We invited four scholars to comment on the challenge of teaching texts in translation as part of our mission to focus on teaching in Jewish studies. We divided the task by the literature and time periods, and by areas most likely to be taught in universities. Our colleagues offer interesting reflections well beyond the pedagogical issues involved. Their insights about the possibilities and impossibilities of translating the subtlety of language and the challenges inherent in teaching about the cultural contexts of texts, whether they are from the seventh

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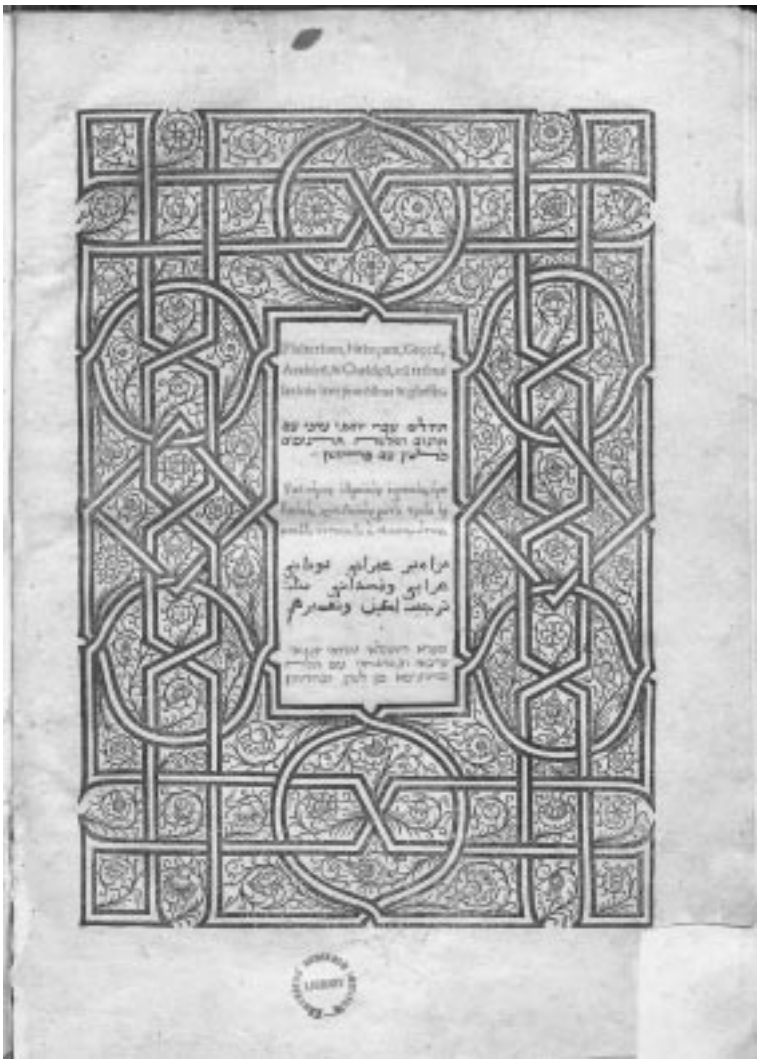
century or the twenty-first, are contributions to understanding our enterprise. In addition, each brief essay offers a useful review of the best resources for teaching about these literatures and periods. While our colleagues do not deny that much is lost in translation, they also reflect on the ways that translation is, for our students as well as for ourselves, central to the endeavor of scholarship in Jewish studies.



Above Right: Title page from the *Polyglot Psalter* (Genoa, 1516), printed on paper. Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

Teaching the Bible in Translation

Marc Brettler

Since many Brandeis students know Hebrew and have some familiarity with the Bible, my first challenge is to convince them that it is worthwhile to enroll in survey courses such as "Introduction to the Bible," where we read most of the Bible in English. Such courses are especially important for students who have only engaged in close reading of texts with commentaries, yet have no sense of how individual parts of the Bible fit into their historical context, or how themes develop throughout the biblical period. Even when students claim they can work through all the assigned texts in Hebrew, I suggest that they read most of them in English—after all, how many can read the Hebrew Jeremiah in a single night, or manage the Hebrew of Job or the Aramaic of Daniel? Also, reading in English encourages them to see the forest rather than the trees, and allows them to engage with the Bible as a whole.

In choosing which translation(s) to assign, I have encountered at least three problems that are specific to the Bible. There is an embarrassment of riches of Bible translations—it is not necessary, as with other texts, to spend the first class telling the students what the problems are with the existing one, two, or three translations; instead, I need to decide which of the more than ten translations to use. Second, unlike many classical texts studied in translation in Jewish studies courses, the Bible is considered a highly "literary" text. Especially in its poetry, but also in some of its prose, it presents problems that are different from translating the Mishnah, most medieval historical texts, or biblical commentaries. Finally, most biblical translations are written for liturgical, rather than university use, presenting the translators with a set of issues that is unlike those Pines confronted when translating *The Guide* of Maimonides.

