

# On Beyond Gender

## Representation of God in the Torah and in Three Recent Renditions into English

David E. S. Stein

Three recently published English translations of the Torah refer to God in unusual ways: They offer the reader the rare experience of encountering the biblical God as a persona who is “beyond” gender. The three renditions, which are of related provenance and presented as “gender accurate” or “gender sensitive,” appear in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, revised edition (2005); *The Contemporary Torah* (2006); and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (2008). Having served as the central member on the translation teams that addressed gender issues, I review considerations for construing God's gender as represented in the Torah. The analysis, based on a reconstruction of ancient plain-sense reading conventions and concepts about deity, explains why a (mostly) gender-neutral translation produces the least distortion of the Torah's God-language. The article then characterizes the three new renditions and their God-language, including the representation of God's name and the rendering of ascriptive imagery.

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JUDAISM RECOGNIZES a God who transcends all of humankind's thought categories, including the societal constructs of “woman” and “man.” Yet such a God has not always been easy to locate within the Bible's English translations, where the Deity usually comes across as a male being. Recently, however, two venerable Jewish publishers have cooperated to produce three books that now afford readers the opportunity of encountering the biblical God as a persona who is “beyond” human gender classification.

The publishers characterize these new translations as “gender accurate” or “gender sensitive” because of how they treat language related to the Torah's human characters. I was the central member

on the translation teams that addressed gender issues.<sup>1</sup> Our overall task was to focus on the text's *plain sense*—what it conveys when read according to normal rules of grammar, in light of context. In general, we sought, as Phyllis Bird has aptly put it, “to enable a modern audience to overhear an ancient conversation, rather than to hear itself addressed directly.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet for language referring to God, we made an exception: we preferred non-gendered terms by default. We did so because the translations are intended primarily for devotional use in study and liturgy. A contemporary Jewish devotional audience relates to a non-gendered God;<sup>3</sup> we have given that audience an opportunity to encounter its God

more directly, without having to keep hurdling over “He”s and “the LORD”s. By rendering in gendered English only where gender is germane in the Hebrew (which is almost never the case), we have created a contemporary Targum.<sup>4</sup>

The publishers made that principal translation choice explicitly, as a matter of contemporary ideology. Yet I myself have since concluded that in an otherwise gender-accurate or gender-sensitive rendition, the use of (mostly) gender-neutral God-language also conveys the sense of the “ancient conversation” *with less distortion* than does rendering in terms of “he-his-him-himself.”

Because my view at first glance contradicts that of most academic scholars of the Bible, I devote most of this article to making the case for it.<sup>5</sup> Part 1 addresses the translation distortion (or accuracy) issue, but only after investigating what the Torah text meant in Hebrew. That is, I first reconstruct ancient reading conventions and concepts about deity, which I then use to assess how the Torah represented God to its original audience.<sup>6</sup> Only with such knowledge can one determine the accuracy of an English translation. Part 2 describes the three recently published renditions and characterizes them in terms of their distinctive treatments of God-language.

In short, this article takes us on a visit to the ancient Near East—with grammar, linguistics, religious history and literary criticism as our travel companions. Our journey ends in the contemporary USA with concrete comparisons of three books.

## • 1 •

### GOD-LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY IN TRANSLATION

We cannot reach a firm conclusion about gender in ancient Israelite perceptions of the Torah’s deity,

for two reasons. First, religious beliefs regularly involve paradox, which means we cannot rule out that the Israelites may have construed the Torah’s God as both male *and* at the same time beyond all human categories.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, nowhere does the Torah state outright that its deity is or is not male.<sup>8</sup> Even the Bible’s famous and repeated censure of iconic images (e.g., Deut. 4:15–16) means only that the Deity should not be *visually represented* in (gendered) bodily form. It does not necessarily claim that God’s “person” possesses no bodily form. Indeed, a number of biblical statements imply that the Deity does have a visible form; conversely, some neighboring peoples—who surely imagined *their* deities with bodies—avoided icons in their worship settings, too.<sup>9</sup> Thus, no one today can conclusively prove or disprove that the Torah presents a God that is beyond gender. Any attempt to confirm or deny a meaningful *absence* of something (in this case, an implied gender ascription) is ultimately an argument from silence.

Instead of striving for conclusive proof, I will aim to demonstrate the *plausibility* of the following claim: The composer(s) of the complete Torah had good reason to believe that the ancient audience would construe its deity as a God beyond gender. For linguistic reasons that I shall explain later, establishing plausibility is sufficient grounds to conclude that in an otherwise gender-sensitive translation, a (mostly) gender-neutral English rendering of the God-language is more accurate than the customary masculine pronouns.

By reconstructing ancient reading conventions and concepts about deity, I will come to the following interim conclusions: (1) Neither the Torah’s grammatically “masculine” expressions nor its ascription of “male” imagery required construing God as an inherently male being. (2) Non-gendered conceptions of deity were familiar to the ancient audi-

ence. (3) The Torah's initial and most telling characterization of its deity precludes a gendered reading of God's nature throughout the work.

### *Hebrew Eye for the Non-Gendered Guy*

The Torah text consistently refers to God via wording that grammarians call "masculine" (as opposed to the "feminine" alternative). Typically, when biblical Hebrew refers to a specific being via masculine pronouns, verbal inflections and adjectival forms, this indicates that the speaker ascribes male social gender to the referent.<sup>10</sup> But that is not *necessarily* so, because the situation is not binary. Sometimes a referent's social gender is unknown, ambiguous or indeterminate. Several lines of mutually reinforcing evidence show that in such cases, ancient Israelites would likely have employed masculine language:<sup>11</sup>

- (1) Genesis 38:28–29 employs masculine inflections and pronouns to refer to a subject whose biological sex is not yet known, namely, the possessor of the tiny hand that briefly emerges from Tamar's birth canal.
- (2) Rabbinic Hebrew employs masculine language matter-of-factly to denote a specific person who possesses both male and female sex characteristics (a hermaphrodite). It is also used for a specific person of indeterminate sex.<sup>12</sup>
- (3) In biblical Hebrew, masculine language is used for *nonspecific* gender-inclusive references, suggesting an analogy for *specific* references where the subject's gender identity is not otherwise indicated.

In sum, the use of masculine Hebrew wording does not *necessarily* mean that a particular referent was believed to be male. The Torah's use of masculine God-language means only that God was not thought of as a solely female being. Masculine

wording provides *no proof* that the Torah's composer(s) considered God to be a male deity, nor that its original audience would have construed maleness to be its authorial intent.

### *Gendering the Vehicle without Gendering Its Passenger*

The Torah applies to God imagery drawn from the human realm. Most often the social gender of that imagery is masculine: lord, father, king, householder, redeemer and warrior.<sup>13</sup> However, in the eyes of the ancient audience, such imagery would have said *nothing* about whether the Torah was presenting a male deity per se.

The scholarly literature evinces a fair amount of imprecision and inconsistency regarding how imagery worked when applied to deities. To elucidate this topic, I will construct a framework from several disciplines of linguistics.

The conceptual domain of "deity" is a product of religious consciousness, within which reality is seen to operate by different rules than reality as perceived within mundane consciousness. Thus, ordinary language expression does not suffice.<sup>14</sup> The ancients commonly spoke about the domain of deity by describing a deity as a *person*. Personification of a deity was a matter of idiom; it was part of normal, matter-of-fact discourse in ancient Near Eastern culture.<sup>15</sup>

In cognitive terms, personification was an act of mapping between the conceptual domain of "humankind" and the conceptual domain of "deity." Upon encountering a personification, the audience would at once have recognized a factual incongruity:<sup>16</sup> Deities are not people; the two types of being do not share all of the same characteristics.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, whenever a text referred to deities via "people ideas" that were not automatically characteristic of deities, the audience would have known that it was

referring only to *some* aspect of a deity that is *like* what is expected of people.<sup>18</sup>

Personification of a deity is not a statement of mathematical identity (“God = King”). Nor is it a claim of existential facts about that deity. Rather, it is an “as if” statement. It attributes certain qualities to the deity. It refers to *situational similarity* in structure or function between that deity and a typical person. It is a form of ascription; and it is valid only as far as the analogy extends in that context.

