

Translations of Genesis 25:19–23

revised after 4/24/2012 class (see page 7)

The story of Jacob occupies half the book of Genesis. It begins in Genesis 25:19 and continues until the end of Genesis in chapter 50. Genesis 25:19 is the beginning of *Parshat Toldot*. As I present these translations from the Hebrew, I am reminded of the translations of the first word of the Torah, *Bereyshit*, appearing on the wall in front of the American Bible Society in New York City <<http://www.americanbible.org/>>. *Bereyshit* is hidden in a corner, giving no indication that Hebrew is the original language of the Bible.

Here are three translations of Genesis 25:19–23 and ten translations of Genesis 25:23. There is general agreement in translations #1–9, 11–13 on the sense of the last clause in Genesis 25:23. Only in Richard Elliott Friedman’s translation #10 is this clause translated differently. In this case the majority does not rule. In fact, of the thirteen translations only Friedman’s conveys the subtle, exquisitely ambiguous biblical wording that raises an issue central to this course.

We are all Rebekah. Her predicament is our predicament. The text is silent. The text invites us to go beyond words as we strive to understand it. As Rebekah is empowered to interpret God’s prophecy in Gen. 25:23, so are we empowered to interpret God’s words here and in all of the Torah. As we do so, we embody the essence of Judaism by becoming God’s partners. The Hebrew language is the perfect medium for this empowerment because, by its very structure based on roots, it effortlessly creates multiple meanings and invites multiple interpretations.

In reading the Torah, we must think for ourselves.

The mistranslation in #8 leads to a typical pro-Jacob, anti-Esau interpretation that is included after that translation.

See page 7 for the much deeper understanding that came from teaching this class.

1. King James Version [The Unbound Bible <<http://unbound.biola.edu/>>]

19. And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham begat Isaac:
20. And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.
21. And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.
22. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the LORD.
23. And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

Comment on “from thy bowels.” This is an accurate translation of the Hebrew *mimeyayich*. Most recent translations choose a softer word than “bowels.”

2. Jewish Publication Society, *The Five Books of Moses*, 1917

- 19 And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham begot Isaac.

20 And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean, of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife.

21 And Isaac entreated HaShem for his wife, because she was barren; and HaShem let Himself be entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

22 And the children struggled together within her; and she said: ‘If it be so, wherefore do I live?’ And she went to inquire of HaShem.

23 And HaShem said unto her: Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

Comparison of KJV and JPS 1917. The two translations are almost the same except for a few archaisms in the KJV and in their renditions of Gen 25:20.

KJV: “when he took Rebekah to wife [genealogy of Rebekah].”

JPS 1917: “when he took Rebekah [genealogy of Rebekah] to be his wife.”

The second is accurate. The first sacrifices accuracy for normative English word order.

The JPS 1962 translation, which is one of my least favorite, follows the KJV, writing “when he took to wife Rebekah.” This leads to the basic question whether the purpose of translation is an accurate rendition of the source or a rendition that reads well in the target language or an interpretation of the source. Of all translations of the Hebrew Bible that I have seen, Everett Fox’s is the more accurate rendition of the Hebrew original (see #6).

3. Jewish Publication Society, *The Five Books of Moses*, 1962

Gen 25:23. and the LORD answered her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;
One people shall be mightier than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger.”

4. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*

Gen 25:23. And the LORD said to her:

“Two nations — in your womb,
Two peoples from your loins shall issue.
People over people shall prevail,
The elder, the younger’s slave.”

5. Artscroll *Bereishis*

Gen 25:23. And HASHEM said to her,

‘Two nations are in your womb;
Two regimes from your insides shall be separated;
the might shall pass from one regime to the other,
And the elder shall serve the younger.’

6. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*

Gen 25:23. YHWH said to her:

Two nations are in your body,
two tribes from your belly shall be divided;

tribe shall be mightier than tribe,
elder shall be servant to younger!

7. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*

Gen 25:23. And *God* let her be told: Two nations are in thy womb, and two manners of government will separate themselves from thy inwards, and one form of government will be mightier than the other, and the greater will serve the lesser.

8. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*

Gen 25:23. God's word to her was, 'Two nations are in your womb. Two governments will separate from inside you. The upper hand will go from one government to the other.

[The greater one will serve the younger.](#)'

The greater one...

Rebecca thus knew that Jacob would be the chosen one. This explains [Genesis 25:28 \[Isaac enjoyed eating Esau's game and favored him, but Rebecca favored Jacob,\]](#) and Genesis 28:5 [Isaac then sent Jacob on his way. [Jacob] headed toward Padan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramaean, the brother of Rebecca, [Jacob and Esau's mother.](#)]

My comment: In Gen 25:28 the Hebrew says "and Rebecca favored Jacob." Kaplan's **but** is an interpretation.

In interpreting the text rather than translating it accurately, Rabbi Kaplan commits what Robert Alter calls the "heresy of explanation":

The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible. This impulse may be attributed . . . to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible — indeed, transparent — to all.

9. W. G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*

Gen 25:23 and the LORD answered her, "Two nations are in your womb,/ Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;/ One people shall be mightier than the other,/ And the older shall serve the younger."

10. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*

Gen 25:19–23. The translation of verse 20 contains an awkward construction: "to him as a wife" is separated from "he took" by Rebekah's genealogy. However, this construction captures the sense of the original Hebrew. This should be contrasted with the King James translation of verse 19 in which "to wife" appears in the normal position, thus sacrificing accuracy for normative English word order.

¹⁹ And these are the records of Isaac, son of Abraham: Abraham had fathered Isaac. ²⁰ And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, the Aramean, from Paddam Aram, sister of Laban, the Aramean, to him as a wife. ²¹ And Isaac prayed to YHWH for his wife because she was infertile, and YHWH was prevailed upon by him, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²² And the children struggled inside her, and she said, "If it's like this, why do I exist?" And she went to inquire of YHWH.

²³ And YHWH said to her,

Two nations are in your womb,
and two people will be dispersed from your insides,
and one people will be mightier than the other people,

and the older the younger will serve.

[subject – direct object – verb or direct object – subject – verb?]

11. Latin Vulgate < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>

Gen 25:23. Qui respondens ait : Duæ gentes sunt in utero tuo, et duo populi ex ventre tuo dividuntur, populusque populum superabit, **et major serviet minori** [nominative subject – verb – dative indirect object].

12. Luther, German Translation, 1545 < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>

Gen 25:23. Und der HERR sprach zu ihr: Zwei Völker sind in deinem Leibe, und zweierlei Leute werden sich scheiden aus deinem Leibe; und ein Volk wird dem andern überlegen sein, **und der Größere wird dem Kleinem dienen** [nominative subject – verb – dative indirect object].

13. Ostervald, French Translation, 1996 < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>

Gen 25:23. Et l'Éternel lui dit: Deux nations sont dans ton ventre, et deux peuples se sépareront au sortir de tes entrailles. Un de ces peuples sera plus fort que l'autre; **et le plus grand servira le plus petit** [nominative subject – verb – direct object].

14. Hebrew Bible <<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0125.htm>>

כַּג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ,

lah Hashem Va-yomer
to her YHWH And said 23

בְּבֶטְנֶךָ שְׁנַי גּוֹיִם

bebitneych goyim shney
[are] in your womb, nations two

וּשְׁנַי לְאֻמִּים יִפְרְדּוּ;

yifreydu mimeyayich le-umim ushney
will be dispersed from your insides peoples and two

וְאֶמָּץ מִלְּאֻם אֶחָד

ye-ematz mile-om ule-om
will be mightier than the other people and one people

וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר.

tsa-ir ya-avod verav
the younger will serve the older.

[subject – direct object – verb or direct object – subject – verb?].

Here is Richard Elliott Friedman’s translation of Gen. 25:21–23, which ends with God’s prophecy to Rebekah.

²¹And Isaac prayed to YHWH for his wife because she was infertile, and YHWH was prevailed upon by him, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²²And the children struggled inside her, and she said, “If it’s like this, why do I exist?” And she went to inquire of YHWH.

²³And YHWH said to her,

Two nations are in your womb,
and two people will be dispersed from your insides,
and one people will be mightier than the other people,
and the older the younger will serve [*verav ya’avod tsa-ir*].
[subject – direct object – verb or direct object – subject – verb?].

What is significant about this?

Note: I followed this outline in class, going from item a to item g. But in the course of doing this, Daniel Berlin made a brilliant insight concerning Rebekah’s mindfulness, which gave me a much deeper understanding of this passage because of my own experience. This deeper understanding begins on page 7 (see item h), immediately after item g on the next page. Once again, in reading the Torah carefully, the sacred text became a mirror of my own soul.

a. God first spoke with Hagar. Rebekah goes to inquire of the Lord, the first woman in the Torah who initiates communication with God. How does Rebekah know that she is hearing the voice of YHWH? One interpretation is that God’s prophecy is a literary device that moves the story forward.

b. God’s response is fraught with ambiguity. Let’s read the last line in Hebrew. *Verav ya’avod tsa-ir*. Is “the elder, the younger’s slave” an accurate translation? As Robert Alter points out, quoting Richard Elliott Friedman, the Hebrew oracle here has the ambiguity of its Delphic counterpart: the Hebrew syntax leaves unclear which noun is subject and which is object — “the older shall serve the younger,” or, “the older, the younger shall serve.” This ambiguity is not available in Latin, German, and other languages that have different case endings for the subject and for the direct object or indirect object (*minori* in Latin and *dem Kleinen* in German). However, this ambiguity is available in English, French, Hebrew, and other languages that do not have different case endings for the subject and for the direct object.

c. The verse, *Verav ya’avod tsa-ir*, is particularly problematic because *rav* does not mean “elder,” but rather “mighty” or “great,” and “*tsa-ir*,” meaning “young,” has no article. So the sense of this verse is rather “And a mighty one a young one will serve.” The word *rav* has other meanings that are relevant to the Jacob story: “Rabbi” or “teacher” and “dispute” or “quarrel.”

