

{68} Jewish New Testament. A translation of the New Testament that expresses its Jewishness.

David H. Stern

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A new translation of the New Testament in English is now available. It is the fruit of the labours of Dr. David H. Stern, a Messianic Jew living in Jerusalem, who is also an editorial advisor to this periodical. The translation is titled *Jewish New Testament* (JNT). In the first sentences of the introduction, the translator states the reasons for his work: "Why is this New Testament different from all other New Testaments? Because the Jewish New Testament expresses its original and essential Jewishness. Nearly all other English translations of the New Testament - and there are literally hundreds - present its message in a Gentile-Christian linguistic, cultural and theological framework."

Stern is clearly not critical of this fact. "For although the Gospel is Jewish in origin, it is not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. The New Testament itself makes this very clear, so it is appropriate that its message be communicated to non-Jews in ways that impose on them a minimum of alien cultural baggage."

The JNT's purpose is to make "it normal to think of the New Testament as Jewish." The JNT "challenges Jews to understand that Yeshua is a friend to every Jewish heart and the New Testament, a Jewish book filled with truths to be accepted and acted upon. At the same time, while reaffirming the equality of Gentiles and Jews in the Messianic Community, it challenges Christians to acknowledge the Jewishness of their faith and their oneness with the Jewish people." The translation is further described as "freshly rendered from the original Greek into enjoyable modern English."

{69} Stern states three ways of bringing out the Jewishness of the New Testament:

1. *Cosmetically*: Names are expressed in their Hebrew forms, eg. Yeshua (Jesus), Yochanan (John). Traditional "church language" is expressed by "neutral terminology that encourages the reader to think, "immersion (baptism), emissary (apostle), execution-stake (cross) and Messianic community (church).

2. *Culturally and Religiously*: *Tzitzit* is used instead of the fringe (edge) of a robe (Mt. 9:20), *Motza 'ei-Shabbat* instead of "the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7).

3. *Theologically*: In Romans 10:4 "the word *telos* does not mean that the Messiah terminates the law, but that he is 'the goal of which the *Torah* aims.'"

Stern also includes "Jewish English" expressions "defined as Hebrew and Yiddish expressions which English-speaking Jews incorporate into everyday speech."

He does not describe his translation as a "literal" translation or a "paraphrase" but as a "dynamically equivalent" translation. "At certain points especially related to the issue of Jewishness it becomes militantly so." For example, he translates two Greek words, upo

nomon (under the law), with thirteen English words: “in subjection to the system which results from perverting the *Torah* into legalism.”

Concerning whether or not the translator should “inject his opinions” into his translation, Stern answers, “The *Jewish New Testament* cautiously answers in the affirmative, on the ground that it inevitably happens anyhow ... Even when a Greek expression seems vague, capable of more than one interpretation, the translator should not transfer the ambiguity into English but should decide on *one* of the possible interpretations and render that one well.”

All non-English words are explained at the bottom of every right-hand page. In the text, non-English words are written in italics, while quotations from OT are written in boldface. A glossary and a reverse glossary are found at the end of the book.

Translation and the receiver group

Anyone involved in translation knows how difficult it is to satisfy everybody. Trying to satisfy everybody will satisfy nobody. Translators know how much work is involved in making a translation like JNT, even as a team and how much more when a single person has undertaken the job himself.

{70} David H. Stern has undertaken it and for this he should be congratulated. It is extremely important to emphasize the Jewish roots of the Christian faith - for both Jews and Christians of gentile origin.

There are weaknesses in the JNT as there are in all other translations. The perfect is for the world to come. God has made use of incomplete translations - a comfort for any translator who is criticized for his work. This translation will no doubt be used to stimulate interest in the Jewishness of the New Testament and to show the way for some Jews to their Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

It seems, however, that the receiver group has not been satisfactorily defined. If the translation were presented as an experiment with a view to evangelism among Jews who do not understand Hebrew well and who think that the New Testament is a gentile book, I have no major objection. If the translation were introduced as a means to provide gentile Christians with a first hand impression of the fact that the Greek New Testament vocabulary can and must be understood within the framework of an Old Testament and Jewish reference, I would be less critical of the work.

But that is not the way the translation is described. The translation seems to promise more than it can deliver. I fear that both Jewish and Christian theologians will regard it as a curiosity. That would be unfortunate because it deserves more appreciation. If curiosity leads people to faith in Jesus, what matters the opinion of theologians? I agree. But when a translation demands to be evaluated theologically, these demands need to be taken seriously.