Personification was employed as a vehicle to convey a statement about deity—and especially about one’s *relationship* with deity. For example, three Torah passages—Ex. 4:22, and Deut. 1:31 and 8:5—pair God together with Israel (the nation), likening them to the duo of a father-householder and his firstborn son.<sup>19</sup> In those contexts, such imagery would have evoked a situation natural and familiar to the Israelite audience, whose members lived and worked in patrimonially organized corporate households. It momentarily ascribed to God both a *structural* role as the authority who determined heirship, as well as *functional* roles of preserving the household legacy (including patrimony), and of investing whatever attention was needed to raise a worthy heir.<sup>20</sup>

Upon encountering such an ascription, the Torah’s audience would have sorted through the possibilities in order to ascertain the nature of the intended comparison. So what was the ancients’ interpretive strategy (that is, their conventions of reading) for handling the *social-gender component* of a personification?

Empirical evidence shows that they distinguished the gender of the vehicle from that of the tenor. Even when the subject of an ascription was a human being, the ancients did not restrict themselves to a one-to-one social-gender correspondence. Thus, kinship terms were regularly used ascriptively without gender being at issue. For ex-

ample, in Phoenician royal inscriptions, one regent boasts that “to one person I was a *father*, to another I was a *mother*”; another observes gratefully that “Ba’l made me a *father* and a *mother* to the Danunites.”<sup>21</sup> The Book of Deuteronomy (15:12) explicitly refers to a *female* Israelite slave as a “brother.” A prophecy proclaiming a bright future for the people of Israel poetically assigns a *female* biological function to *male* rulers: “You shall nurse nations’ milk / kings’ breasts you shall suck” (Isaiah 60:16).<sup>22</sup> The authors of all four texts pointedly chose gendered imagery because of special meaning that it conveyed, yet they also expected their audience *not* to identify the gender of the referents with the gender of the images applied to them.

The same goes for the ancients’ application of ascriptive language in the case of a deity. Certain proper names evinced a willingness (by the bearers’ parents) to attribute a female role to a male deity; for example, in the northern Syrian city of Ugarit, an extant text mentions a fellow called “Athtar-Is-Mother,” invoking the (male) god Athtar. Similarly, various ancient Near Eastern prayers address a male deity as “mother and father”; other prayers address a female deity in those terms.<sup>23</sup>

Such usages imply that where the Torah ascribes male imagery to God, the audience (*a*) was not supposed automatically to construe that deity as necessarily male; and (*b*) would have known not to do so as a matter of course. Rather, the audience would have scanned for evidence that gender is germane, asking themselves: Is the masculinity in opposition to, or in negation of, femininity? If so, the imagery might be what Erhard Gerstenberger calls an “attempt to polemicize against female realities.”<sup>24</sup> If not, the audience would assume that the text was making some other point. In all cases where the Torah refers to God as a warrior, lord, king and so forth, they would have seen no indication from the context that gender is at issue.<sup>25</sup>

(Moreover, many of those images occur in poetry, where the genre reinforces the expectation that its vivid imagery is not to be taken literally.) Consequently, in terms of ancient Israelite mores and the plain sense of the passages in question, such imagery says nothing whatsoever about God's social gender.<sup>26</sup>

### *Conceiving of a Non-Gendered Deity: No Problem*

Historians of religion have shown that in the Levant, prior to the genesis of the Israelite people, the high god was depicted as the male head of a household (or of a governing council) of deities. The Torah effectively equates this high god, who was named El, with its deity named *Y-h-w-h*.<sup>27</sup> Historians therefore postulate that *Y-h-w-h* merged with (or displaced) the existing high god in the minds of the Israelites.<sup>28</sup>

That historical reconstruction, if correct, does not mean that the Torah's deity was necessarily understood as male. As I have shown, the Israelites probably did not confuse the Torah's God-imagery (fatherhood, kingship, etc.) with the deity that it referred to. Yet this issue affords us a good opportunity to explore the ancient audience's readiness to entertain the thought of a non-gendered deity. I will now argue on several grounds that in the ancient Near East in Israel's heyday, as well as in Israel itself, deities were often imaged *without* an articulated personality, and thus social gender was *not* an ineluctable property of any deity.

### **The Customary Conception of Deities**

What conception of deities was taken for granted when the Torah was first promulgated? As stated earlier, the denizens of the ancient Near East commonly spoke of each major deity as a person with human attributes—a body, emotions, needs and so

forth—who engaged in activities as a human being does; for example, by interacting with others. And as a matter of course, people attributed a social gender to each such personified deity.

However, the ancients did not *constrain* their view of deities to personal imagery. Edward Greenstein has rightly noted that in ancient Near Eastern literature, “gods are depicted differently depending upon the purposes of the representation.”<sup>29</sup> Regularly, too, the ancients depicted their major deities in *nonpersonal* terms. Typically, they ascribed to each deity a totem animal, a semiprecious stone, a mineral, a celestial body, a particular force or power, a symbolic number and so forth. Particularly when marshaled in combination, these things represented or manifested a given deity.

Modern scholars of the ancient Near East have tended to view an anthropomorphic image of a deity as its primary identity, seeing the other identifiers as mere “symbols” or “abbreviations.” However, another (simpler and more historically plausible) view is that the ancients employed human imagery as one among many alternate ways of evoking an underlying deity's functions and presence.<sup>30</sup> To explain the ancient Egyptians' representation of their deities simultaneously in human, animal and hybrid forms, Egyptologist Siegfried Morenz noted in 1960 that “‘power’ as primary cause . . . can elevate to the rank of deity [both] man and animal, even plant and object, so that neither . . . ceases to be God *in potentia*.”<sup>31</sup> As for Mesopotamia, Assyriologist Barbara Porter holds that a deity was “a set of related but not completely congruent phenomena and qualities, only one of which was imagined as a divine person.”<sup>32</sup> This conception is consistent with patterns of representation for deities specifically in the Levant, including the Land of Israel.<sup>33</sup>

In resorting to a wide variety of expressions, the ancients once again seem to have differentiated be-

tween an underlying religious phenomenon or experience and the imagery (literary or otherwise) that they used to denote it. In other words, the ancients readily imagined and experienced their deities apart from personhood—and thus *apart from* social gender.

The point bears emphasis. Scholars have *assumed* that throughout the ancient Near East, before and during Israel's life as a nation, personhood was viewed as a quintessential, irreducible element of a deity's nature. Arguably, however, attributing personhood (and its attendant social gender) was just one alternative for conveying what a given deity represented.<sup>34</sup>

### The Impact of International Perspective

Linguistic considerations, it appears, further helped some of the ancients to view deity regularly through a non-gendered lens. In contrast with Hebrew and other Semitic tongues, a few Near Eastern languages did not differentiate personal nouns by grammatical gender; the mythic poetry, epics and inscriptions written in those languages speak about male and female deities without linguistic gender distinction.<sup>35</sup> During the last two millennia BCE, male elites among native speakers of Semitic tongues often learned a non-gendered language (Sumerian, Hittite or Luwian), because it enjoyed international scope and literary standing.<sup>36</sup> Given the ancients' concept of the inherent reality of words, this multilingualism had cognitive consequences: The reader became used to viewing deities without grammatical gender cues; and in this view their social gender would not have been part of their nature, for, as Assyriologist and translator Stephanie Dalley has pointed out, "the change in noun categories would mirror a change in the objects which these nouns represented."<sup>37</sup>

