



Robert Alter

The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary

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In the publisher's copy accompanying this translation of the entire Tanak, it is proclaimed that Robert Alter's monumental opus is "a landmark publication: the first single-author literary translation of the complete Hebrew Bible." It has been pointed out elsewhere that this claim is exaggerated. For example, James Moffatt, a biblical scholar, though specializing more in the Christian Scriptures than the Jewish ones, translated the so-called Old and New Testaments into idiomatic English in 1926. Moffatt's rendering of Gen 1:1, "When God began to form the universe," set the pace for later translations and had its impact on Robert Alter's as well (see below). The project took him twenty-five years. Moffatt repeatedly described his texts, sacred as they were to him, as "literature," and his translation often seeks to reproduce some of the rhetorical tropes he observed in the original. Toward the opposite end of the spectrum of translational styles, Martin Buber completed in 1962 a German rendering (*Verdeutschung*) of the Tanak he began writing with Franz Rosenzweig in the 1920s in language that, for philosophical, literary, and theological reasons, strove to sound Hebraic and reflect the literary patterns and features of the source. In the 1970s, Buber and Rosenzweig's Anglophone heir, Everett Fox, began the painstaking work that would be published in *The Schocken Bible*, two of the projected four volumes of which have appeared (1995, 2014).

Robert Alter's contributions to the study of the Hebrew Bible as literature are well-known. His *Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and *Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985) are standard fare among biblicists and their students and the wider reading public. Two years after the appearance of Everett Fox's *Five Books of Moses*, which Alter praised in an endorsement for "making constantly visible in English the distinctive Hebraic quality of the original ... a bracing protest against the bland modernity of all the recent English versions of the Bible," he published his own translation of Genesis (1997), adopting a similar approach but keeping the English proper. Like Fox, Alter added commentary that was intended to inform the reader of important cultural background and to indicate forms of Hebrew discourse that are not evident in the translation alone. This became the beginning of the endeavor that is now embodied in the much-discussed three-volume translation and commentary under discussion here.

Alter lays out the rationale for his translation in the larger part of an introduction entitled "The Bible in English and the Heresy of Explanation," which is printed at the head of each of the three volumes. He regards idiomatic translation as a "heresy" that seeks to remove the source from its cultural context and modes of expression and transform it into a more contemporary literary work. For more elaborate arguments for the preservation of the source's character, one may consult in general George Steiner's classic *After Babel* (1975) and for the Bible my own *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (1983, slightly revised 1989). "Modern English versions," writes Alter, "have placed readers at a grotesque distance from the distinctive literary experience of the Bible in its original language(xiv)" "The one single exception," however, "is Everett Fox's 1995 American version of the Torah.... Fox goes to the opposite extreme of other modern versions: his English has the great virtue of reminding us verse after verse of the strangeness of the Hebrew original, but"—and here comes Alter's compromise with idiomaticity—"it does so at the cost of often being not quite English and consequently of becoming a text for study rather than a fluently readable version that conveys the stylistic poise and power of the Hebrew" (xv–xvi). Alter in his rendering aspires to a target language that is vivid and "concrete," like the source, but that also conveys the elegance—or occasional "crabbiness"—of the original.

Compare, for example, these two renderings of 2 Sam 1:17–20. First Fox:

Now David sang-dirge with this dirge
over Sha'ul and over Yehonatan his son,
he said:
To teach the Children of Judah the bow,
here, it is written in the Record of the Upright:
O beauty of Israel, on your heights are the slain:
how have the mighty fallen!
Tell it not in Gat,
spread not the news on Ashkelon's streets,

lest they rejoice, the daughters of the Philistines,
lest they exult, the daughters of the Foreskinned Ones!

Now Alter:

And David sang this lament for Saul and for Jonathan, and he said to teach hard things¹
to the sons of Judah—look, it is written down in the Book of Jashar:

The splendor, O Israel, on your heights lies slain,
how have the warriors fallen!
Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in Ashkelon's streets.
Lest the Philistine daughters rejoice,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised gloat.

Fox's peculiar "sang-dirge with this dirge" is obviously meant to convey the fact that the Hebrew expression "to sing a dirge" or "make a lament" is here a cognate accusative construction, *wayqōnén qîṇā(h)*, and in the final couplet Fox's word order mirrors that of the Hebrew. In my judgment, there is nothing unintelligible about these formulations. In the last line of this excerpt Alter renders Hebrew *ālaz* as "gloat" rather than "exult," and one wonders here, as one wonders time and again in reading his translation, if Alter is not transgressing his own rule against explaining instead of merely translating.