In the following paragraphs I will not render the translation full justice because I will not stress its many positive aspects. I will point out certain weaknesses.

Selection

Stern has used about 400 words and phrases of Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish or other origins. The majority of these are Hebrew. Other words are denarius, diaspora and

talent. Some terms should not have been included: “They had plotted to have him ambushed and killed *en route* “ (Acts 25:3).

If the translation’s primary goal is to express the original and essential Jewishness of the New Testament, it seems unnecessary to use Yiddish words. Stern excuses the use of expressions from “Jewish English,” “but since ‘Jewish English’ in its manifold variety is widely used, an appeal is made for tolerance of those elements included in the *Jewish New Testament* .” I {71} don’t find it hard to tolerate such expressions, if the translation was directed at people who talk in such a manner, but then I would have preferred much more of such words to have been used. The JNT all together contains 10 such terms (bubbemeises, davvening, Goyishe, kvetching, macher, mentsh, nu, nudnik, shmooze, tsuris). These words have the effect of slang. I have no objections to translations rendering the New Testament in slang in order to comply to people, who only understand or who prefer slang, so long as it is not implied that this is how Jesus talked.

Most of the 400 words are Hebrew and Aramaic. If we are to exclude names of persons and places, less than 100 Hebrew and Aramaic words remain. If terms such as scribe, pharisee, saducee and publican are excluded, names of Jewish holidays, and Hebrew and Aramaic words that are found in the Greek New Testament then only about 70 Hebrew and Aramaic words remain. I refuse to believe that NT’s “original and essential Jewishness” can be expressed in so few words!

Of course, names of persons, places, Jewish groups and holidays in their original Hebrew form give the impression that Jesus and his disciples were Jews, and that Jesus worked mainly in Jewish localities. For English speaking Jews, who are familiar with Hebrew name forms, these renderings are quite acceptable. But could it also be imagined that some American Jews who would want to read the JNT, would have problems understanding these name forms, because they are more used to traditional English names?

More important, however, is the question of the principles by which Stern chose the Hebrew and Aramaic terms he employs or omits. To a great extent it seems that a vague understanding of the receiver group has determined the choices made. This is a dismally poor method of indicating the NT’s original Jewishness.

A few examples: “Go and make people from all nations into *talmidim* , immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the *Ruach Ha-Kodesh* “ (Matt. 28:19). Why not translate “Father” and “Son” as “Abba” and “Ben?” Another example is “Grace, mercy and *shalom* will be with us from God...” (2 John 3).

Occasionally a few words are rendered differently and other concepts just as familiar are rendered in the traditional way: “Why is it that your *talmidim* break the Tradition of the Elders? They don’t do *n’tilat yadayim* before they eat!” Why not use *masoret*, for the Hebrew expression for “Tradition of the Elders?” (Matt. 15:2) “I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the *Torah* “ (Matt. 5:18). Is there no word for “a stroke” in Hebrew?

{72} The Lord’s Prayer, on the other hand, is rendered in a “pure” English translation: “Our Father in heaven! May your Name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven... Amen.” If the translator had followed the line he follows in other places, he could have found Hebrew expressions for “Our Father,” “heaven,” “Name,” “holy,” and “kingdom.” The selective use of Hebrew and Aramaic expressions raises the question, “Why use these terms, and are not others equally important?” Hebrew expressions considered to be theologically more relevant are transliterated from Hebrew or Aramaic. Others remain in simple English.

Omission of Hebrew Words and phrases

In his introduction Stern says, “It is all very well to adapt a Jewish book for easier appreciation by non-Jews, but not at the cost of suppressing its inherent Jewishness.” With this in mind, it is strange to notice that there are examples in the JNT of a Jewishness that has been subdued. A few examples: In the original text of Matt. 5:22, the Aramaic term *raqa is* found, an epithet used frequently in rabbinic literature. Stern renders it ‘You-good-for-nothing!’ There is nothing wrong with this rendering except that it subdues the Jewishness of the Greek text.