It seems likely that for several centuries, at least a few Israelites—namely, the literate elite most

likely to have been involved in producing the Bible—were familiar with the (grammatically non-gendered) Hittite language. Certain cultic regulations in the Torah are strikingly similar (in both detail and literary expression) to Hittite texts unearthed in modern times.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Bible alludes to diplomatic relations between the Israelite and Hittite governments.<sup>39</sup>

### Biblical Presumptions

The Bible's own literary style is further evidence that the Israelites shared a larger Near Eastern conception of deity as not being inherently gendered. I am referring to what has been called "the divine symphony"<sup>40</sup> of voices in the Hebrew Bible: It presents various conceptions of Israel's God, some of which depict a personhood so pale as arguably to be devoid of personality—and therefore of social gender. Although on the whole the God of Israel, in the words of Yochanan Muffs, is "probably the most articulated personality of all Near Eastern deities,"<sup>41</sup> only some of the Bible's specific representations are actually so colorful. Stephen A. Geller characterizes biblical theology in terms of three dominant traditions, and he succinctly summarizes their views of God: "In each one of them, one aspect of the deity predominates. The God of the covenant tradition is a *personality*; of the priestly tradition, a *force*; and of the wisdom tradition, a *principle*."<sup>42</sup> That such distinctive characterizations of the same deity often appear side by side in the same biblical book is *prima facie* evidence that its composer(s) expected the audience not to be fazed by such dramatically different views of deity.

This consideration of the ancient Near Eastern conceptual context—linguistic, iconographic and theological—and the biblical evidence leads me to two conclusions. First, the composer(s) of the Torah plausibly imagined its deity as *something other than a personal being with a particular gender* (at least

in certain genres). Second, the composer(s) of the Torah plausibly had good reason to presume that the text's Israelite audience was prepared to construe *in non-gendered terms* the Torah's insistence on one transcendent Deity (again, at least in some literary settings).

### Marketing an "All-New" Model of Y-h-w-h

Historians of Israelite religion point to (disputed) epigraphic and iconographic evidence that, during the Israelite monarchy and well into the exile, some Israelites thought of their national deity Y-h-w-h as having a female consort.<sup>43</sup> If so, then some among the Torah's audience perhaps worshipped that presumably male Y-h-w-h. What would prevent them from reading such maleness into the deity of the same name whom the Torah champions?

It seems that the Israelites knew of different versions of Y-h-w-h and of 'elohim ("God").<sup>44</sup> Given the apparent variety of ancient conceptions of the deity known by those names, it would have been no surprise to the audience if the Torah was promulgating an idiosyncratic view. The real question, then, is twofold: Does the Torah present its deity as beyond gender? And would this feature have been clear to an ancient audience that took the text on its own terms? (The answer does not depend on how the audience members themselves viewed Y-h-w-h.) So let me now review the Torah's presentation of its deity, assessing the plausibility that the target audience of the composer(s) would construe that deity *as beyond gender*, and would see this *as a distinguishing feature* of that deity.

Of the Bible's many depictions of God, the one that counts most is the *first* one. As Yair Hoffman has put it, the start of the Torah is a "strategic location." Depictions placed there have extra weight.<sup>45</sup> A first impression lingers: As a matter of ordinary reading strategy, later representations must be read

as compatible with the initial one. When the Bible continues to speak about one God as a single character, the audience is expected to construe the representations of this character as coherent and consistent.<sup>46</sup>

What might be termed the Torah's "real" story—that of the relationship between God and human-kind—does not begin until Gen. 1:26.<sup>47</sup> The initial twenty-five verses (extending partway into the sixth day of Creation) are a kind of prologue. Nevertheless, this prologue is crucial for the audience to establish the character of its protagonist, 'elohim ("the deity in question"; usually rendered in English as "God").<sup>48</sup> The question is whether in that passage 'elohim is rendered as a *dramatis persona*—a personage who plays a role—who would be expected to possess gender. Space constraints require me not only to assume that the present reader is familiar with this famous section, but also to give my answer while standing on one foot.<sup>49</sup>

As depicted in Gen. 1:1–25, 'elohim is indeed a persona, albeit minimally so.<sup>50</sup> Relatively weak personification downplays any distinctive social-gender connotations of the predicates—connotations that (in terms of Israelite mores) are lacking anyway. There is nothing peculiarly male here. Masculinity versus femininity is not at issue.

More importantly, this deity is almost nothing like a human being. The incongruities of the personification appear on many levels, starting with the vocabulary. The verbs *b-r'* ("created," 1:1, 21) and *b-r-k* ("blessed," 1:22) set the subject apart from humans.<sup>51</sup>

Strikingly, this persona accomplishes what no literal person could begin to do: organizing the cosmos merely by expressing one's wishes (not even commands!), and without the involvement of, or divine interaction with, anyone else. That is not how human speech works. Dale Patrick points to the resulting paradox: "Here is a persona who pos-

sesses an identity like other (i.e., human) personae, but [it is part of this deity's persona to] surpass all traits of human personae."<sup>52</sup>

Even more strikingly, this persona accomplishes what no *deity* could begin to do. The key incongruity is not simply a matter of *one god* versus *many gods*, but rather the extent of control. As Yochanan Muffs explains, everyone in the audience knows that deities "do not have full control over their fates. . . . They are subject to internal, physical needs but also to external, magical forces" (quite apart from a given deity's need to reckon with other deities and their portfolios).<sup>53</sup> Clearly, no such constraints apply here; this *'elohim* is not "within the system" as other ancient Near Eastern deities (including *Y-h-w-h*) have been heretofore, but rather operates from "outside the system."<sup>54</sup> Thus, the appellative *'elohim* is given new meaning as the passage generates a second-order figurative ascription. It seems to say, "This is not how you have known *'elohim* before." Or more colloquially: "It's not your parents' *Y-h-w-h!*"<sup>55</sup>

Glaring linguistic incongruity (with both the idiom of *personhood* and the conceptual domain of *deity*) functions as a warning to the reader that the implied analogy between this character and either a typical *person* or a typical *deity* must be highly circumscribed. It seems to me that this dual message is reinforced by the form of the communication—the literary genre. Generally, the genres of narrative and (epic) poetry featured strongly personal protagonists, either persons or deities. But Gen. 1:1–25 is neither prose nor poetry<sup>56</sup>—and it features a weakly personified character that is neither person nor deity (as those concepts were normally understood). Like the genre, its subject is something else.

And now the real point: the character in Gen. 1:1–25 is so obviously unlike any known entity that the audience not only receives no warrant to ascribe

social gender, but also would be hard pressed to do so. After all, masculinity (the only realistic option between the genders) has meaning only with regard to a corporeal body, interpersonal interactions, and cultural roles, all of which are conspicuously absent in our passage.

In summary, a plausible ancient reading of the Torah's opening is that it was introducing a deity whose breathtaking otherness demands "beyond gender" categorization. Thus, despite possible prior audience conceptions of a male *Y-h-w-h*, and despite the ascriptive personifications and anthropomorphisms that the Torah subsequently employs, the character of God was supposed to be viewed as beyond gender. For purposes of reading the Torah as a canonical work, allow me to twist Hillel's dictum: "What is inappropriate to the opening, do not do to what's joined to it—that is, the whole Torah. The rest is commentary"—and translation.<sup>57</sup>

### *Conveying the Ancient Situation in Contemporary English*

Having shown it to be *plausible* that the Torah's composer(s) had good reason to believe that the ancient audience would construe its deity as beyond gender, I can now return to the question of translation. Which English rendering least distorts our picture of that plausible ancient understanding of the Torah text: regular use of the customary masculine pronouns, or use of gender-neutral language as the default?