There are other points on which one could comment on both these renditions. However, for the sake of this discussion I shall remark on only one.² The phrase *haṣṣābî yîsrā'él*, which Fox renders correctly as "O beauty of Israel," is an apostrophe—a vocative addressed to the hills of Gilboa (v. 21) and not a reference to the Israelite warriors who lie slain. That is why *ha-*, functioning as a vocative, is prefixed to *ṣābî* and not, as implied in Alter's version, to "Israel."³ What, in Alter's translation, is the antecedent of "your heights?" (Pronouns nearly always require antecedents in Biblical Hebrew.) It is this type of philological shortcoming that repeatedly bedevils Alter's effort.

Alter allows that translators must not only be sensitive to the language and tropes of the source, to its literary elements and forms (and this he ordinarily is), but they must also be keen philologists, immersed in ancient Semitic modes of expression, conceptual frames, and generic conventions. Apparently feeling his lack of expertise in this area, Alter customarily belittles it, caricaturing

1. Following Jan Fokkelman, Alter reads *qāšôt*, "hard things," whatever that means, for *qešet*, "bow," although, so far as I can tell, the term *qāšôt* serves only as an abstract adverb, "in a hard tone," in Biblical Hebrew. For an explication of "bow" or "the Bow" in this context, see my article cited in the following note.

2. See further my "What Was the Book of Yashar?" *Maarav* 21 (2014): 25–35.

3. For *ṣābî* in reference to beautiful land, see, e.g., Jer 3:19; Ezek 20:6, 15; Dan 11:16, 41, 45; *HALOT Study Edition*, ed. M. E. J. Richardson (2001), 2:998.

biblical philology “as an end in itself” instead of “as a tool for understanding literary texts.” “Especially in its Anglo-American applications,” he asserts, philology “has often come down to lexicography and the analysis of grammar” (xiv). It is true that philology, as Alter contends, seeks “clarity,” whereas literature often revels in ambiguity. However, along with clarity, philology seeks precision and authenticity, that which seems correct in the linguistic, conceptual, literary, and cultural contexts from which the texts we study have emerged. That is why Everett Fox, for example, has routinely consulted with a philological specialist. Full disclosure: for his Torah translation and commentary, I performed this function. For his subsequent work, others have assisted. It seems that Alter has gone it alone. While that may seem courageous, the results are all too often disappointing. Some song writers are effective in both music and lyrics, but others need a partner.

Not only Alter but, as he himself maintains, most modern translations, produced by committees, have both literary and philological weaknesses. I would suggest that this is in part on account of insufficient attention to form and an idiomatic approach to translation. But it is also owing to the relative haste in which committees must work. Even trained philologists need time in order to reassess the conventional meanings of every word and expression, every phrase and construction, anew. On account of the constraints of time, Bible translators tend to rely on other people’s studies, which ultimately enter the reference books and standard commentaries. Alter does some homework and, like other translators, looks over the shoulder of experienced philologists. He includes no specific references or bibliography, but one can tell from the names of medieval and modern scholars whom he credits in his comments that he has consulted a few relatively accessible commentaries, in Hebrew and English, for each section of his project.

Accordingly, many of what I regard as Alter’s lapses are found in other translations as well. For example, it is still news to many scholars that the phrase *lammabbûl* in Ps 29:10 incorporates the preposition of time *lam*, known in Akkadian and especially in the expression *lam abûbi*, “from before the flood,” and has precisely the same sense.⁴ The term *yôšēb* in Amos 1:5, 8 is, on the basis of its parallelism with “holder of the scepter,” an ellipsis of “the sitter (on the throne),” the monarch, and not a collective for the inhabitants of the place.⁵ The verb *hārā(h)*, when predicated of *’ap*, “nose,” denotes anger. However, the phrase *hārā(h) lə ...* does not mean “to be incensed” but “to be depressed.”⁶ The word *kim’at* in Isa 1:9 does not indicate “scantiness,” as Alter and some other translators interpret; it is rather the second element of a two part “if ... then ...” formula, *lû ... kim’at ...*, as is clear—and correctly rendered by Alter—in Ps 94:17 and Job 31:22. As several

4. See Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009), 196, with reference to a Hebrew article of Chaim Cohen from 1989.

5. See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, CB (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 131; Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 51–52.

6. See Mayer I. Gruber, “The Tragedy of Cain and Abel: A Case of Depression,” *JQR* 69 (1978): 89–97.

rabbinic sources and the medieval commentator Rashi were already aware,⁷ the Masoretic division of the verse is faulty and needs to be overridden in this instance. Remove “scant” from the first clause in Alter’s translation, and it is correct. Another common error is to misinterpret the word *kî* in the third line of a triple (usually rhetorical) question *ha ... ’im ... kî ...* as the conjunction “that” instead of the interrogative “why, then?” For example, Job 7:12 should be translated: “Am I Yamm? / Or am I Tannin? / Then why do you place me under guard?”⁸ This *kî* is different from the widespread conjunction; it is cognate with Ugaritic *’ēka*, “why?” (written *ik*) and is actually glossed by *maddûa*, the common word for “why,” at Jer 8:22.⁹ Failing to know this, Alter produces the clumsy line: “For why has no mending come...?”

