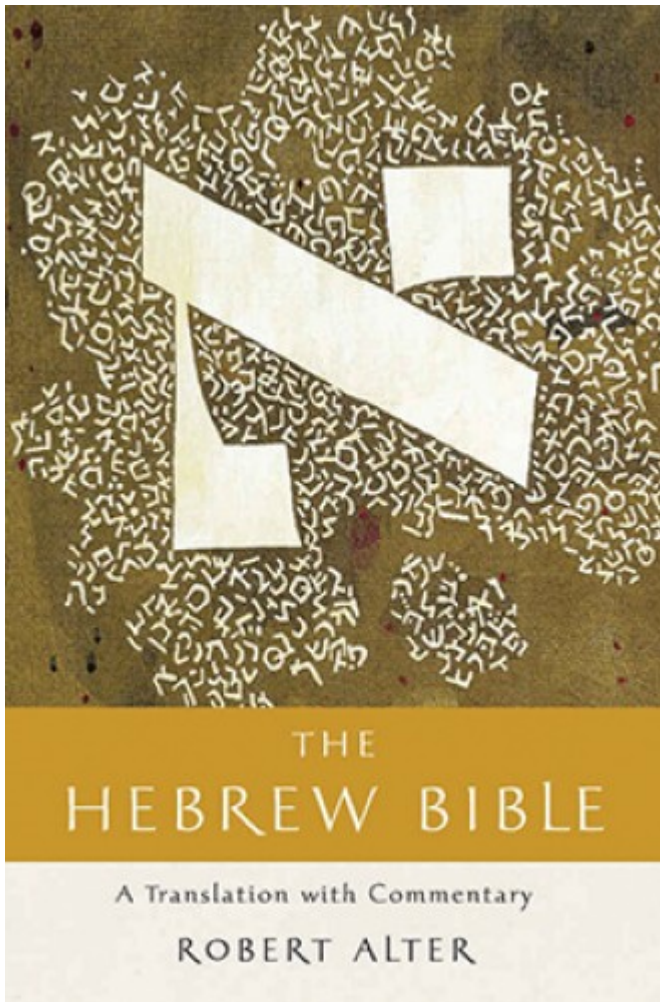


Robert Alter's Hebrew Bible translation is at once accurate and eloquent

Precision and beauty have kissed.

by [Judy Klitsner](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Hebrew Bible

A Translation with Commentary

By Robert Alter

W. W. Norton

Robert Alter has accomplished the monumental feat, 22 years in the making, of single-handedly translating the Hebrew Bible into English. Since he began, Alter's translation has been published in segments. Now that he has completed the magisterial project, it is available in its entirety as a three-volume set.

Alter claims that despite the many competent translations already available, his was necessary because modern translations generally display a "shaky sense of English," while more ancient translations (such as the 17th-century King James Version) exhibit "a shaky sense of Hebrew."

With remarkably few exceptions, Alter avoids both pitfalls. He manages to provide precision in translating—remaining true to Hebrew grammar and syntax as well as modern philological scholarship—without sacrificing an organic, often graceful English that sits well with an English-speaking readership.

To appreciate Alter's skill in sidestepping the snares that have entangled others, we turn to an example of a translation that displays "a shaky sense of Hebrew." At the conclusion to the extraordinary saga of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph is catapulted to the position of viceroy of Egypt. Faced with a devastating famine, the people of Egypt appeal to Joseph as their last hope for survival. Having already surrendered their money and their livestock in exchange for food, all the people have left to offer are their land and their *gevi'ot*, a Hebrew word that generally refers to dead bodies.

The KJV translates the people's words this way: "there is not ought left in the sight of my lord, but **our bodies** (*gevi'ot*), and our lands" (Gen. 47:18). KJV's refashioning of *gevi'ot* from "dead bodies" to simply "bodies" seems reasonable, given the context of the Egyptian people's urgent struggle to survive. Stripped of everything, save their precious land and their personal freedom (the "bodies" of which they speak), the wretched Egyptians now offer these items as well.

But Alter objects to the dilution of the stark Hebrew term *gevi'ot*, insisting that the original meaning of "dead bodies" must be applied. Here is how he translates the verse: "nothing is left for our lord but **our carcasses** and our farmland."

This translation adds a layer of pathos that is missing in the King James Version. Rejecting the notion that the Egyptians held even a glimmer of hope that selling their land or their bodies would sustain them, Alter reads *gevi'ot* as an expression of

their utter hopelessness. What they communicate to Joseph is that all is lost. In essence, they are already “walking corpses.”