To answer this, I must touch on a crucial difference between Hebrew and English, what linguists call a *semantic asymmetry*.<sup>58</sup> As is well known, in contemporary English the pronoun "he" (and also "his/him/himself," but for simplicity I will focus on "he") almost always refers to a person or an animal. In biblical Hebrew, by contrast, the grammatically masculine pronoun *hu'* corresponds not only to

“he” but also to “it” or “one” or “this.” It often refers to inanimate as well as animate antecedents. Much of the time, what *hu’* conveys has nothing to do with maleness.

One implication of this Hebrew-English semantic asymmetry for translating God-language is that the consistent use in English of masculine wording over-translates the ascription of *personhood* to God. As we have seen, the Torah’s composer(s) often represented God impersonally. Due to the nature of the Hebrew language, the depictions of God could flow from personal to impersonal and back again without alteration at the level of grammar. Grammar alone did not force either the composer(s) or the audience to decide whether a given reference to God involved a personification. In contrast, the use of “he” in English imposes personification on the text throughout. It obscures the Torah’s varying representations of God (and, some would add, its varying theologies).<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, in both languages, when a particular personal subject is indeed in view, masculine pronouns usually denote someone of masculine gender, but they are used also when gender is unknown or irrelevant.<sup>60</sup> This linguistic feature leads to imprecision, by leaving ambiguous what exactly the speaker believes about the referent’s social gender. Usually, the context of situation then makes that belief clear—but not, as we have seen, in the case of the Torah’s God-language in Hebrew.

“Gender-sensitive” (or “gender-accurate”) Bible translations reduce the ambiguity of references to *human beings* by avoiding the generic usage of masculine pronouns. Yet, until now, such renditions have preserved the traditional masculine pronouns for *God*. God is the only “person” whose gender is not overtly specified and yet is referred to as “he.”<sup>61</sup> Ironically, due to this inconsistent English usage, God arguably comes across as a more male character than ever. (Unfortunately, those pronouns,

which are mostly an artifact of the translation, misleadingly imply that the overblown male orientation is the work of the Torah itself—which contemporary readers already tend to believe.)

How best, then, to preserve the gender ambiguity of God-language in a gender-sensitive translation? By consistently applying—for both human and divine referencees—the same grammatical rule: use gender-neutral language as the default, while reserving masculine pronouns for male characters.<sup>62</sup>

A rendering of God-language that is gender neutral by default is not perfect. Even when done well, some awkwardness occasionally remains. However, two advantages clinch its superiority in a gender-sensitive translation. First, it respects the indeterminacy of the Hebrew text. We cannot today *prove* whether the Torah is presenting a male deity, or a deity beyond gender, or both. (Neither possibility can be dismissed, for the matter went without saying.) The beauty of a nuanced gender-neutral rendering is that it allows for all possibilities. It does not prejudice our reading. Second, by conveying gender only where the text makes an issue of it germane, such a translation allows us to experience more precisely the (relatively limited) extent to which both divine personhood and gender were part of the “ancient conversation.”

## • 2 •

### THREE RECENT ENTRANTS INTO THE FIELD OF TRANSLATION

In recent decades, more than a dozen “gender-sensitive” or “gender-accurate” Bible translations have appeared in English. Remarkably, however, none of them (at least none that we could find) has altered the customary pronouns used *for God*; these have remained masculine. The three recent works to which I alluded at the start of this article have thus provided new options for interested readers.

The first of these to appear, in 2005, was a thorough reworking of *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* as edited in the 1970s by W. Gunther Plaut for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC; currently known as the Union for Reform Judaism, URJ). Redesigned in 2005 for ease of use in synagogue worship, the revised edition incorporates a “gender-accurate” translation featuring a 1999 rendition of Genesis by the late Chaim Stern. For the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy,<sup>63</sup> the URJ Press asked me to revisit the widely used NJPS (“New JPS”) translation, a contextual rendering of the Hebrew text’s plain sense into the idiom of modern English.<sup>64</sup> Marshalling an unusual degree of cooperation between two publishers, the URJ contracted with the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) for joint ownership of a newly created “gender-accurate” adaptation of the NJPS version. As the revising editor, I was privileged to work with URJ Press editor-in-chief Hara Person and JPS editor-in-chief Ellen Frankel, as well as with Bible scholars Carol Meyers and Adele Berlin as consulting editors. The changes that we made relate almost exclusively to social gender.<sup>65</sup>

JPS itself then decided to build upon the URJ-sponsored work by issuing *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (2006), whose scholarly abbreviation is CJPS (“Contemporary JPS”).<sup>66</sup> The CJPS effort engaged much the same editorial team, not only to extend the same methodology to the book of Genesis (for added consistency), but also to then revisit the treatment of certain expressions throughout the Torah in light of what we learned from working on Genesis.

URJ Press, in turn, borrowed back from JPS in updating the revised *Modern Commentary* edition (third printing, 2006) to reflect new philological insights gained from preparing *The Contemporary Torah*.

In 2008, the URJ Press published *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and co-edited by Andrea Weiss. This work (which features commentary by one hundred women, most of them academic scholars or rabbis) incorporates, alongside the Hebrew text, the second-generation “gender-accurate” URJ translation of the Torah, with a few local changes.

In short, the three renditions are three iterations. Both URJ Press publications (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary* and *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*) feature essentially the same “gender-accurate” translation; and their renditions of Exodus through Deuteronomy are nearly identical to those found in *The Contemporary Torah*, the “gender-sensitive” JPS version.

What are the distinctive approaches of these versions, relative to other translations and to each other, as they relate to God-language?<sup>67</sup>

### *Employing Masculine Pronouns Only Where Germane*

All three renditions incorporate a translation that renders the Torah’s references to God in non-gendered English, unless there is contextual indication that gender is germane. In practice, this meant avoiding gendered pronouns for God.<sup>68</sup> Typical editing approaches included the following:

<u>NJPS</u>	<u>Stern’s Genesis or Adapted Versions of NJPS</u>
He said	[God] said
His people	God’s people
His covenant	the Covenant
His laws that He enjoined upon you	the laws that were enjoined upon you
His voice	the divine voice <sup>69</sup>
the fear of Him	the fear of God

In only one passage (Exodus 15:1–4, 21), in which God is depicted as a warrior, did we editors recog-

nize ancient poetic license and convey the imagery via masculine pronouns.<sup>70</sup>

### Representing God's Name

God's name in Hebrew—known as the tetragrammaton—has no true equivalent in English. Indeed, according to some Jewish traditions, it can barely be represented even in Hebrew: In antiquity, some Jewish copyists of Hebrew texts (working on what are now called the Dead Sea Scrolls) set the Name apart from the rest of their manuscript by writing it in an archaic Hebrew script. Nearly as old is the religious taboo that precludes writing the Name in Hebrew with vowels that would suggest its pronunciation. Even today, for Jews who read the text devotionally, the Name cannot simply be transcribed into English in the same way that, say, שָׂרָה (*sarah*) becomes “Sarah.” (Such distinctive treatment for God's name appears to be a reflex of monotheism, as well as of the Name's reputed magical power.)<sup>71</sup>

The most obvious distinction between CJPS and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, on the one hand, and prior Torah translations into English, on the other, lies in their handling of the challenge posed by the tetragrammaton. For example, in Gen. 27:20, blind Isaac asks his son (Jacob, disguised as Esau) how he managed to return from the hunt so quickly. The son replies:

כִּי הִקְרָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְפָנַי

- oJPS (1917):<sup>72</sup> “Because **the LORD** thy God sent me good speed.”
- NJPS (1962): “Because **the LORD** your God granted me good fortune.”
- Fox (1983): “Indeed, **YHWH** your God made it happen for me.”
- NRSV (1989): “Because **the LORD** your God granted me success.”
- Alter (1996): “Because **the LORD** your God gave me good luck.”

TAMC (2005): “**The Eternal** your God made it happen for me.”

