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# Genesis: Translation And Commentary



## Synopsis

"[Here is] the Genesis for our generation and beyond." —Robert Fagles  
Genesis begins with the making of heaven and earth and all life, and ends with the image of a mummy in a coffin. In between come many of the primal stories in Western culture: Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden of Eden, Cain's murder of Abel, Noah and the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham's binding of Isaac, the covenant of God and Abraham, Isaac's blessing of Jacob in place of Esau, the saga of Joseph and his brothers. In Robert Alter's brilliant translation, these stories cohere in a powerful narrative of the tortuous relations between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, eldest and younger brothers, God and his chosen people, the people of Israel and their neighbors. Alter's translation honors the meanings and literary strategies of the ancient Hebrew and conveys them in fluent English prose. It recovers a Genesis with the continuity of theme and motif of a wholly conceived and fully realized book. His insightful, fully informed commentary illuminates the book in all its dimensions.

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## Customer Reviews

The Biblical book of Genesis contains some of the most sublime poetry known to man as well as the powerful and bloody history of early Israel. Literary critic Robert Alter here joins the ranks of contemporary authors who have tried to mimic, in English, the sonorous rhythms and parallel constructions of the original Hebrew. He also supplies an insightful, fascinating commentary that emphasizes the dramatic unity of the Genesis story. For believers seeking a deeper understanding

of the Bible's first book, or for readers interested in the Bible as literature, Alter's contribution is essential. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Of the making of many translations and commentaries on the book of Genesis there is no end. After all, the book of Genesis contains not only two of the Western world's most enduring myths of creation but also chronicles the history of early Israel. While past commentators like Hermann Gunkel and Gerhard von Rad were concerned with the ways in which the various literary forms present in the book of Genesis reflected the historical and theological concerns of the texts' writers and hearers, literary critic Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*) emphasizes the overall narrative unity of the disparate textual units that comprise the book of Genesis. In his translation of the first 11 chapters, for example, Alter carefully reproduces the stylistic devices of repetition and parallelism so characteristic of Hebrew poetry, while his translation of chapters 12-50 captures the dramatic tension and characterization that are the hallmarks of Hebrew narrative style. Alter is ever attentive to the power of paronomasia in the Hebrew so that his translation of Genesis 1:1, "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste (tohu wabohu, in Hebrew) and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters..." attempts through alliteration to translate the lilting poetry of the Hebrew phrase. Although Alter's translations lack the sparkle and elegance of Everett Fox's translations of Genesis in *The Five Books of Moses* (Schocken 1995), his commentaries on the literary qualities of Genesis and his casting of the Hebrew Bible's opening book as a single narrative woven together by the threads of character and theme ensure that Alter's work will take its place in the distinguished ranks of commentaries. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I'll take Alter's translation and commentary of Genesis over any other commentary yet produced. Alter's translation is easily the best out there and provides for the greatest insights into the narrative strategy of the author/editor. Alter's translation has forced me to shake my head time and again in disappointment over major translations like the NASB or NIV simply because they force the ancient text to read like a modern writing - and as a result lead the reader to miss so many interesting, important and wonderful features of Genesis. Alter's footnotes are gold. It's not going to give you a full commentary on every part of the text - but he will capture the power of the narrative and the insights offered are priceless. Having read through Alter, when I pick up a commentary (like that of Wenham's or Waltke's - both excellent commentaries) I find myself bored and slightly

disappointed. Alter does not deal extensively with the ancient cosmology of Genesis one and the extensive cultural and literary background to that text (John Walton's recent book on this is an important contribution to this). I'd have liked to have seen more on this from him. However, this is a bit peripheral to the literary and narrative intent of Alter. This "gap," if you will, doesn't really take away from the value of the book. It still must come with a 5-star recommendation. I'm afraid that those who have rated this book lower on the scale just don't get Genesis or the value of this translation.

I have been reading Alter's Old Testament translations; I especially like his discussions in the footnotes. These give me insight not only into the complexities of translation, but of the richness (and the gaps and interpretive cruxes in the text). I especially enjoy his side trips and analogies to later literature (my field is 18th century prose fiction) and his early work in Fielding is, to my mind, some of the best I have read. However intellectually interesting his Old Testament work is, it is also spiritually enlightening. It is a pleasure to read such a great scholar engage a great text.

Yes, this is an entire book based on Genesis. He wanted to retain some of the poetic nuance that was involved with the original Hebrew, and it definitely reads different than the more modern translations that I'm used to. If you're an amateur or professional theologian, or historian, it's fun to read through his translated content, and then the commentary in the footnotes. He puts so much into a historical and artistic context to better understand the original Hebrew text. I got this book for an Ancient Literature class, and it was enjoyable to see similar themes, but in no way does it mess with my faith. If anything, it's bolstered.

Has interesting insights. However, the author's secular viewpoint results in some ridiculous interpretations (i.e. Jacob wrestled with not an angel, but a demon? It was a demon that named the nation of Israel?). I certainly did not come to the same conclusions.

Used this version for a 'Bible as Literature' course, and it was excellent. The author endeavors to select words in his translation that respect the original poetic constructions and capture the sense of the original writings. Ample footnotes discuss how the original word choices and structures are significant in revealing the meanings and intent of the writers, in a historical and anthropological sense. Tried several other sources for Genesis, and liked Alter's best by far. I hope more Bible study groups will tap this source, for there is so much richness to be had. I'm not a religious person, but

very respectful of the truth that goes behind the writings, and the importance of these stories in our culture even today.

Sensitivity to translation starting from the actual words, considering various primary texts, authorship, and possible alternative interpretations. Alter captures the story as literature in context of other First Testament books. Thorough and exhaustive. Avoids doctrinal controversies which stem non-biblical theological concepts. A joy to read.

Theologians say that Genesis is a Little Gospel all in itself, & if no other book had been written, we have all we need to know about God, His origins, & ours. And Robert Alter is my favorite university instructor of theology. His translations from Hebrew make it unique & personally relevant. One of the best references for an incredible book of beginnings.

I was very impressed with the book's readability, scholarship, and insight into the text and literary quality of Genesis, challenging conventional renderings of the same passages based on extensive knowledge of both Biblical Hebrew and how to best and most accurately render into a very literary and readable English the ideas from the ancient text. Really captures a lot more of the power and subtlety of this classic document. I hope he goes on to translate the rest of the OT.

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