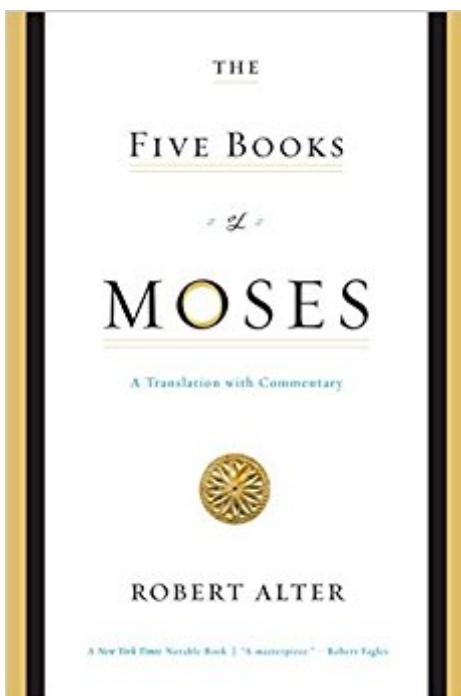


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# The Five Books Of Moses: A Translation With Commentary



## Synopsis

"A modern classic....Thrilling and constantly illuminating." — Michael Dirda, Washington Post Book World Through a distinguished career of critical scholarship and translation, Robert Alter has equipped us to read the Hebrew Bible as a powerful, cohesive work of literature. In this landmark work, Alter's masterly translation and probing commentary combine to give contemporary readers the definitive edition of The Five Books. Winner of the PEN Center USA Literary Award for Translation and the Koret Jewish Book Award for Translation, a Newsweek Top 15 Book, Los Angeles Times Favorite Book, and San Francisco Chronicle Best Book.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This brilliant and rigorous book by Alter, who teaches Hebrew and comparative literature at Berkeley, strikes the perfect balance. It delves into literary and biblical scholarship, yet is accessible to the general reader. It argues forcefully and persuasively, but is never arrogant, even when Alter is detailing the inadequacies of other biblical translations. It points to the ways a single Hebrew word can make all the difference in our understanding of the text, but it never loses the forest for the trees. In a stimulating and thorough introduction, Alter makes a case for the coherence of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) as a whole, while acknowledging that it is "manifestly a composite construction" that was written and edited by many people over several centuries. He discusses why we need yet another translation, contending that every existing English translation has an anemic

sense of the English language, while the King James Version—the most beautiful and literary English-language translation—is unreliable and sometimes inaccurate with the original Hebrew. After this energizing introduction, Alter proceeds with his eminently readable translation and fascinating footnotes on various Hebrew terms. This may well be the best one-volume introduction to the Torah ever published in English. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A godsend. The foundational texts are here given their due in prose at once modern and magnificently cadenced. Immediately readable. -- Seamus Heaney, Times Literary Supplement  
Engrossing...the translation [that] deserves to become the version in which future generations encounter this strange and inexhaustible book. -- Judith Shulevitz, New York Times Book Review  
The poets will rejoice. Alter's language ascends to a rare purity through plainness that equals the plainness of the Hebrew. -- Cynthia Ozick, The New Republic

Robert Alter's translation of the Five Books of Moses is one of those rare books that really is as good as everybody says it is. Alter's task in the book is huge: to make a meaningful translation of works that have been translated thousands of times and commented upon by hundreds of thousands of people from dozens of religious traditions. How in the world can one do anything new with the Bible? Well, as it turns out, you can. Alter succeeds by sticking firmly to one core principle: to create a literary, rather than a theological or a scholarly text. He is not trying to use the translation to explain the theology of the Bible, or (as most committee-driven translations tend to do) to avoid offending anybody's constituency. Nor is he interested in the traditional scholar's game of dividing the text into original sources (variants of the "J," "E," "D," and "P" source texts). The biases he as (and everybody has biases) are literary—he wants to present the first five books of the Bible as five unique, coherent literary texts. There are a few exceptions to the "coherent" part. He argues cogently in his introduction to Genesis that the multiple streams of original source material do not stand in the way of coherence from a literary perspective. He mentions the Documentary Hypothesis, but makes no effort to tease out the "Yahwest" (J) and "Elohist" (E) strands of the text. He does, however, consistently tag (in his commentary) the lengthy interruptions of the Priestly redactor—the clearly post-exilic representative(s) of the priestly caste who frequently interrupt(s) the narrative (sometimes with comically inappropriate results) to make sure that people remember to make their temple donations (Exodus 30), give the best sacrificial meat to the priests (Numbers 28-29), or remember