CJPS (2006): “Because your God **יהוה** granted me good fortune.”

TAWC (2008): “Your God **יהוה** made it happen for me.”<sup>73</sup>

As indicated above, Jews have assigned special handling to God's name for a long time. Many translations—including four of the first five entries shown above—have adopted a practice that dates back more than 2,200 years to the very first known translation of the Torah, the ancient Jewish rendering into Greek that scholars call the Septuagint. Throughout, it represented the Name via the word *kyrios* (“Lord”).<sup>74</sup>

However, by common usage in contemporary English, “lord” is a male title. For Jewish readers who seek to reconcile the English translation with contemporary Judaism's concept of a non-gendered God, rendering God's personal name as “the LORD” is like wearing male sunglasses to view the invisible deity: “I'm not sure what I'm seeing, but it appears to be masculine.”

The URJ translation solves that problem by rendering the Name as “the Eternal,” an epithet that has served the North American Reform movement in Bible translations and liturgy for at least fifteen years. Used well beyond the bounds of the Reform movement, it reflects the popular idea that the Name is related to the Hebrew verbal root for existence—a connection made by the Torah itself in the Burning Bush episode (Exodus 3).<sup>75</sup>

Arguably, however, the Torah employs the tetragrammaton primarily as a name, rather than as a title, attribute, description or declaration, and this surely was the original audience's foremost experience. The Torah's deity is a named *dramatis persona*. Accordingly, the producers of both *The Contemporary Torah* and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* sought to present it as a name, not an epithet. JPS and the editorial board for the women's commentary both concluded independently that no

single, consistent rendering could do justice to the Name—either as presented in the Bible or as treated thereafter in Jewish lore—and so their renditions have left it untranslated and untransliterated.<sup>76</sup>

### *Preserving Gendered Images for God*

Occasionally, the Bible uses female imagery to express God’s relationship with the people of Israel, as, for example, in Deuteronomy 32:13:

וַיִּנְקְדוּ דָבַשׁ מִסֵּלַע

OJPS (1917):	and He made him to suck	honey out of the crag
NJPS (1962):	He fed him	honey from the crag
Fox (1983):	he suckled them	with honey from a boulder
NRSV (1989):	he nursed him	with honey from the crags
Alter (1996):	He suckled him	honey from the crag
TAMC (2005):	Nursing them	with honey from the crag
CJPS (2006):	Nursing them	with honey from the crag
TAWC (2008):	Nursing them	with honey from the crag

The implied subject is God. Thus, the verb’s grammatical form is masculine, yet it designates what is biologically a female activity. In the view of the ancient audience, this passage would have had a feminine cast. As Carol Meyers has written, “biblical texts acclaiming God as a provider [of food] . . . evoke culturally specific images of women’s tasks.”<sup>77</sup> In context, the female ascription means that God sustains the people devotedly, as a mother nourishes an infant.

NJPS obscures the motherly activity attributed to God. Apparently, the translators reasoned that the word chosen to render it should express the figurative meaning of sustenance rather than the concrete one of nursing. But this is poetry: The specificity of the image matters. All three of the new renditions convey the female ascription—without the distraction of a (gendered) pronoun.

When rendering into English, translators have the option of ignoring the vehicle’s gendered aspect and focusing instead on the message that it delivers (e.g., by saying “ruler” instead of “king”). They do so at the cost of conveying a true feel for Israelite society—the matrix that the Torah’s language takes as a given. Ascriptions are of a piece with the wording that the Torah elsewhere uses to refer to human characters. In the same vein, our translation teams chose to represent literally the masculine ascriptions applied to God. (All three books explicate such imagery in the commentary or endnotes.)

### *Conclusion*

In their treatment of God-language, our three renditions of the Torah differ from each other in small ways. This is partly a response to each publisher’s respective goals and interests and partly a reflection of lessons learned during each iteration.

Yet, taken together, the new translations share some significant features. They eschew the ascription of social gender to God when it is not germane, avoiding the use of pronouns for God except in certain poetic passages. They do not flinch from conveying concretely the text’s occasional depictions of God via personal ascription—whether masculine or feminine. And they represent God’s name not as “the LORD” but either as “the Eternal” (in one version) or without rendering it into English at all.

Each in its own way, these three editions offer readers a rare experience among gender-sensitive translations, of encountering directly the biblical God as a persona who is at home in the ancient Near East, and who at the same time is beyond gender.

\* \* \*

## NOTES

1. This article, which I dedicate in memory of my teacher Tikva Frymer-Kensky (d. 2006), reports on an intellectual journey undertaken partly in response to her insistence that my rendering of God-language be nuanced according to the Hebrew text. With regard to Part 1, I thank Profs. Adele Berlin, Phyllis Bird, Marc Brettler, David Carr, Tamara Eskenazi, Michael Fox, Leonard Greenspoon, Edward Greenstein, Esther Hamori, Tamar Kamionkowski, Lori Lefkowitz, Adriane Leveen, Carol Meyers, Susan Niditch, Dale Patrick, Mark Smith and Rabbi Joshua Waxman for their often unsparing yet always helpful critiques of various drafts. I am also grateful to Sally Nakanishi of the Frances-Henry Library (Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles) for assistance in tracking down books and articles. I speak herein only for myself and not for the publishers mentioned.
2. Phyllis Bird, “Translating Sexist Language as a Theological and Cultural Problem,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 42/1–2 (1988), p. 91; reprinted in idem, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997). For the purposes of this article, I need not specify when that “ancient conversation” took place, nor how and when the Torah came into being. (The Torah itself makes no claims as to how it was assembled, nor to the date of its promulgation as a complete package, implying only that this occurred some time after Moses’ death.) The linguistic and cultural factors that bear upon how the text’s God-language may be translated are *effectively constant* throughout the 1,000-year span within which various experts each confidently fix a date for the Torah’s appearance.
3. This claim does not seem to be controversial in Jewish religious circles. For example, I spoke with a rabbi who publicly represents an “ultra-Orthodox” organization. When informed that I had prepared a translation of the Torah with (mostly) gender-neutral God language, he responded approvingly with a rhetorical question: “Well, who could object to that?”
4. “Targum” refers to one or more of the ancient rabbinic translations of the Bible into the Aramaic vernacular. They famously paraphrased the biblical descriptions of God, apparently so as to avoid language that depicted God in corporeal terms. In our case, we avoided language that depicted God in male terms.
5. I have queried dozens of academic Bible scholars and found few who think that the Torah’s God might have been anything other than male. As Carol Meyers observed, “It is commonplace in biblical scholarship for the God of the Israelites . . . to be considered a male deity.” Eadem, “Gender and God in the Hebrew Bible: Some Reflections,” in Rainer Kessler et al. (ed.), *Ihr Völker all, klatscht in die Hände!* *Festschrift für Erhard S. Gerstenberger Zum 65. Geburtstag* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997), p. 257. In what follows, I confirm many of Meyers’s proposals and those of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 204–207.
6. Methodological notes: (1) The Hebrew text whose translation is at issue is the Masoretic text as we now know it today (that is, the text as standardized by Jewish Bible scholars in the tenth century CE). (2) Because the enterprise of translation is primarily a literary one, my argument does not require a historical reconstruction of the Torah’s (or its purported constituent pieces’) *actual* reception by its audience. (3) Because the meaning of a text is a product of the interaction between it and its audience, I must consider its wording only after reconstructing what the composer(s) of the text presumed with regard to the target audience’s assumptions about cultural givens, reading conventions and authorial intent. History is vital to this endeavor, but, again, such a reconstruction is not historical *per se*. (4) My goal is to recover the text’s plain-sense meaning when taken on its own terms, at the time of its promulgation as the Torah *per se*. (5) For purposes of this article, the ancient audience’s act of interpreting an authoritative oral performance of a literary work—which historically was their chief means of encountering such a work—was tantamount to our reading the written text. Thus I will speak of an ancient audience “reading” a text as convenient shorthand.
7. That the Israelites in fact held these contradictory beliefs has been the claim of a number of historians of religion, such as Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 90–93.
8. Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that in light of what other ancient Near Eastern peoples said about their deities, the Torah’s is conspicuously “not sexed.” Eadem, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 187–189. However, silence is not the same as a positive assertion that God is beyond gender. Two general observations by Bible scholars will keep us properly cautious about interpreting the Torah’s lack of gender explicitness. Edward Greenstein, in “The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?” *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World

Union of Jewish Studies, 1999, p. 58\*), remarks: “the Torah and most other biblical texts elaborate very little on the nature of God [in any respect].” In the same vein, David H. Aaron, in *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery* (Boston: Brill, 2001), has observed: “the fact that [in the Bible] God goes undescribed must be placed in the context that except for ritual objects, basically everything goes undescribed” (p. 184).

