member of an obviously male-only group. But those outcomes are incidental; they are created by the co-text or the context, not by the word itself.)

The second reason for so many different renderings is that English idiom usually prefers the most specific term. English has many ways to designate someone in terms of the kinds of relationship that the Bible uses *ish* to indicate. When we write or speak English, we normally choose (usually automatically) a particular noun that “goes with” the particular context. To indicate affiliation, we say variously “a domestic *partner*” and “a *party* to the dispute” and “an *opponent* in battle” and a “*member* of the tribe” and “a diplomatic *envoy*” and “a secret *agent*” and “a sheriff’s *deputy*.”

Although biblical Hebrew uses the same word *ish* in all of those contexts (and more), I have rendered it in each case according to the particular context. I have done this especially in the printings since 2006, when the true nature of *ish* became apparent to me. (Thus it is reflected less often in the 1st and 2nd printings of the URJ *chumash*, which were produced in 2005.) That approach is in accord with our base translation, which strove to provide a contextually precise rendering into idiomatic English.

For more details, please see my article “[The Noun שׂר in Biblical Hebrew: A Term of Affiliation.](#)”

Q. What methodology do you use to analyze a term in a given verse?

A. Given a Hebrew term that applies to human beings, the typical entry in my translator’s notes walks through the following steps. It begins by emulating how I believe the ancient Israelite audience analyzed that term. I infer their approach from linguists’ description of how the human mind handles language in general, as well as from the structure of Hebrew (as being a language with two grammatical genders that bear a certain rough correspondence to the social gender—manliness or womanliness—of a person being referred to).

According to Talmy Givón (a discourse-oriented functional linguist), the human mind comprehends an utterance or text via two parallel processing “channels”: grammar and word meaning (that is, vocabulary or lexis). The grammatical

channel distinguishes between information that is already given versus that which is new, as it assesses what is the topic and what is being said about it. Meanwhile, the lexical channel considers all known meanings of the words used, within whichever cognitive domains seem germane to the communication underway—which in turn is inferred both from other words in the co-text, and from the situation. The audience's process of construing a coherent text also includes an analysis of what would go without saying.

Of the two language processing channels, the grammatical one is the fastest. Therefore in my analysis I consider grammatical factors first. I ask: In this clause, what is the subject and what is the predicate; which are the nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech? (Generally, the answers to this initial question come from published parsings, such as the grammatical tags in the Groves-Wheeler Westminster Hebrew Morphology; therefore my analysis takes them largely for granted.)

When inferring the gender of the party in question, the key grammatical factor is the reference's specificity. That is: Is the term being used to *categorize* (classify) the party in question, or to *identify* that party? (Categorizing references do not necessarily say anything about the person's gender, whereas Hebrew grammar requires that an identifying reference must correspond to the person's gender. In the latter case, the audience is more able to infer gender from the grammar used by the narrator or speaker.) Answering that question requires looking at how the reference is framed, and at what are the co-referents, if any, to that same party.

After establishing the relevant grammar and the type of reference, I assess what—if anything—the word itself says about gender. If the term itself is gendered, then its rendering should be gendered. (The nouns *zachar* ["male"] and *gever* ["manly man"] are among the few words that by definition exclude a gender from view. And in the latter four books of the Torah, those terms refer to human beings only 39 times and 6 times, respectively. The most common human nouns can be shown to apply to women somewhere in the Bible—which shows that when that word is used, women cannot be excluded from view anywhere on lexical grounds alone.)

In any case, I consider the word's denotation, starting with its "primary" (most common) meaning. I consider how a particular sense of the word may be evoked by the co-text and the context (semantic or cognitive domain).

Next I ask whether a gender restriction is germane but goes without saying. (Narrators and speakers often refer to a gendered group via terms and grammar that don't specify social gender.) Here is where the nature of the target language—in this case, English—comes into play. For English idiom by default does not mention a referent's gender (outside of personal pronouns) unless it is both germane and not already evident. Consequently, if gender went without saying in the Hebrew text, it must likewise go without saying in the English text, unless we can be sure that gender is germane yet obscure. In other words, in order to warrant a gendered English rendering in cases where the Hebrew does not specify gender grammatically or lexically, we must first show that *the text's composer(s) had ample reason to rely upon the ancient Israelite audience to know that the situational context surely excludes women from view*. (Note that the burden of proof is on the exclusion.) This will establish that gender is germane for purposes of translation.

Passing that test requires marshalling evidence from the Bible and from what scholars know about ancient Near Eastern society and its worldview.

If it appears that women are indeed excluded from view but this fact went without saying, then I ascertain whether the gendered situation is already evident to contemporary readers, without the translation's needing to be explicit about it. If the contemporary reader is likely to (incorrectly) assume that women are in view, then we have warrant for rendering in gendered terms.

Finally, after assessing what the term means in Hebrew and its gender implications, I consider its equivalent in English. I follow the NJPS translation philosophy of rendering into idiomatic modern English.