More serious is the rendering of the word *amen*. After a prayer or a statement *amen is* used (Matt. 6:13; Rom. 11:36). Still, in the Synoptics and in the Gospel of John a double *amen, amen is* found - with no parallel in other first century Jewish sources - but is rendered in the JNT with the very ordinary “Yes, indeed!” (Matt. 5:26). The Hebrew flavour found in the Greek has disappeared. Nor does the translation differentiate between the single *amen* and the characteristic double *amen, amen* in the Gospel of John. It must further be asked whether any modern translation should aim at a rendering, which in some way or another creates an effect unlike the one found in the Greek New Testament. The use of *amen is* extraordinary! It must have seemed strange to the first readers. Stern’s explanation in the Glossary does not sound very convincing: “Most translators take Yeshua’s *Amen* as referring forward to what he was about to say: ‘Truly, I say to you,...’ But there is no other instance of *Amen* pointing forward in early Jewish literature, and the context does not require it. Yeshua uses *Amen* to refer back, either seriously or ironically, to what he or someone else has said, or to what has just happened....”

I don’t think Stern has said the last word in this matter. The pre-positioned *amen* contains the Christology of the New Testament in a nutshell. Whether one agrees with me or not it is surprising to find that a translation of the New Testament which is meant to emphasize its Jewishness, passes lightly over such a characteristic Jewish expression {73} found in the Greek. May only those words and expressions already found in the Jewish tradition, rightly be described as “Jewish?” Is it not possible to think that Jesus - because he is the unique Jew and the Son of God - can express himself in a way that cannot be found in Jewish tradition, but which is no less Jewish?

Which is more important: Jewishness or the modern reader’s frame of reference?

The modern translator must constantly choose his emphasis: should he emphasize the antiquity of the book, in which case he is in danger of producing a translation that is not readily understood? Or should he be more conscious of his readers, in which case he is in danger of suppressing elements belonging to the original milieu? All translators face this dilemma. The JNT has not resolved this tension in such a way as to emphasize the Jewishness of the New Testament. It should be noted that “Jewishness” in New Testament times and rabbinical material is often expressed by phrases which are not Semitic in their origin. The following are examples of such:

Indications of time: “...it was about four o’clock in the afternoon” (John 1:29) instead of “by the tenth hour” and: “... it was about noon” (John 19:14) in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus. The fourth watch of the night in Mark 6:48 is rendered in the JNT as: “around four o’clock in the morning.” Whether there were three or four

night watches - a topic for discussion among the rabbis - the JNT translation eliminates a historical detail.

Linear Measurements: “Beit-Anyah [Bethany] was about two miles from Yerusalayim” (John 11:18). “The talmidim ... weren’t far from shore, only about a hundred yards” (John 21:8). The angel measured the new Jerusalem as “at 1500 miles ... its wall at 216 feet by human standards of measurement” (Rev. 21:16-17). There is nothing faulty with miles, yards and feet, but the introduction emphasized strongly the importance of restoring the original cultural environment. We must also ask whether the 12.000 stadia (=1500 miles) and the 144 cubits (=216 feet) could have a theological meaning in the Apocalypse.

Cubic measurements: The six stone water-jars at the wedding in Cana each had a “capacity of 20-30 gallons” (John 2:6). Many other examples could be mentioned. These suffice to demonstrate that the JNT at times suppresses the original Jewish milieu for the sake of its readers. That is good “dynamic equivalent” translation, but it is not very Jewish.

Some New Testament phrases “make no sense”

In his introduction Stern writes: “Sha’ul, whose letters were composed in Greek, clearly drew on his native Jewish and Hebraic thought-forms when {74} he wrote. In fact, as shown earlier, some phrases in the New Testament manuscripts make no sense unless one reaches through the Greek to the underlying Hebrew expressions.”

The first part of this claim is correct. But it is not complete. Paul (and John) also used Greek thought-forms, which they filled with biblical content. When Paul communicated the gospel to Greeks, Jews or gentile, he wrote in clear Greek - not in “Jewish Greek!” I am not arguing against Stern’s experiment in the JNT, but am merely observing that the (Jewish) apostles found it possible to communicate the gospel in a language other than Hebrew. When Paul calls himself Paul and not Sha’ul, as it is rendered consistently in JNT, I don’t think he or his readers considered his practice less than Jewish. There were many venerable rabbis whose names could be traced to gentile deities.

For the sake of simplicity, I shall now refer to the three letters of John in order to indicate how the JNT translates a group of manuscripts. Is it really more “Jewish” than other translations? The answer is negative.

III John.

There are four foreign words in this short message:

v. 7: “for the sake of *Ha-Shem* they went out without accepting anything from the *Goyim* .” The expression *Ha-Shem* serves in the JNT to refer to God. In the Greek text it can just as well be understood as referring to Jesus. In John the two might well be joined. This is an example of how translations can narrow meanings by avoiding the ambiguities which are built into the Greek text.