Others of Alter’s mistakes betray a lack of linguistic sophistication. He repeatedly transcribes the furtive *pataḥ* following instead of preceding the guttural (he writes, e.g., *raqi’a, ’eloha*) and even reads the guttural ahead of the preceding vowel (e.g., *tsav’a [šābāʔ]*, *nod’a [nôdaf]*). The terms “Judah” and “Israel” in Ps 114:2 denote territories, not peoples, as the feminine verb *hāyētā(h)* makes clear. In explaining the correspondence between *’ir*, “emissary,” in Dan 4:10 and Hebrew *šîr*, which I believe is correctly drawn, Alter says, “the Hebrew consonant *tsadeh* converts to the Aramaic *ayin*” (765). Of course, there is no such “conversion”; the two consonants devolve from a common “Proto-Semitic” ancestor. Finally, the correct Biblical Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *melek*, “king,” is not the determinate form *malka*’ but—*melek*. It is good that Alter, like most other translators, pays attention to Masoretic *qere-ketiv* alternatives. However, at Lev 11:21 he distinguishes the *qere* from the MT, as though it was not, like the *ketiv*, an integral part of the Masorah.

Deficiencies such as these are minor and perhaps pardonable, given the scope of Alter’s project. However, Alter’s mistakes are extensive and range from the shortcoming to the egregious error, the latter all the more distressing when he rudely dismisses conventional understandings. For example, Alter refers to the traditional interpretation of the phrase *rə’ût rūaḥ* in Qoh 1:14 (et al.), always in conjunction with *hebel*, “breath,” or *šāmāl*, “pain, distress” and usually rendered as “chasing, pursuit of wind,” as “an interpretive liberty” of modern translators. He himself, possibly misled by a note in the New JPS version, derives the form *rə’ût* from the verb *rā’ā(h)*, “to tend, herd,” and insists on the more literal translation “herding the wind,” although he admits in his commentary that this does not mean anything. He fancifully interprets the phrase to refer to “futile activity.” However, it should be clear, as recognized already in BDB, that this *r-’y* stem enters Late Hebrew through the influence of Aramaic and is cognate to Classical Hebrew *rāšā(h)*, “to will or desire.” The form *rə’ût* corresponds to the Biblical Aramaic term *rə’ût*, “pleasure, will,” in Ezra

7. See, e.g., the second apparatus in Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, ed., *The Hebrew University Bible: The Book of Isaiah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), 2. Abraham Ibn Ezra in his commentary acknowledges the formula but insists that the Masoretic division of the verse must be respected.

8. Edward L. Greenstein, *The Book of Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 32.

9. See Moshe Held, “Rhetorical Questions in Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew,” *ErIsr* 9 (1969): 71–79.

5:17 and 7:18. Accordingly, the sense of *rə'ût rûah* that Alter rejects is basically the correct interpretation.¹⁰ Alter compounds his error by correctly relating to it the phrase *ra'yôn (lēb)* in Qoh 2:22 but translating it as “(his) heart’s care.” The term *ra'yôn*, which occurs several times in Daniel, denotes “thoughts,” a sense that is apt in Qoh 2:22 as well. Alter renders “care” on the basis of a putative connection to tending flocks.

In Job 19:22 the protagonist confronts his companions and asks, “Why do you hound [the Hebrew uses the verb *rādap*, “to pursue”] me like God, / and of my flesh you are not sated?” (Alter). The New JPS translation renders the proper sense of the second line: “Maligning me insatiably.” The literal translation is appended in a footnote. The JPS translators were well aware that the expression “to eat someone’s flesh” is an idiom for defamation, as in Ps 27:2.¹¹ BDB (s.v. “אכל”) explains the expression as a figure of enmity. Moffatt had translated idiomatically: “as if no slander were enough for you.” A somewhat more revealing but related locution, “to eat the parts or limbs of someone” (... אכל קרצי), which surely entered Aramaic from Akkadian *karṣē akālu*, appears in Dan 3:8 and 6:25. Alter renders the phrase in Daniel as “to denounce” here and “to slander” there without comment, even as he thereby violates his declared principle of concrete representation of the original. The phrase in Ps 27 he renders literally without comment, but at Job 19:22 he “explains”: “Job represents his three reprovers as ghastly cannibals” (514).¹² This bizarrely literal reading manifests not only an innocence of ancient Semitic idiom but a failure to understand what lies at the bottom of the phrase in Daniel.