9. See, e.g., Karel van der Toorn (ed.), *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997).
10. In this article, “social gender” refers to the socially constructed categories of “women” and “men,” as distinct from grammatical gender, which is a feature of many languages, including Hebrew. In Hebrew, each of the two classes of nouns (masculine or feminine) includes words that can refer to a man, a group of men, a woman, a group of women, a mixed group of men and women, or a non-gendered individual or group. See my article “[The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew](#),” *Hebrew Studies*, 49 (2008), pp. 7–26.
11. On the following points, see further my article “The Grammar of Social Gender” (above, note 10).
12. See Tosefta *Bikkurim* 2; BT *Yevamot* 83a–b; and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, ‘Laws of *Ishut*’ 2.24–26. I adduce post-biblical usage under an assumption of historical uniformity of the grammar of personal reference.
13. That some other ancient Near Eastern cultures recognized a warrior goddess does not mean that making war was a woman’s role. On the contrary, warmaking was quintessentially male, part of the very delineation of genders: Both literary sources and grave goods (items buried alongside human remains) consistently associate weaponry with men as opposed to women. Those occasional females who did bear arms were considered not-truly-women; likewise, battle goddesses were imagined as something other than true women. Given such mores, I concluded that in the eyes of the ancient audience, the ascription of God as warrior was a masculine image. See, e.g., Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 85 (1966), pp. 326–334; Kathleen McCaffrey, “Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?” in S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), p. 383; and Amélie Kuhrt, “Women and War,” *NIN: Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity*, 2/1 (2001), pp. 1–25.
14. See, e.g., Lawrence LeShan, *Alternate Realities: The Search for the Full Human Being* (New York: M. Evans and Co., 1976); Arthur Green, *See My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992); and James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003).
15. Personification was not a “metaphor” in the sense of a language performance—the result of the speaker’s creative burst of insight; rather, by the time of the Bible it had been institutionalized in the cultural discourse, converting what had once been a metaphor into an “idiom.” On this terminological distinction, see Menachem Dagut, *Hebrew-English Translation: A Linguistic Analysis of Some Semantic Problems* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1978), p. 98. At the same time, personification was a “generic metaphor” in the sense of a mapping from one conceptual domain to another; see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On the ubiquity of deity, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 87.
16. A semantic anomaly is the ensign that a figure of speech proudly holds aloft, to distinguish it from a mere literal utterance. As Andrea Weiss explains, the audience’s interpretive question “does not concern whether or not the utterance is literally true, but, instead, whether or not the usage . . . can be viewed as semantically anomalous. The focus centers on a linguistic, not an ontological issue.” Eadem, *Figurative Language in Biblical Prose Narrative: Metaphor in the Book of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 82.
17. It seems worthwhile to remind ourselves of some of the numerous ways that the ancients showed they did not equate deities with people. For example, in some written languages they tagged the names of deities with distinct markers. In literary convention, a person—regardless of social rank—who encountered a personified deity (or the deity’s authorized representative) was expected to bow and express verbal deference. Again according to the ancients’ explicit beliefs, human beings existed to serve deities—at least in theory. In addition (as we shall see later), the ancients did not relate to deities *only* as persons; personhood was perceived as only one facet of a deity. In contrast, living human beings were always persons.
18. The wording of this sentence and the analytical process it conveys follow the diagnostic schema laid out by Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities* (above, note 8), pp. 116–17, 124. Later in

his book, Aaron argues cogently that within the ancient worldview, it went without saying that *iconic* imagery was not “literal” (that is, expressive of ontological identity). Similarly, I am arguing that in the Bible, as in the ancient world generally, it went without saying that *literary* imagery about God was not literal; and this convention did not need to be stated because such ascriptive idioms were so thoroughly a part of the culture.

19. The role of father-householder is also ascribed to God in Num. 12:7, and Deut. 28:10 and 30:3. (Moses calls God Israel’s “father” in Deut. 32:6 and 18, but different reading rules apply within the genre of poetry.)
20. Similarly Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities* (above, note 8), p. 63; and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (English transl. by Frederick J. Gaiser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 6. On household-kinship imagery as the root metaphor for ancient Near Eastern society at all levels, see David J. Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001).
21. Kilamuwa Inscription (ca. 825 BCE), KAI 24, line 10; Azatiwada Inscription (ca. 720 BCE), KAI 26, A.I.3.
22. (My translation —D.S.) With its indefinite and nonspecific referent, the word *melakhim* (“monarchs”) by itself does not ascribe social gender. Nevertheless, I construe the plain-sense connotation here as male (“kings”) partly because of the social context: in the ancient Near East, the default ruler was male. Also, the literary context of hyperbole makes the imagery more compelling if taken as male.
23. See, e.g., the citations in Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (2nd edition; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 139–140.
24. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch* (above, note 20), p. 10.
25. Why the composer(s) of the text chose male more often than female imagery was probably to convey the *ultimacy* of this deity, for in a patriarchal society certain (relatively few) men nominally had both the last word and the final responsibility. This explanation might account for why the high gods were male in Ugarit, Asshur, Babylon and elsewhere. See my brief discussion in *The Contemporary Torah*, “Dictionary of Gender in the Torah,” s.v. “Male metaphors for God”; and see Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch* (above, note 20), pp. 5–6, 9–10.
26. Some contemporary interpreters do construe the male imagery as reflecting God’s gender, which can be a valid exegesis following an interpretive strategy other than a plain-sense reading in terms of ancient conventions.
27. Herein I use “Y-h-w-h” to represent the tetragrammaton, יהוה (see further below). The “w” represents the apparent pronunciation of the letter *vav* in ancient times.
28. See, e.g., André Lemaire, *The Birth of Monotheism: The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2007); cf. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (above, note 8), pp. 86–87, 188–189.
29. Greenstein, “The God of Israel” (above, note 8), p. 52\*. That is, the portrayals in the genres of myth, epic, hymn, narrative and law differ from each other in tone, register, degree of resort to anthropomorphism, and so forth. To Greenstein’s observation I add that attribution of social gender (or not) is a variable factor in the ancient depictions.
30. Similarly Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities* (above, note 8), p. 152; see further above, note 18. Scholars of ancient Near Eastern religion have found that personalization of deities developed long after the conception of deity itself; see, e.g., Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). I do not mean to claim that personal and non-personal representations of deity were entirely equivalent in all contexts.
31. Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (English transl. by Ann E. Keep; London: Methuen & Co., 1973), p. 20. That the Egyptians viewed human and nonhuman depictions as equivalent representations of the same deity is suggested, for example, by depictions of stylized trees labeled “Goddess X in her name ‘Tree Y.’” As iconographer Othmar Keel explains, “in the sacred tree . . . the otherwise invisible and incomprehensible goddess . . . becomes visible and comprehensible.” Idem, *Goddess and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 48; see also Johanna H. Stuckey, “The Great Goddesses of the Levant,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities*, 29 (2002), p. 46.
32. Barbara N. Porter, “The Anxiety of Multiplicity,” in eadem (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Chebeague Island, ME: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000), pp. 243–244, 247.
33. For example, in the Levant, including Israelite settings, from the late Bronze Age until well into the Iron Age, a “great goddess” was depicted variously as a woman with tree branches growing out of her, or as a tree with a woman growing out of it, or as a tree without a human figure but with a pair of goat-like animals (caprids) stretching up to eat from its branches. Usually—but by no means always—these depictions appeared with other symbols of the goddess alongside. See Keel, *Goddess and Trees*, Part 1,