Goyim: To a modern reader this may have a derogative meaning, not necessarily found in the text. It does not here refer to gentile Christians. *Macher* (v.9): A Yiddish word that is both unnecessary and alienating. *Shalom* to you (v. 15): See below.

II John. *Yeshua* and three times *shalom*.

v. 3: “Grace, mercy and *shalom* ...” Only one of the three terms used is Hebrew.

v. 10-11: “Don’t even say ‘*Shalom!*’ to him; for the person who says, ‘*Shalom!*’ to him shares in his evil deeds.” I, too, love *Shalom* , the word as well as the reality. But the idea can easily be expressed in other languages. Stern’s use of the term here tends to obscure the fact that the prohibition is not against private hospitality but hospitality given by the church.

I John. Besides *Yeshua* and *Kayin* , only the following words:

2:1: “If anyone does sin, we have Yeshua the Messiah, the *Tzaddik* who pleads our cause with the Father.” The term *Tzaddik* may lead one to think {75} of a chassidic rebbe. The same Greek word used to describe God is rendered “righteous,” (2:29; 3:7).

2:2: “He is the *kapparah* for our sins ...” (also in 4:10). This is precise rendering - provided you understand the word.

2:20: “You have received the Messiah’s anointing from *HaKodesh...*” But why then is Jesus only called “Deliverer” in 4:14 instead of *Moshia* ?

3:4: “Everyone who keeps sinning is violating *Torah* - indeed, sin is violation of *Torah* (*anomia* in Greek). By using *Torah* the rendering becomes too precise, again interpreting rather than preserving the ambivalence of the original text.

In other places the JNT uses expressions like *acharit-hayamim* and *olam haba* , but in I John English phrases are maintained: “Last hour” and “Day of Judgment.”

Some phrases could actually sound more Semitic in English. For example, in I John 1:6 JNT says, “... not living out the truth,” literally: “we do not do the truth.” The JNT renders the meaning well, but the Jewishness of the original has disappeared. Furthermore, according to John, that truth is not only something to be said, but also to be done.

Finally, whether it is part of Jewishness or not, I wonder, but the JNT consistently avoids translating the Greek word for “give birth to,” paraphrasing it by “that he is the Father of everyone” (I John 2:29) and not “that he is born by him (God),” (I John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4). Concerning the Son (in 5:18), “We know that everyone who has God as his Father (literally: everyone born by God) does not go on sinning; on the contrary, the Son born of God protects him, and the Evil One does not touch him.” I appreciate the fact that “to be born of” is used concerning Jesus. There indeed is a theological difference between the birth of the Son of God and the spiritual birth of the believers, but the theological and grammatical connections found in the Greek text should not be eliminated in a translation.

The JNT translation of John’s letters is outstanding, but they are not particularly Jewish. In other words: To restore the Jewishness of the New Testament is easier said than done.

It is a bold claim to say that some phrases in the Greek New Testament make no sense unless reached through the Greek to underlying Hebrew expressions. I admit, of course, the need for studies involving Hebrew words and phrases underlying the Greek text. I look forward to a thorough discussion of this question in the commentary that Stern, in the introduction to the JNT, promises will come. The main question is: Are we not assuming the existence of an hypothetical Hebrew source for the Gospels, attributing to such a text the characteristics of inspiration? The Gospels as we have {76} them did not fall from heaven. But our rejoicing over “discoveries” in the Hebrew background carry with them the danger that we do not realize the implications some of our “discoveries” may have on our view of Scripture. Stern refers to Matt. 6:23: “Yeshua says in the Sermon on the Mount, literally, ‘If your eye be evil, your whole body will be dark.’ What is an evil eye?

Someone not knowing the Jewish background might suppose Yeshua was talking about casting spells. However, in Hebrew, having an *'ayin ra'ah*, an 'evil eye', means being stingy; while having an *'ayin tovah*, a 'good eye', means being generous. Yeshua is simply urging generosity against stinginess."

I would have preferred a "most likely" instead of a "simply," other explanations are also possible. But from the point of view of translation it is strange to read Matt. 6:22-23: "'The eye is a lamp of the body.' So if you have a 'good eye' [That is, if you are generous] your whole body will be full of light; But if you have an 'evil eye' [if you are stingy] your whole body will be full of darkness."

