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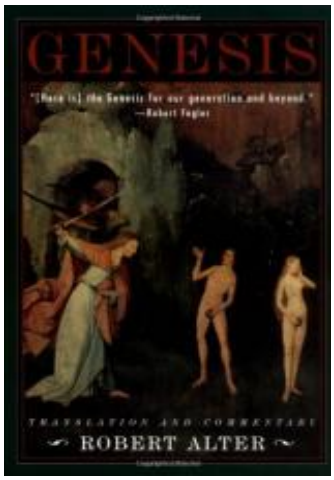
Genesis: Translation and Commentary

by Robert Alter



About the Book

Robert Alter sets a new standard in the translation of this formative book of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis begins with the making of heaven and earth and all life, and ends with the image of a mummy?Joseph's?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.

Discussion Guide

1. Modern scholarship has often drawn attention to the apparent contradictions betwen two different accounts of creation, the first concluding in the middle of verse 4 of Chapter 2, the second beginning from that point and running to the end of Chapter 3. Consider how these two accounts differ in form and content. Why did the ancient editors choose to put together these two stories, and these two ways of telling the story?

2. Biblical storytelling, as the Commentary repeatedly shows, often places great weight on the repetition of certain key words. In the early chapters of Genesis, three such terms are soil, blood, and pain. (The story of Cain and Abel powerfully joins the first two.) What do you make of the prominence of these terms in this opening section of Genesis? In what ways might the large implications of these terms continue to bear on our own historical predicament?

3. As this new translation makes clear, the first nine chapters of Genesis have numerous poetic fragments inserted in the prose narrative. What purpose, or purposes, are served by these switches from prose to poetry?

4. To modern readers, the story of the Tower of Babel reads like a fable and surely has no historical validity. What serious resonance might it have as an account of primordial division in humankind? Why the Babylonian setting? What bearing does it have on the representation of history and culture in the later chapters of Genesis?

5. Approximate repetition of episodes is an essential part of the biblical method of storytelling. Compare the two following recurrent stories: the sister-wife in a southern land (Chapters 12, 20, and 26) and the encounter of the future bride at a well in a foreign land (Chapters 24 and 29). In each case, how are the details of the version in question shaped to meet the needs of the immediate narrative context, or to express the character of its hero or heroine?

6. Polygamy is assumed in the Patriarchal Tales as a given social institution. What light do the stories of Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, cast on the institution? Where do issues of social standing intersect the representation of polygamy? Consider in particular how the co-wives speak to each other in the dialogues.

7. As in Homer, hospitality in Genesis is conceived as a central rite of civilization. How does Lot's hospitality (Chapter 19) differ in style and detail from Abraham's (Chapter 18), and why? How does the attempted gang-rape by the men of Sodom place their whole society beyond the pale of civilization?

8. In the sequenced stories of the birth of Isaac and the near-death in the wilderness of Ishmael (Chapter 21), to be followed by the near-death of Isaac in the wilderness, "laughter" is highlighted first and then "crying" is highlighted. What do you make of this juxtaposition in regard to what is conveyed about the characters and their destinies? Why is the writer drawn to play, here and elsewhere, with multiple meanings of the verb "to laugh"?from disbelief and mockery to joy to sexual dalliance?

9. In a set of narratives that are proverbially "patriarchal," women play a large and sometimes remarkably active role (most strikingly, Rebekah and Tamar). There is surely no neat key to this seeming contradiction, but what explanation would you suggest? Are these forceful, enterprising women in keeping with or contradictory to the accounts of the creation of man and woman in Chapters 1 and 2?

10. The first dialogue assigned to a character, Robert Alter has proposed, has a particularly sharp characterizing effect in biblical narrative. How does this work in the first dialogue between Jacob and Esau (25:27-30)? Over the many years of narrated time after this early moment, does either of the twins move beyond the image of himself presented in his first speech, and if so, how and why?

11. In the story of the stealing of the blessing by Jacob (Chapter 27), what sense of the nature of truthfulness and lying is conveyed through the articulations of the dialogue? Does the story suggest any moral judgment of Jacob's actions, or Rebekah's, either in this episode or later? What do you make of the fact that the patriarch who gives the very name to the

people of Israel is portrayed as seizing his "election" through deceit?

12. The tale of Jacob's wrestling through the night with a mysterious stranger (32:22-33) is one of the most haunting and enigmatic stories in the Bible. What are the sources of its power, and why does the narrator leave so much unexplained? What do you make of its placement just before Jacob's encounter with his brother Esau after twenty years? Why do you think this was deemed an appropriate story to account for the national name "Israel"?

13. Chapters 38 and 39 give us in immediate sequence a story of sexual incontinence (Judah and Tamar) and sexual restraint (Joseph and Potiphar's wife). How do the two episodes interact, and what light do they throw on the larger, unfolding story of Joseph and his brothers? Sexual appetite, licit and illicit, is frequently represented in Genesis, but as a rule the narrator makes no explicit moral judgments about it. What attitude, or attitudes, about sexuality can be inferred from this broad range of stories?

14. Dreams, and the interpretation of dreams, punctuate the Joseph story from its beginning until his achievement of greatness. Why does this make sense in regard to both the themes of the story and its particular historical setting? How do the dreams in the Joseph story differ from those in the earlier sections of Genesis in regard to both the character of the dream and its narrative function?

15. The two visits of the brothers to Egypt, with the arrest of all the brothers, the detention of Simeon, and the later detention of Benjamin, form an elaborately staged sequence, with Joseph as stagemaster. What is going on morally and psychologically, both among the brothers and within Joseph? Can you reconcile Joseph's cat-and-mouse cruelty with his repeated tears, the rush of feeling he experiences when he reveals himself to his brothers?

16. Jacob plays a central role in four scenes in Egypt: his reunion with Joseph (46:28-30), his court appearance before Pharaoh (47:7-10), his deathbed blessing of Joseph's two sons (Chapter 48), and his poetic testament to his twelve sons (Chapter 49). What resonances does each of these scenes have with the previous representations of the character of Jacob and his role as father and forefather?

Author Bio

Robert Alter is Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. A distinguished literary critic, Professor Alter is the author of **The Art of Biblical Narrative** and **The Art of Biblical Poetry**, and is co-editor with Frank Kermode of **The Literary Guide to the Bible**.

Critical Praise

"Genesis remains our best single collection of perennial stories. Alter translates them glowingly, without slickness or archness. His running commentary illuminates the true language of life in both Hebrew and English."Robert Shattuck

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