As for the “shaky sense of English” eschewed by Alter, consider the beginning of the book of Genesis and God’s dire warning to humanity not to eat of the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2:17). To make the threat of death emphatic, God employs the words *mot tamut*, a phrase that doubles the Hebrew verb *m-w-t*, “to die.” Here is how the 20th-century translator Everett Fox renders the duplicated language of God’s admonition: “for on the day that you eat from it, **you must die, yes, die.**”

Dissatisfied with such clumsy English, Alter conveys the absolute nature of the death sentence in a more elegant fashion: “for on the day that you eat from it, you are **doomed to die.**” This translation is true to both the English and Hebrew languages.

Alter’s translation of God’s warning also demonstrates a more ambitious goal, arguably the most important of his entire translation effort. In his choice of the alliterative “doomed to die,” Alter retains the poetically repetitive sounds of the Hebrew “*mot tamut*.” In fact, throughout his work, Alter pursues a self-stated goal to “do justice to the literary beauty of the Hebrew.” Time and again, he reproduces the look, sound, and feel of the Hebrew text: its cadences, rhythms, word play, imagery, interconnections between passages, and much more.

For example, note how Alter preserves the repetitive, rhythmic tropes of the Hebrew in Genesis 24, in which the Hebrew letter *vav*, meaning “and,” recurs an impressive 15 times. The scene is the meeting at a well of Abraham’s wayfaring servant and the young future matriarch, Rebekah:

And she came down to the spring **and** filled her jug **and** came back up.
And the servant ran toward her **and** said, “Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your jug.” **And** she said, Drink . . . **and** she hurried **and** tipped down her jug . . . **and** let him drink . . . **and** she said, “For your camels too I shall draw water until they drink their fill.” **And** she hurried **and** emptied her jug.

With this translation, Alter defiantly rejects the efforts of those who seek to simplify the text by compressing its information and eliminating many of its conjunctions. In Alter’s dismissive words, these efforts, such as those of the 20th-century Revised English Bible, “push translation to the point of paraphrase.”

In translating the scene at the well, the REB delivers a mere five *ands* to Alter's 15. Here is a sampling of its pared-down translation: "She went down to the spring, filling her jar, and came up again. Abraham's servant hurried to meet her."

For Alter, every *and* serves to preserve the text's natural rhythm. As he repeatedly reminds us, the text was meant to be not only seen but heard. Moreover, the repeated conjunctions make vivid Rebekah's extravagant efforts to refresh her weary guest. She provides water not only to the servant but to his ten "empty" camels—each requiring up to 25 gallons of water. Thanks to Alter's abundant string of *ands*, we feel more intensely Rebekah's stunning hospitality.

Alter's quest to highlight the text's artistry reaches its peak in his translation of words that appear in only a small number of biblical passages. Alter takes pains to translate these rare words in a uniform fashion, thereby underscoring their function as literary links between the passages in which they appear.

For example, the Hebrew word *tevah*, generally translated as "ark," is used only twice in the Hebrew Bible. (The Hebrew word for the ark of the covenant is *aron*—not *tevah*.) The first instance of *tevah* is the massive ark that safeguards Noah and his family from the devastation that has befallen the rest of humanity. The second *tevah*, the small floating cradle in which Moses' mother placed him for his protection in the Nile, seems to be closer to a basket—and in fact, that is how the highly regarded New Jewish Publication Society translation renders the term.

But Alter, in his resolve to accentuate the Bible's sophisticated system of literary cross-referencing, insists on translating the word in line with its only other use. Although it is awkward to refer to Moses' diminutive encasing as an "ark," this term faithfully exposes the Bible's effort to draw a line from Noah to Moses. The astute reader will then note a broader commonality between the two heroes. With God's protection, both bring hope of survival and renewal: one for the world at large, the other for a microcosmic world, the nascent Israelite nation.

In his introduction to this mammoth work, Alter affirms his commitment to conveying not only the words but also the music of the biblical text. In grand style, he delivers both. When we read Alter's cadenced translation of the Rebekah story, not only do we receive the narrative facts in an accurate way, we *hear* the rhythmic beat of the frenetic actions, steeped in kindness, of a matriarch in the making. In Alter's hands, the story of the vulnerable baby Moses floating in a miniature ark is

accompanied by the background music of God's providence and the human potential for renewal even in the most helpless of situations.

With his groundbreaking translation, Alter has done no less than to turn a technical task into a vehicle for showcasing and celebrating the artistic glory of the Hebrew Bible. To the attuned reader, the Bible's exquisite craftsmanship communicates the deeply affecting nature, as well as the eternal relevance, of an ancient, hallowed text.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Precision meets beauty."