The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation was published by the Jewish Publication Society in 2006. While praising the strengths of the NJPS in the preface to The Contemporary Torah, David E. S. Stein, the project’s Revising Editor, notes that two areas in the NJPS were problematic: those passages referring to the social gender of human beings and those that used gendered references to God. According to Steins, references to human beings in the NJPS often: (1) rendered words in male terms or were inconsistent in their translation (e.g., ‘avot in Num 14:18 as “fathers” but in Exod 20:5 as “parents”); (2) translated terms in a more neutral way when, in fact, a better translation would have been a noninclusive one; (3) translated female-specific activities (e.g., pregnancy) in archaic terms (being “with child”); (4) based its translations on a misunderstanding of social gender in biblical times, and (5) reflected the use of male nouns and pronouns when a more neutral sense was intended (vii–viii). When it came to references to divine beings, the NJPS predictably used masculine terms, such as male pronouns or nouns like the male title “Lord” (ix–x).

In spite these shortcomings, Stein sees The Contemporary Torah sharing much of the same assumptions and goals of the NJPS project. Stein agrees with Harry M. Orlinsky (editor-in-chief of the NJPS Torah section) when Orlinsky said: “The English language has resources that allow a translator faithfully to translate … biblical texts and be inclusive where the text is inclusive, and exclusive where the original is exclusive” (x). Moreover,
Stein, like Orlinsky, feels that translators’ task is “to render the Hebrew text as they believed the original author of that text meant it to be understood” (x). Following Orlinsky’s guiding hand, Stein also feels that the two most important goals concerning social gender are “accuracy” and “clarity” in its portrayal (xi). Indeed, Stein quips that the adaptation reflected in *The Contemporary Torah* is “just like NJPS, only more so” (xi).

How, then, is *The Contemporary Torah* different from its parent NJPS translation? Stein suggests that he, drawing upon contemporary interdisciplinary findings, is able to construct a “mental image” of the original target audience. This allows him to assess more accurately both authorial intent and audience response. The information upon which this image is based, he explains, was not available to the NJPS translation team. Based on this additional information, his attempt to “think like the text’s composer(s)” allows him to determine “what the finished text … meant to say” (xiii). The resulting adaptation in *The Contemporary Torah* allows Stein’s contemporary readers (he hopes) to “sit in on an ancient conversation between the Torah’s composer(s) and its original audience” (xx).

When imagining the original audience’s response to the text, Stein makes a number of assumptions. For example, he argues that that: (1) due to their ambiguity the original audience did not take male nouns and masculine inflection at face value (xv); (2) inclusive language was part of the ancient biblical ethos (not an imposition of postmodern feminists) (xv); (3) ancient writers thought that “the original audience would apply their society’s familiar gender categories to textual interpretation” (xvii); (4) sometimes the ancient context would have been more male than the contemporary context (xviii); and (5) in the case of legal texts where gender is not an issue, the ancient audience would have been inclined “to take male language in a neutral sense” (xxii).

Two charts provided in the preface lay out concrete examples of how Stein’s assumptions shape his adaptation of the NJPS. In terms of pronouns and titles for God (xxviii):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NJPS</th>
<th>THIS ADAPTATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He said</td>
<td>[God] said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His people</td>
<td>God’s people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His covenant</td>
<td>the Covenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His laws that He enjoined upon you</td>
<td>the laws that were enjoined upon you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His voice</td>
<td>the divine voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fear of Him</td>
<td>The fear of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doing what displeased the LORD and vexing him</td>
<td>doing what displeased and vexed יהוה</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Concerning changes concerning human beings and gender, Stein explains that he followed a two-step methodology. He analyzed the Torah’s gender ascription (according to his “mental image” of the original audience), then rendered the text into idiomatic English. He gives readers a chart (arranged in problem categories) that gives concrete examples of his methodology in action:

Gender not at issue—NJPS rendered in masculine terms
Gen 42:11 (NJPS/we are honest men; TCT/we are honest people)
Num 14:35 (NJPS/they shall die to the last man; TCT/and so be finished off)
Deut 1:17 (NJPS/fear no man; TCT/fear no one)
Deut 12:8 (NJPS/every man as he pleases; TCT/each of us as we please)

Gender at issue—NJPS rendered in neutral terms
Exod 21:2 (NJPS/a Hebrew slave; TCT/a male Hebrew slave)
Num 1:2 (NJPS/Israelite community; TCT/Israelite company [of fighters])
Num 26:7 (NJPS/the persons enrolled; TCT/the men enrolled)

Gender not an issue—NJPS unduly restricted gender roles
Exod 21:7 (NJPS/a man sells his daughter; TCT/a parent sells a daughter)
Deut 23:16 (NJPS/man over to his master; TCT/turn over to the master)
Deut 23:25 (NJPS/another man’s vineyard; TCT/a fellow [Israelite]’s vineyard)

NJPS English style that conveyed a neutral sense ambiguously
Exod 8:13 (NJPS/man and beast; TCT/human and beast)
Deut 23:16 (NJPS/him who is to be cleansed; TCT/the one who is to be purified)
Deut 23:25 (NJPS/a blind person on his way; TCT/a blind person on the way)

NJPS imprecision in rendering ‘ish as “man”
Gen 24:30 (NJPS/thus the man spoke to me; TCT/thus the emissary spoke to me)
Exod 4:10 (NJPS/a man of words; TCT/good with words)
Num 1:4 (NJPS/a man from each tribe; TCT/a representative from each tribe)
Num 13:3 (NJPS/all the men; TCT/all of them being notables)
Num 27:18 (NJPS/an inspired man; TCT/an inspired leader)
Deut 19:5 (NJPS/a man has two wives; TCT/a householder has two wives)

While there is much worthy of praise in this project, there are some lingering issues that are not easily dismissed. While avoiding the issue of pinpointing the sources and dating of the Torah, Stein acknowledges that the Torah could have been written over a span of nine hundred years by multiple authors (xvii). In spite of this fact, Stein insists that construction of the original audience’s mindset is possible because attitudes concerning
social gender did not change much over the centuries. As he explains, “The continuity and uniformity of that social world … makes it fairly safe to combine extant evidence from different centuries in order to draw conclusions about the construction of gender by the text’s original audience” (xviii). For many biblical scholars trained in a historical-critical method that emphasizes the importance of historical context, Stein’s argument that there was little change in gender perceptions over nine hundred years will be unconvincing.

Furthermore, Stein admits that not all passages lend themselves to easily reconstructing the “mental image” of the target audience. This is, he admits, “usually because of contemporary ignorance about conditions in ancient Israel” (xxvi). This admission, especially for historical minimalists, begs the question of how he can reconstruct any mental image of the original audience to the degree that he can discern what they meant, not simply what they said.

Nevertheless, The Contemporary Torah, in the words of Stein, opens up “possibilities not previously imagined.” Moreover, Stein says he will consider the whole project a success if readers have “a few of the same bright-eyed questions” and “a bit of the open-ended encounter with the magic of Torah” (xxix) that he himself experienced while working on the project!