the proper dimensions of the tabernacle (Exodus 25). Tagging these Priestly interruptions is extremely helpful, as it helps the reader factor them out of the narrative flow that they interrupt. What comes out of Alter's translation is a revelation for those of us who are fairly familiar with the text in other translations. Instead of one undistinguished mass of one-paragraph proof texts, we get five very different and remarkable literary creations. Genesis is almost entirely folkloric narrative, except for the story of Joseph, which is more like a short story. Leviticus is a very detailed Priestly instruction manual. Deuteronomy is a soaring triad of rhetorically powerful speeches (and horrifying ones at that, as their main point is "kill everyone who is not like you, and don't stop until all of them are dead"). Exodus and Numbers are more mixed books. Exodus 1-24 is a coherent historical narrative that Alter manages to make exciting even AFTER Cecil B. DeMille. Numbers is part census, part historical chronicle, and one totally awesome parable (Balaam and the talking ass). I am not by any means biblical novice. I know these texts reasonably well and have written peer-reviewed articles on several of them (Genesis, 1 Samuel, Ruth, and the Psalms). But I have never, through any other translation, experienced these five books as five unique works of literature. Robert Alter makes that happen. And, amazingly, he even makes it look easy.

I can't remember now how I came upon Robert Alter's work, but I'm certainly glad I did. His style is very readable, occasionally reminiscent of the King James Version (particularly in poetic passages). He also elucidated the meaning of the text through copious notes, which I found very interesting and valuable. They make connections between different segments, note recurring themes and motifs, as well as provide the rationale for translating words/phrases a particular way. Equally valuable are his introductions to each book of the Pentateuch, which lay the groundwork for what you're about to read. You have the legendary stories in Genesis, the Exodus and Wilderness narratives, the sweeping rhetoric of Deuteronomy, and of course the many laws and cultic regulations/procedures (which were still difficult to get through). However, the most important takeaway I got was seeing, despite the complicated process of redaction and editing of oral tradition that brought us the text, how unified in theme and purpose it was as a literary work and unit. This translation might be a little difficult for casual reading, but would make an excellent supplement to Bible study. I'm definitely looking forward to delving into Robert Alter's other translations now after this.

I am a Christian, and I found the translation notes and commentary to be excellent precisely because they were authored by a non-believer. Christian commentaries often seem at pains to explain the Old Testament in light of the new, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, it

makes it harder to trust the interpretations and translation choices when you know the translator has particular bent toward harmonizing the two books. That does not make Alter right by definition. I am sure he has his own biases. But when he does trace a connection, even if he is not aware of what the connection would mean for a Christian, it is trustworthy because his primary agenda seems to be a faithful reading of the original books. Sometimes this leads him to conclusions that an orthodox Christian or Jewish commentary would never make (for instance finding traces in the text of origins from other, earlier, polytheistic sources. But, with each Alter book I have read, I have never felt he had an ax to grind against orthodox believers (Jew or Christian), just a desire to uncover the original meanings. Two nice things you will get in this translation besides a lot of technical (but very interesting) notes:- A great English translation of the text. Preserving more of the original languages poetry, humor, rhyming, etc than other translations I am familiar with. I think this is the best translation of the Old Testament in terms of its readability and faithfulness.- excellent notes on not just technical terms, but literary themes, parallels, ironies, etc. Alter is great about pointing out these types of elements which would have been readily perceived by the original audience, but are sometimes lost on modern readers from a different culture.

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