d. Another problem is that the verse *Verav ya'avod tsa-ir* omits the definite articles; a more accurate translation would be “an older a younger will serve.” Only Everett Fox’s translation #6 expresses this subtlety; he writes “elder shall be servant to younger.” If the definite articles had been included, then the Hebrew would be *Varav ya'avod et ha-tsa-ir*, in which the subject-object ambiguity is lost. In Hebrew *et* is a grammatical particle that precedes a direct object and has no analogue in English. The awkward construction in the Hebrew original without definite articles alerts us that the verse has a deeper meaning that we the readers are invited to discover.

e. Because of the ambiguity of God’s prophecy, Rebekah is challenged to interpret God’s words. God invites Rebekah to observe her two children and decide which one, by his superior intelligence and wit, will prevail. She is challenged by God to take fate into her own hands by acting. She is challenged by God to think for herself. Eventually she decides to interpret the prophecy as “the elder shall serve the younger.” The alternate interpretation (“the elder, the younger shall serve”) is the normal working of society. Rebekah challenges the conventional wisdom of society by doing all she can to help her younger son prevail.

f. We now reach the main point. We are Rebekah. Her predicament is our predicament. The text is silent. The text invites us to go beyond words as we strive to understand it. As Rebekah is empowered to interpret God’s prophecy in Gen. 25:23, so are we empowered to interpret God’s words here and in all of the Torah. As we do so, we embody the essence of Judaism by becoming God’s partners. The Hebrew language is the perfect medium for this empowerment because, by its very structure based on roots, it effortlessly creates multiple meanings and invites multiple interpretations. In reading the Torah, we must think for ourselves.

g. Here is the full commentary by Richard Elliott Friedman on his translation of the last clause in verse 23.

25:23. the older the younger will serve.

As I explained in *The Hidden Face of God*, people have usually taken this to mean that YHWH tells Rebekah that her younger son, Jacob, will dominate her older one, Esau. Some have thought, therefore, that Rebekah is not really manipulating the succession when she sends Jacob to pose as Esau. Rather, she is simply fulfilling God’s will. The decision of who is number-one-son thus is still God’s. However, this understanding is based on a misunderstanding of the subtle, exquisitely ambiguous biblical wording. The text does not in fact say that the elder son will serve the younger son. In biblical Hebrew, the subject may either precede or follow the verb, and the object likewise may either precede or follow the verb. What that means is that sometimes it is impossible to tell which word in a biblical verse is the subject and which is the object, especially if the verse is in poetry. That is the case in this oracle to Rebekah, which is in poetry. It can mean:

“the elder will serve the younger”

But it equally can mean:

“the elder, the younger will serve”

Like the Delphic oracles in Greece, this prediction contains two opposite meanings, and thus the person who receives it — Rebekah — can hear whatever she wants (consciously or subconsciously) to hear. It can be understood to mean that Jacob will serve Esau or that Esau will serve Jacob. I learned this from my senior colleague, David Noel Freedman.

h. My deeper understanding of this passage was inspired by Daniel Berlin. This is amazing. When God speaks to Rebekah in Gen 25:23, Rebekah is in severe pain. Robert Alter characterizes her statement in Gen 25:22 as her “cry of perplexity and anguish over this difficult pregnancy.” We read in Friedman’s translation, changing “insides” to “bowels” and modifying the last line: ²¹... and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²²And the children struggled inside her, and she said, “If it’s like this, why do I exist?” And she went to inquire of YHWH. ²³And YHWH said to her,

Two nations are in your womb,
and two people will be dispersed from your insides,
and one people will be mightier than the other people,
and an older [or a mighty one or a great one] a young one will serve.

In spite of the pain of the pregnancy and the suffering that it causes, Rebekah is mindful. This was pointed out to me by Daniel Berlin. She hears YHWH make a syntactical error in the last line, which must omit the definite articles to achieve its exquisite ambiguity. And hearing this, she realizes that YHWH is challenging her to take fate into her own hands by acting. She thinks, “Does God mean that the younger son will serve the older son? Since this is the normal course of events, why would God say it? Perhaps God means the reverse, that the older son will serve the younger son. I must observe my two children and decide which one, by his superior intelligence and wit, will prevail?” As we see in Gen 27, Rebekah chooses Jacob.

This insight touches me deeply because the same thing happened to me. At first I reacted to the headache pain with anger and self-pity. However, after meditation taught me to accept the pain, the pain became my best teacher, challenging me to take fate into my own hands by acting. In the midst of pain I became mindful.

Here is what I wrote in item e concerning YHWH’s challenge to Rebekah.

Because of the ambiguity of God’s prophecy, Rebekah is challenged to interpret God’s words. God invites Rebekah to observe her two children and decide which one, by his superior intelligence and wit, will prevail. She is challenged by God to take fate into her own hands by acting. She is challenged by God to think for herself. Eventually she decides to interpret the prophecy as “the elder shall serve the younger.” The alternate interpretation (“the elder, the younger shall serve”) is the normal working of society. Rebekah challenges the conventional wisdom of society by doing all she can to help her younger son prevail.

By teaching the class, I opened myself up to this wisdom.