- no. 13, and see pp. 35, 47–48; cited also by Stuckey, “Great Goddesses,” p. 35, and see the discussion on pp. 45, 49–50 (both above, note 31). See esp. Pithos A from Kuntillet Ajrud, dated to the early eighth century BCE, in Keel, *Goddess and Trees*, pp. 210–217. During the period in which, according to the Bible, Kings David and Solomon reigned, the various denizens of the Land of Israel typically represented deities on scarabs and seals via attribute animals and related entities, rather than via human figures; see Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (English transl. by Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 133–175. Archeologists have also found numerous stelae in ancient Canaan (at Israelite and non-Israelite sites) and in neighboring lands, generally lacking graphic images. Regarding what these “blank” or “empty” monuments suggest about worshippers’ view of their deity as a person (or not), David Aaron rightly cautions: “Nothing in the artifactual remains discloses theological principles.” Idem, *Biblical Ambiguities* (above, note 8), p. 182.
34. Further evidence that social gender was not seen as an absolute property of a given deity may be derived from the way the ancients seem, over the centuries, to have switched around the social gender they ascribed to some of their deities. For example, in some places in the ancient Near East, the deity represented by the sun was understood to be male; in other places, female. Likewise for the moon, the dawn and the dew: The same deity, with (essentially) the same name, was not everywhere ascribed the same gender. See, for example, Samuel A. Meier, “Shahar,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1999), V, cols. 1150–1151. Cf. William J. Fulco’s speculation (“Ishtar,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*) that the Akkadian goddess Ishtar was originally a male deity. It seems to me that an equation of “male” and “female” deities could occur only if the essence of divinity was imagined *apart from* personhood and social gender.
35. Stephanie Dalley, “Evolution of Gender in Mesopotamian Mythology and Iconography,” in Parpola and Whiting, *Sex and Gender* (above, note 13), pp. 120–121.
36. For Old Babylonian societies (c. 1950–c. 1530 BCE), see Julia Asher-Greve, “Decisive Sex, Essential Gender,” in Parpola and Whiting, *Sex and Gender* (above, note 13), p. 18.
37. Dalley explains (with regard to Babylonians learning Sumerian) that they “would have been well aware of a change in language from . . . [or] to masculine-feminine, and for them words were deeply rooted in the actual nature of the things they described.” Eadem, “Evolution of Gender” (above, note 35), p. 120.
38. See the studies cited by Israel Knohl in his *The Divine Symphony: The Bible’s Many Voices* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), p. 11 and p. 163, note 12. Meanwhile, the covenants in the Torah and in Joshua share close formal similarities with Hittite treaties of the second millennium BCE; see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 95–107.
39. See 2 Sam. 8:9–10 and 1 Kings 10:29, 11:1. On such exchanges as an indication of diplomatic relations, see Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook (eds.), *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). For a biblical text that presumes the special linguistic training of diplomats, see 2 Kings 18.
40. Quoting from the title of Knohl’s book (above, note 38).
41. Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), p. 63.
42. Stephen A. Geller, “The God of the Covenant,” in Porter, *One God or Many?* (above, note 32), p. 277 (emphasis added). Geller cites Israel Knohl, who collated certain passages of the Torah on the basis of linguistic and literary criteria and then observed that one such set of passages never represents the deity in anthropomorphic terms or expresses God’s actions in terms of physical features or emotions. As Knohl puts it, in the Priestly sections of the Torah, “the divine nature associated with the name of YHWH is impersonal—free of any marks of personality.” Knohl, *The Divine Symphony* (above, note 38), p. 33; see further idem, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 125–137. The Bible also depicts God impersonally by framing scenes so that God remains offstage: “God appears in most biblical stories only indirectly. . . . God . . . is both the single most important character in Hebrew Bible narrative and absent from the majority of it.” Amelia D. Friedman, *God as an Absent Character in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 3.
43. See, e.g., Nili Fox, “Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism,” in Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (eds.), *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), pp. 326–345.
44. See Nili Fox, “Concepts of God” (above, n. 43); and Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). On inscriptions such as “I bless you by *Y-h-w-h* of Samaria,” or “. . . by *Y-h-w-h* of Teman,” and on the worship of ‘Anatyahu, see, e.g., the *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible (DDD)*, s.v. “Yahweh”; and

- mons and Deities in the Bible (DDD)*, s.v. “Yahweh”; and Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images* (above, note 33), pp. 226 and 228. On the various referents for *'elohim* used as a deity title, see, e.g., Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), pp. 63–70, 79–119.
45. “The First Creation Story: Canonical and Diachronic Aspects,” in Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (eds.), *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (JSOT-Suppl, 319; 2002), pp. 32 and 51. So also Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament: Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1981), p. 15; Mary E. Mills, *Images of God in the Old Testament* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 9.
  46. Patrick, *Rendering of God* (above, note 44), pp. 47, 60. This is an expression of the principle of canon.
  47. Cf. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought* (above, note 15), p. 187.
  48. The term *'elohim* does not require that its referent be male. As a common-gender (“epicene”) noun, it can refer to either a male or a female deity. In this passage it is a status term; like “pharaoh,” that status can be taken by either a man or a woman. As such, the gender inflections of verbs and adjectives would be expected to follow the semantic orientation (social gender) of the occupant. See 1 Kings 11:5, 33; Burnett, *A Reassessment* (above, note 44), pp. 27, 60; and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989; 9th corrected printing, 2004), § 6.5.2a; 6.6b.
  49. My unit of analysis was actually the full opening scene (Gen. 1:1–2:3 or 2:4a), but here I will stop sooner for the sake of simplicity and brevity.
  50. Mills, *Images of God* (above, note 45), p. 13; Patrick, *Rendering of God* (above, note 44), pp. 16–17. Contrast this passage’s bland predicates with the anthropomorphic verbs of poetic creation accounts in Psalms 90:2 (birth, and bring forth via labor) and 104:1–7 (put on, drape over, stretch out, set into place, ride upon, fix in place, and cover up—with the Creator meanwhile interacting with messengers and servants). Reinforcing the weakness of *'elohim*’s personification in Gen. 1:1–25 is the absence of other personae with whom to interact. This would be highly significant for the ancient audience, since, in the worldview of their group-oriented culture, the identity of both humans and deities derived from social relations. An individual could hardly be said to exist alone. See, e.g., Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought* (above, note 15), pp. 104, 147–148; Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel* (New York: Brill, 1996), pp. 3, 115–118, 374; and Lyn M. Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19.1–11,” in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 109–110.
  51. The verb *b-r-*’ was never used (either in the Bible or, as far as we know, in the ancient Near East) to refer to the activity of a person. Similarly for *b-r-k*: “Blessing” by a deity is a grant that manifests impersonally (as in Psalms 67:7), in contradistinction to the human act of “blessing” (a personal prayer).
  52. Patrick, *Rendering of God* (above, note 44), pp. 56, 59.
  53. Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), p. 12; see also pp. 20, 22, 35, 40, citing the works of Yehezkel Kaufmann and Frances Cornford.
  54. See Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 396; Dennis J. McCarthy, “‘Creation’ Motifs in Ancient Hebrew Poetry,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 29 (1967), reprinted in Bernhard W. Anderson (ed.), *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 80; Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought* (above, note 15), pp. 97–99, 103; and Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 11.
  55. The next literary unit (2:4b–3:24), by persistently referring to its protagonist via the highly unusual dual formula *Y-h-w-h 'elohim* (God *Y-h-w-h*), seems to confirm the distinctive nature of the opening unit’s *'elohim*. Apparently the composer(s) of Genesis did not expect the audience to equate the *'elohim* of the first scene with the *Y-h-w-h* they already knew, for otherwise the name *Y-h-w-h* alone would thereafter have been enough.
  56. Frank H. Polak, “Poetic Style and Parallelism in the Creation Account (Genesis 1:1–2:3),” in Reventlow and Hoffman, *Creation* (above, note 45), pp. 2–31; Meir Paran, *Literary Features of the Priestly Code* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1983), p. vii.
  57. Playing on BT *Shabbat* 31a. Historians of religion, however, engage in a different enterprise. Rather than bind themselves by the principle of canon, they take individual passages out of canonical context and construe them as source “documents” or reflexes of pre-canonical views of God. This in turn can warrant translating the passages in gendered terms.
  58. See Dagut, *Hebrew-English Translation* (above, note 15), p. 21.
  59. The same can be said for relative pronouns: Personhood is not distinguished in Hebrew, but it is in English (“who”

