

# Book Review | The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, 3 vols. by Robert Alter

A Man, a Book, a Mission

BY GARY A. RENDSBURG December 19, 2018 in [2018 November-December](#), [Featured](#)

## **The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, 3 vols.**

*by Robert Alter*

W. W. Norton

2018, 3500 pp, \$125

When I first learned that Robert Alter had completed the task of singlehandedly translating the entire Bible, a project he commenced around 1995, my mind went to *Lawrence of Arabia*. In one scene of that spectacular movie, Peter O’Toole, playing T. E. Lawrence, enters British military headquarters in Cairo, dusty and exhausted from the long trek across the Sinai, and says to his commanding officer, “We’ve taken Aqaba.” The officer asserts, “It’s impossible,” to which Lawrence replies, “Yes, it is, [but] I did it.” And so it is with Alter’s *The Hebrew Bible*: What had been thought to be impossible—a complete modern Bible translation with expert commentary, not by committee, but by a single individual—is indeed possible.

Unlike Lawrence, though—who, despite his “I,” had a supporting cast of horse- and camel-mounted warriors—Alter has worked alone, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, year after year, to produce this exquisite Bible translation and commentary.

For most of the 20th century, biblical scholarship was dominated by the fields of history, archaeology and philology. Archaeologists unearthed sites; historians attempted to fit the evidence into the biblical narrative; and philologists worked on texts and inscriptions (sometimes in newly discovered languages) in an effort to explain rare Hebrew words and idioms. Scholars asked “historicist” questions such as the location of Ur of the Chaldees (the birthplace of Abraham), the date of the Exodus, the nature of the conquest under Joshua, the extent of the Davidic-Solomonic empire and so on. With no direct evidence coming to the fore, however, scholars were essentially spinning their wheels. Few approached the biblical text for what it is first and foremost—literature.

In the 1970s, the focus shifted—in large part because of Alter, professor (now emeritus) at the University of California at Berkeley since 1967. He published a short (eight pages) but path-breaking essay in the December 1975 issue of *Commentary*, “A Literary Approach to the Bible,” with special attention to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. In 1981, this and other essays formed the basis of Alter’s programmatic monograph, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, followed by *The Art of Biblical Poetry* in 1985. Through his fine *explication de texte*, Alter paved the way for readers of the Bible, the present writer included, to read and understand the inner workings of biblical language. (Alter’s work deeply influenced my own teaching and research by bridging the gap between a B.A. in English literature and mostly philological graduate work in biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies.)

Alter’s brilliant analyses of biblical literature raised a key issue, however. All of us who have endeavored to convey the literary essence of the Bible to our students know well the challenge of explaining the text via a standard English translation, such as the widely used Jewish Publication Society volume *The Tanakh* (1985). Explicating the Hebrew text requires a translation that adheres closely to the original, whereas most English translations, including *The Tanakh*, take precisely the opposite route, sacrificing the very essence of the source language (ancient Hebrew) to allow the translation to read smoothly in the target language (modern<sup>nt</sup>English).

To use two of Alter's favorite examples: 1) Whereas Hebrew narrative typically repeats the same word over and over again, in cultured English we are taught to vary our vocabulary, and 2) Whereas educated English prose is constructed via hypotaxis, with strings of dependent or subordinate clauses (see, for example, the opening sentence of this review), ancient Hebrew prose is assembled via parataxis, with one complete clause after another, linked by the conjunction "and."

To exemplify the first of these features, Alter observes how the word *zera* , "seed," reverberates throughout Genesis especially, although translators pluck all manner of English words to render this basic Hebrew noun, including "heirs," "offspring," "children," "descendants," etc. Similarly, *yad*, "hand," is used repeatedly in Genesis 39, which tells the story of Joseph in Egypt, but when translators refer to Potiphar's having placed everything in Joseph's "care," "trust" or "charge" (Hebrew *be-yado*), they miss the connection with the young hero's escape from Potiphar's wife, minus his tunic, which he left "in her hand" (*be-yadah*). Alter's approach renders each instance of *zera* as "seed" (and yes, I checked all 59 attestations in the Book of Genesis). And in his version of Genesis 39, the reader is able to see the connection between and among all nine occurrences of "hand(s)," regardless of the context.

Likewise, when translators constantly convert parataxis to hypotaxis, the essential character of the prose is altered. In the story of the meeting between Rebekah and Abraham's servant, for instance, compare *The Tanakh's* translation, "When she had let him drink his fill, she said, 'I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking'" (Gen 24:19), to Alter's rendering, "And she let him drink his fill and said, 'For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.'" Why does it matter? Why should one care if the former version deletes both instances of "and," while the latter version includes them? In Alter's words, and I could not agree more: "The reiterated 'and,' then, plays an important role in creating the rhythm of the story, in phonetically punctuating the forward-driving movement of the prose. The elimination of the 'and' [produces] an abrupt, awkward effect in

the sound pattern of the language, or to put it more strictly, a kind of narrative arrhythmia.”

The alert reader also will have noticed another difference between the two above renderings: In *The Tanakh*, one reads “I will also draw for your camels,” while in Alter’s version, the reader is treated to “For your camels, too, I shall draw water.” Alter’s version puts the camels at the head of the clause, following the Hebrew original, *gam li-gmalleka ’eš’ab*. As Alter argues, when English usage allows it, the translator should follow the word order of the Hebrew—especially when the author’s goal is to have the reader/listener focus on a particular item. Giving drink to Abraham’s servant is a simple hospitable deed; drawing water for ten camels (each of which can drink 25 gallons at the end of a long journey) is “an act of ‘Homeric’ heroism,” as Alter observes.

With all this in mind, Alter in 1996 published his own translation of Genesis, which then was incorporated into *The Five Books of Moses* (2004), though along the way there also appeared *The David Story* (1999). Next came *The Book of Psalms* (2007), *The Wisdom Books* (2011), *Ancient Israel* (2013), devoted to Joshua through Kings, and *Strong As Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel* (2015).

What was left? About five years ago, I asked Alter if his goal was to translate the entire Bible, to which he responded, “If I am granted length of days.” He quickly added that the hardest material, the Prophets, was still to come—for in these long biblical books one finds “a form of elevated speech” created by individuals with a “mastery of poetry and rhetoric.”

The translation itself is not Alter’s only accomplishment in these volumes. As readers of the previous editions know, about two-thirds of each page presents the translation, while the lower third provides helpful notes and observations. Sometimes these are simple aids to the reader, e.g., “*Rabbah*. The capital city of Ammon.” More often, however, the comments deliver keen insights regarding the style and diction of the biblical writers. For example, regarding the poetic couplet

at Isaiah 1:3, “The ox knows its owner / and the donkey its master’s stall,” Alter remarks, “This line is a neat illustration of the pattern of focusing or concretization in the movement from the first verset to the second in biblical poetry. The first verset puts forth the general relation of beast to owner; the second verset (with metrical room for an additional word in the parallelism because the verb ‘knows’ does double duty for both halves of the line and need not be repeated) then focuses on the place of nurture connecting beast and master.” Multiply this example by thousands, and one gains a sense of the scope and wonder of this project.

Alter’s *magnum opus* is a landmark achievement, deserving of great celebration. The three-volume boxed set is aesthetically pleasing, the author’s own literary panache is evident throughout, and the scholarship embodied in this remarkable undertaking will last for generations. To state the obvious: Alter’s *The Hebrew Bible* deserves to be on the bookshelf of every scholar, interested lay person, devoted church- or synagogue-attender and, indeed, everyone. And to the author himself, I say, “You did it.”

*Gary A. Rendsburg is the Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History at Rutgers University.*