I usually deal with the plethora of choices by assigning a single translation, and supplementing it with others. I try to teach my students that there is no "best" translation—it all depends on what you are looking for. Some render the text into contemporary idiom (e.g. *Today's English Version*), others try to bring English as close as possible to Hebrew (e.g. Fox's *The Schocken Bible*), while others strike a balance in between, being sensitive to the Hebrew and its meaning, while using contemporary (formal) English idiom (e.g. the JPS *Tanakh*). To my mind, the latter is a reasonable compromise—idiomatic and easy enough for students to read, yet still reflecting aspects of the style and structure of the Hebrew; this is why I use the *Tanakh* translation as my main text.

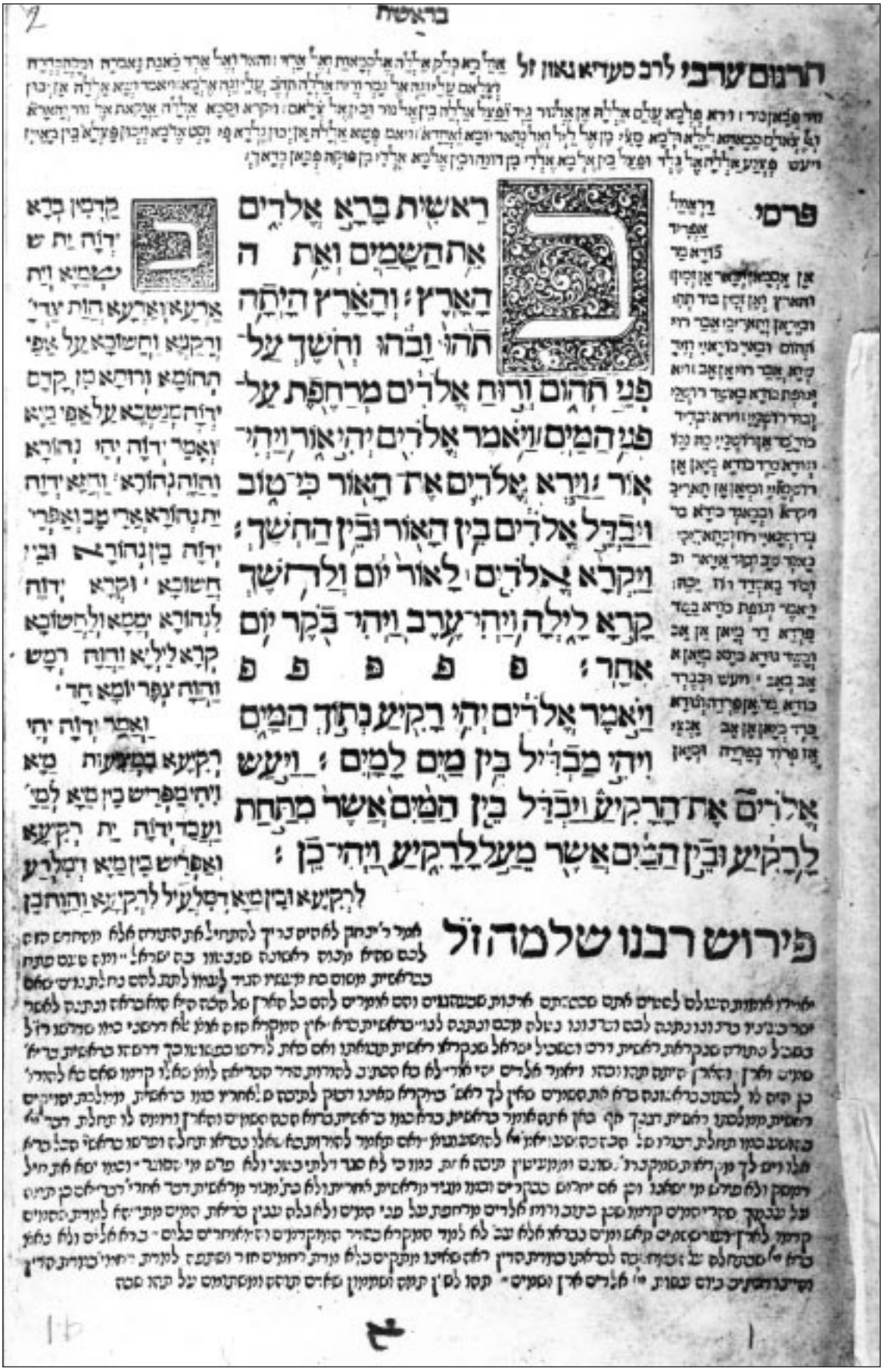
I frequently supplement *Tanakh* with handouts. I do this from the first class, where I slowly teach the first creation story in Genesis using *The Five Books of Moses* (*The Schocken Bible*). Its layout—as poetry rather than prose—encourages students to slow down. In addition, this translation renders the same Hebrew word with the same English word, so I can explore structural matters, repeated words and phrases, and how they convey meaning, particularly in sections that are especially literary. The translation, however, is less successful for assignments such as "read all of Leviticus"—its style makes it too difficult to read quickly for appreciating broad content. In addition, it is not complete, and thus it is difficult to find, for example, a translation of Psalms that completely allows the structure, meaning, and beauty of the original to shine through. (For example, the major English translations of Psalm 6 do not capture the importance of the repetition of שוב, and its punning with בוש).

