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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 •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.

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Customer Reviews

This edition pairs a fabulous translation with commentary that is extensive and erudite without being the least bit boringly pedantic. Alter's running commentary in the footnotes (which constitute at least one half of every page!) alerts readers to centuries of interpretations and re-interpretations of this cornerstone of world literature, in a manner that makes the book of Genesis seem more alive and more vital than ever before, an ongoing and important discussion. Alter's commentaries help to

situate Genesis within the larger narrative arc of the Bible as well as they address even the most current strains of Biblical exegesis (like feminist rethinkings of gender roles in the creation, for example), but this reader found the wealth of fascinating minutiae even more endearing. What did Potiphar's wife REALLY say to Joseph when she tried to seduce him? It's in there. What does Adam's name mean in Hebrew? It's in there. First-time readers of the Bible can expect a very readable yet faithful prose, while long-time readers can expect the unexpected, as Alter's etymological and socio-historical explanations bring a pleasantly surprising new clarity to a classic.

I'll never look at Genesis in quite the same way. That said, sometimes the "fresh" "new" look is just another way of packaging a worthless, fleeting novelty. Once in awhile, though, "fresh" means a shift in paradigm. Alter's translation is thoughtful, readable, and faithful to the spirit and dignity of the great book of Genesis. As a man who principally looks at Genesis through literary eyes, one might think his commentary would be reduced to cold faithlessness. But Alter is deeply linked to the faith of the authors and what they were trying to tell. He leaves the judgment of the story to the reader. As a believer, I also appreciated Alter's comments on the intelligence of the composition. To him, it's not just a collection of old legends, but a story with a plan - a tapestry with patterns to be sure woven into a sensible design. In a day where we've chaptered and versified the Bible to death, Alter's holistic treatment probably gets back to the spirit in which the original account was probably presented.

Perhaps the most serious limitation of standard translations of the Bible is the tendency for the target language and its literary conventions to take control. One concrete example of this is the convention within contemporary English prose that word repetition is undesirable. This is particularly unfortunate when translating a language like biblical Hebrew in which frequent word repetition is one of the key elements of literary structure. Alter has produced a valuable translation of Genesis which allows the literary conventions of the source language to retain control. Of course, this means that the translation will often depart the expectations of contemporary English prose, but the result is well worth this price. For the first time, the literary features of the Hebrew text of Genesis are available for English readers to observe. Those who find the stories of Genesis so familiar that they have become stale will find that this translation gives the text new life. Alter has included helpful commentary on the text in footnotes. Unfortunately, this commentary is somewhat uneven. Some literary features of the text are discussed in great detail while others receive no comment at all. Therefore, the need for a fully developed narrative commentary on Genesis is still unmet.

Alter is attempting to capture both the meaning of the words and the poetry of the phrasing. This was a wonderful read. And where his choice of words differs from mainstream translation, he is careful to explain what the Hebrew words are and why he made his choices, so you can make up your own mind. Masterful.

If you're looking for an unbiased version of this great work of literature, something that gives readers the chance to have a better insight into various possible translations of one of the best selling books ever, Robert Alter's Genesis is what you're looking for. This book is truly extraordinary, in that it doesn't manipulate words to achieve a certain goal or position in the reader's mind, instead, it explains why many previous translation give a very wrong view of the bible. Robert Alter carefully revises the Hebrew, and uses large amounts of footnotes, to explain why he has chosen a certain translation, and what several other interpretations could be. Many people think a translation really can't change a book very much, but this version of Genesis shows us otherwise. A good example for instance, is the creation of mankind. King James and most other translators have always said the first human was a man, and from his flesh a woman was created. When we look at the exact word that is used in the original book, we see that it is 'adam, which means human. Without the prefix "ben" (son of), this does not suggest maleness, and verse 27 says "And God created the human in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." This suggests the first human being both male and female. Then God took part of this human, and made another human, now calling one man and the other woman. This would also explain the attraction between man and woman, the need to be together, because they were once one. This shows how much difference even just the fact that the translator is male (such as King James) can make, and what a huge impact something this small can have on all of Christianity and indeed mankind. This translation of Genesis is full of valuable information, and should be read by anyone with an interest in religion or literature. Personally I am not religious at all, but I frequently use the bible as a reference for other literature, and this book has given me a much better insight into how careful one should be with translations.

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