The use of brackets to indicate the translator's explanations is very unfortunate. These are best given elsewhere because brackets are also used by Stern for other purposes in the translation. The reader is likely to forget the difference and confuse the two kinds, thus obscuring the difference between the text and Stern's explanations.

Militantly or not militantly

As mentioned, Stern says of his translation that "... at certain points especially related to issues of Jewishness it becomes militantly so, " i.e. "dynamically." Paul's Greek phrase *erga nomou* is not rendered as "works of the law;" but as "legalistic observance of Torah commands." *Upo nomou* is not rendered "under the law;" but with thirteen words: "in subjection to the system which results from perverting the Torah into legalism."

First it must be noted, that Paul used only two words, which apparently he found to be sufficient. Secondly, if two words are presumed to be theologically important, and are also difficult to understand, is it right for a modern translation to make them more "understandable;" thus running the danger of narrowing a very complex theological issue. Thirdly, are there no other texts which require a similar paraphrase?

I am inclined to think that a precise word-to-word translation is preferable in cases that are theologically very loaded. Any more specific translation is liable to be challenged. Preachers and archeological professors may {77} allow themselves to do what translators ought not. This is certainly the case when it comes to translating the Bible.

There are places in the JNT that hardly can be described as militant, but nevertheless are questionable. I have in mind the difficult question of rendering expressions of possession. In Romans 3:21-26 one notices the following:

V. 22: "... and it is righteousness that comes from God, through the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah.

V. 25: "... God put Yeshua forward as the *kapparah* for sin through his faithfulness in respect to his bloody sacrificial death."

V. 26: "... and is also the one who makes people righteous on the ground of Yeshua's faithfulness."

I am not saying JNT's rendering is false. It is *through* the faithfulness of Jesus that we can be declared righteous. This is good theology. But the question is if the traditional understanding (that the text here refers to the righteousness that can be obtained "*through faith* in Jesus") isn't more correct.

It would be beyond the framework of review to look more deeply into the translation. In general it can be said that Stern, in many and important ways, has provided us with a brilliant translation,

as dynamic translations go. There are places, like Romans 9:5, where a comma would have been preferred to a period (“... and from them [the Jews], ... came the Messiah, who is over all. Praised be *Adonai* for ever!”) Examples show that rendering of the Greek *Kyrios* is a complex and difficult problem. It is my opinion that Rom. 9:5 praises Jesus as *Kyrios* (cf. JNT’s rendering of Phil. 2:11: “... Yeshua the Messiah is *Adonai* ...”).

The translator only says in his introduction that “Immersion [baptism] is a Jewish practice.” I don’t quite know what to do with such a brief statement, as it raises more questions than it answers. Do Hebrew Christians not have anything more to say about baptism than that it is “a Jewish practice?” Hebrew Christians should further inquire, in speaking of baptism, what word best suits the Greek term, *baptizo*.

This takes us to the JNT’s use of “execution-stake” instead of “cross.” Jehovah’s Witnesses would rejoice over this rendering, but they do not understand atonement. I am, of course, aware of the feelings among Jewish people towards the cross because of offenses perpetrated by the church toward the Jewish people. But I do not think this despicable word with the despicable content can be avoided. When Jews write about others who were crucified during the period of the second temple, they use the term crucified. In the new Hebrew translation of the New Testament (United Bible Society, {78} Jerusalem) the common Hebrew word for cross is used. It is artificial to use such an uncommon expression when Hebrew Christians in Israel have no such compunctions. This is equally true of other important terms.

Conclusion

In 1901 The British and Foreign Bible Society sent out a new edition of the New Testament in Yiddish. Joseph Rabinowitz in Kischinev was one of the translators. The translation was appreciated by many, because it was not as “pure” as the translation published in 1899 done by Marcus S. Bergmann. The translation from 1901 used the kind of Yiddish that was best understood in many Jewish circles in Russia.

Among other criteria, a translation ought to be judged according to its ability to satisfy the needs of its intended readership, assuming that it faithfully renders the original biblical message. The Jewish New Testament not only renders the New Testament message “in an acceptable way,” but does it well. The fact that individual places may be criticized is true of all other translations.

The intended readership should have been more narrowly defined and the project introduced with more reservation than has been done. If the translator had done so, the JNT could have had more effect than is now likely to be the case.

Translations are best made by a team, in spite of the compromises such teamwork entails. I look forward to the day, when English speaking Hebrew Christians will, as a team, produce a translation that will satisfy their needs.

David H. Stern has made the first move. For this he deserves our thanks.