Early in the semester, I distribute a handout of various translations of the *Akedah* from Genesis 22, to highlight the problems inherent in all translations. I cover such issues as whether *Tanakh* is correct in its translation and reordering of the nouns in verse 2, קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק as "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love," and whether the opening phrase וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה should be rendered "Some time afterward," as in *Tanakh*, or "Now after these events it was," as in *The Five Books of Moses*. We review why Alter's *Genesis* renders every *vav* as "and," and why Mitchell's *Genesis* avoids this use, translating for tone rather than style, and recreating a more original text rather than adhering to the standard Masoretic text. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to perform a similar exercise with most other Jewish texts, where this diversity of translations and translation types does not exist.

Throughout the semester, I correct mistakes that likely have their origin in the translator's desire not to disturb English readers too much, especially when they are reading the text in a liturgical context. My interest as an academic scholar of the Bible is in what the Bible meant historically, and thus, I find myself criticizing modernized translations, which aim to make the text more

palatable to the modern worshipper. This is especially evident in recent Protestant translations—e.g. the *New Revised Standard Version* renders the beginning of Psalm 1, אַשְׁרֵי־הָאִישׁ, as "Happy are those," even though there is good evidence that the Psalter is addressing males only, and the text uses האיש rather than the gender-neutral האדם. *Tanakh* is not immune from such mistranslations. In 2 Samuel 12, after David is confronted by Nathan, he confesses, and according to *Tanakh*, Nathan responds: "The LORD has remitted your sin; you shall not die." The Hebrew for "has remitted" is הֶעֱבִיר, however, and should be translated as "has transferred." If there is any doubt about this, later in the chapter the son born of this adulterous affair dies. It seems that for theological reasons, because most people are uncomfortable with vicarious punishment and the death of innocent children, the *Tanakh* translators have softened the text.

Other reasons determine translation choice as well, such as the availability of



Page from the *Constantinople Polyglot Bible* (1546), written in Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, and Aramaic. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

translations printed together with useful commentaries or annotations. Most classical Jewish sources are so difficult or foreign in English that a translation alone is not of much help. The availability of good annotations is of paramount importance. This is why earlier I used the *Revised Standard Version* in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, and then the *New Revised Standard Version*, first in the *HarperCollins Study Bible* and then in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, third edition. They were available with good annotations, even though I was not enamored of the translations themselves. In part, my frustration in using these works was one factor that motivated me to co-edit with Adele Berlin *The Jewish Study Bible* (2004), which reproduces the *Tanakh* text, and contains annotations and essays incorporating traditional Jewish and modern critical scholarship. Among other things, we used the annotations to correct problematic or questionable renderings in *Tanakh*, such as העביר in 2 Samuel 12, which the *Jewish Study Bible* notes is "better 'transferred,'" or the ubiquitous mistranslation of חטאת as "sin offering," which is corrected to "purification offering." *The Jewish Study Bible* thus attempts to provide excellent, up-to-date, Jewishly sensitive annotations on the best compromise translation available.

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It would seem that what I do—teaching from translations while pointing out their shortcomings—is problematic, and could undermine the students' confidence in the very translation that we use. This can happen, though if done properly, it need not, and teaching in this manner can serve as an important reminder that much is lost in any translation, and that it is important to study biblical Hebrew in order to attain unmediated access to the Bible. Thus, my most gratifying experience is seeing students move from English survey courses to biblical Hebrew courses and then to Hebrew text courses, where they use the general background information gleaned from translation courses, along with their Hebrew skills to appreciate fully the text in the original.

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