versus “which”). In this realm, however, gender is not at issue.

60. Examples of the standard use of masculine pronouns to mean “the subject in question” include: (1) “That car with the darkened windows is weaving dangerously in and out of traffic; who does that guy think he is?” (2) “What a beautiful dog! What breed is he? What’s his name?” (3) “Merely to personify God would have been to disparage Him. . . . In the prophetic mind there was a dissociation of the human—of any biological function or social dependence—from the nature of God.” Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, II (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 49–50.
61. For example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV; National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989). With regard to human beings, it does make some exceptions, as its preface states: “Only very occasionally has the pronoun ‘he’ or ‘him’ been retained in passages where the reference may have been to a woman as well as to a man” (Bruce Metzger, “To the Reader”).
62. Some observers might believe that rendering with male pronouns produces wording “closer” to the original. In fact, however, most pronouns for God that appear in translation do not correspond to independent pronouns in the Hebrew text; rather, they are supplied by translators according to the needs of English idiom. Nor can the use of masculine God-language in English be justified by a general claim that it reflects the “literal meaning” of the Hebrew wording. Masculine language in Hebrew has more than one “literal” sense, and Mark Strauss aptly states the governing linguistic truth: “It is context alone that determines which sense of a lexeme is intended within its semantic range”; idem, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate,” in Glen Scorgie et al. (eds.), *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), p. 134. The issue, then, is which English equivalent produces the least distortion in a given context.
63. The URJ Press had intended for Stern to translate the entire Torah, but he passed away in 2001, after completing his rendering of Genesis.
64. The NJPS *Torah* (formerly known as the New Jewish Version), first published in 1962, underwent four significant revisions, published in 1967, 1985, 1992 and 1999. Its translation committee strove to establish the text’s plain sense as the author meant to convey it to the Torah’s first audience, while taking into account postbiblical Jewish interpretation. The translators explicitly valued clarity of expression, and they sought to emphasize a religious mes-
- sage. See the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1999), Preface to the 1985 English Edition, p. xxiii.
65. See *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (revised edition; New York: URJ Press, 2005), Preface to the Revised Edition, pp. xxv–xxx. By “gender-accurate,” the publisher meant that the rendering of terms referring to human beings (as opposed to God-language) accurately reflects the understanding of the text’s ancient audience, given the latter’s assumptions regarding social gender.
66. *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2006), Preface, pp. v–xxxv. The publisher preferred the term “gender-sensitive” to “gender-accurate” out of an abundance of caution, so as not to “claim too much authority” for an adaptation with a somewhat innovative methodology. It viewed cJPS as complementing rather than replacing the NJPS translation (Ellen Frankel, personal communication, Feb. 14, 2006).
67. Most of the effort in preparing the renditions focused on the assignment of gender to the Torah’s *human* characters. See further the Preface to *The Contemporary Torah* (above, note 66).
68. Often the Hebrew wording itself does not contain a subject pronoun, but only a verbal inflection that implicitly refers to God as the subject. As for the circumlocutions to avoid a pronoun in English, translating into another language is never solely an endeavor of word-for-word replacement, especially if the rendering is intentionally cast into the idioms of the target language.
69. Apart from one instance in a poetic passage in Genesis (1:27), these translations render the possessive inflection adjectivally only in Deuteronomy. The revising translators intended this as a reflex of that book’s distinctive rhetorical style. See the Preface to *The Contemporary Torah* (above, note 66), p. xxxv, note 35.
70. On the warrior as a masculine image, see above, note 13.
71. See further, e.g., my online article “[God’s Name in a Gender-Sensitive Jewish Translation](#),” *SBL Forum* (Summer 2006), reprinted in *The Bible Translator*, 58/3 (July 2007), pp. 105–110; and DDD, s.v. “Yahweh.”
72. Key: oJPS: Old Jewish Publication Society version (Philadelphia: JPS, 1917); Fox: Everett Fox, as incorporated in *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995); NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (above, note 61); Alter: Robert Alter, as incorporated in *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004); TAMC: *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, revised edition (above, note 66); TAWC: Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (eds.), *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008).

73. With respect to God, English translations have customarily employed a Hebraism: They place an appositive-that-defines-relationship *after* the epithet or Name (for example, “the LORD your God”). Perhaps this arrangement has been preferred because the definite article would otherwise break up the apposition (“your God the LORD”). In contrast, with respect to other personas, NJPS, for example, opts for normal English idiom, as in the following examples: אָבִיחִי לְ אָבֶל (‘‘Where is *your brother* Abel?’’ Gen. 4:9); אִמְךָ אֵיזֶבֶל (‘‘*your mother* Jezebel,’’ 2 Kings 9:22); לְדָגוֹן אֱלֹהֵיהֶם (‘‘to *their god* Dagon,’’ Judg. 16:23). Distinctively, both CJPS and *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* treat an apposition with the Name in accordance with English idiom. Hence, in the present example (Gen. 27:20), CJPS reads ‘‘your God יהוה’’ rather than ‘‘יהוה your God.’’ This approach helps the reader, when encountering the Hebrew word in an otherwise English text, to construe it as a name. More importantly, it affords the reader an encounter with the Name that is closer to how the ancient audience experienced it.
74. The audience for the Septuagint lived in the polytheistic milieu of Hellenistic Egypt. Apparently the translation’s producers wanted to emphasize that their Deity was not merely one more named god among many.
75. URJ translator Chaim Stern cited as precedent the rendering *der Ewige*, a German coinage by the Jewish philosopher and translator Moses Mendelssohn (1783). Further precedents may be found in the renderings *L’ ternel*, used in the French version most widely accepted among Christians, by Louis Segond (1874); and ‘‘the Eternal’’ in James Moffatt’s translation into English (1924), which was influenced by the French practice. See Anthony Byatt, ‘‘Handling the Tetragrammaton in English Translations,’’ *Bible Collectors’ World* (Oct.–Dec. 1987).
76. This is akin to the practice of some ancient copyists of biblical books in Greek translation, who consistently inscribed the Name using Hebrew letters. On the editorial decision process for handling the tetragrammaton in *The Contemporary Torah*, see my article ‘‘God’s Name’’ (above, note 71). Regarding pronunciation, *The Contemporary Torah* offers the following guidance: ‘‘We invite those who read this translation aloud to pronounce the Name via whatever term that they customarily use for it’’ (Preface, p. xxvii).
77. Carol Meyers, ‘‘Female Images of God,’’ in eadem et al. (eds.), *Women in Scripture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 527.