Alter frequently apprises his readers of facts drawn from historical and philological scholarship, but he often misleads with misinformation. For example, he tells the reader at Gen 1:5 that it is “unusual” for Hebrew to use a cardinal number, “one day,” instead of the ordinal, “first day.” However, not only is this common ancient Semitic practice (and logical: there is no first day until there is a second), but it is the norm in Biblical Hebrew for indicating a first day; compare, for example, Num 29:1: “And in the seventh month on the first [באחד] of the month” (Alter). Alter repeatedly refers to an ancient Canaanite myth of creation, assuming that the combat between the storm god and the sea that is referenced dozens of times in the Tanak belongs to such a myth—but it does not. So far as we can tell, El and not Baal was the creator god in ancient Canaan. Alter repeatedly challenges the long-held notion that the Israelites had ancient epics, which are excerpted and quoted in the Tanak, without ever dealing with the strongest evidence in its favor: the fact that epic formulae, known from Ugaritic, such as “He lifted up his eyes and saw,” “She lifted up her voice and cried,” are never found in the third-person anywhere in biblical verse but

10. Cf., e.g., Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 210–11; Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xx; contrast Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 63 n. 15.

11. The New JPS translates there literally but in a note suggests the idiomatic sense “to slander,” comparing the verses in Daniel.

12. The expression recurs in Job 31:31, but there Alter interprets it as “metaphoric cannibalism.”

are found a-plenty in biblical prose narrative. If there were no epic to draw on, whence did the biblical prose writers come up with these formulae?¹³ Alter claims that sudden bursts of archaic poetry in the midst of dry prose, such as the couplet in Gen 7:11b, are typical of biblical narrative—but they are not. They occasionally occur in direct discourse, but that is not the case here.¹⁴

Alter deigns to provide his own translation to some lines (7–9) from the ancient Hebrew Meşad Ḥashavyahu inscription: “And Hoshaiahu son of Shobi came and took your servant’s garment when I had finished harvesting” (comment at Exod 22:26). However, what he renders as “when I had finished harvesting,” parsing the verb as *k-l-y*, “to finish,” specialists tend to translate “when I had measured my harvest” (see also line 6), from *k-w-l*.¹⁵ More problematically, Alter misdivides the sentences. The clause “And Hoshaiyahu came...” belongs to the preceding sentence, and the clause he renders “when I had finished harvesting” belongs to the succeeding sentence. There is no controversy among specialists on this matter. Accordingly, the lines (6–9) should be understood this way: “When your [se]rvant had measured his harvest and stored it as (he would) every day, Hoshayahu son of Shobay came, and he took your servant’s garment. When I had measured my harvest, as (I have done) for days, he took your servant’s garment.”

It may seem that this deviation from standard scholarship is incidental to Alter’s enterprise, but it is not. Alter makes a very strong statement in his introduction (and in statements he has made in the media) that a hallmark of his Bible translation is that, in opposition to the current trend, he will translate *waw*-consecutive verbs giving prominence to what appears to be the conjunction “and” (*wa-*) imbedded in the form. Rather than understanding the typical parataxis of Biblical Hebrew clauses as simple conjunction, one clause following the other, Alter insists on rendering “and” in the large majority of instances, even at the beginning of a sentence or unit, giving the impression that Hebrew prose comprises lengthy run-on sentences.¹⁶ The book of Ruth, in Alter’s rendition, therefore begins: “And it happened in the days when the judges ruled.” Now whether or not the *wa-* plus doubling of the following consonant in *waw*-consecutive verbs is etymologically

13. See now Edward L. Greenstein, “Signs of Poetry Past: Literariness on Pre-biblical Hebrew Literature,” in *Strength to Strength: Essays in Appreciation of Shaye J. D. Cohen*, ed. Michael Satlow, BJS (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 5–25, esp. 21–24. This observation was briefly made by Frank Polak in 1989.

14. See Edward L. Greenstein, “Direct Discourse and Parallelism,” in *Discourse, Dialogue, and Debate in the Bible: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, HBM 63 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 79–91.

15. See, e.g., John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions 1: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 28–30; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, J. J. M. Roberts, C.-L. Seow, and R. E. Whitaker, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 358–68; Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes From the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 156–63.

16. Cf. Ziony Zevit, *The Anterior Construction in Classical Hebrew*, SBLMS 50 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 1.

the conjunction “and” is questionable.¹⁷ But no matter, Alter maintains that an ancient Hebrew audience would have interpreted the *wa-* at the head of a consecutive verb form as a connective.

In the passage from the Hebrew inscription cited in the preceding paragraph, and in the surrounding narrative text, the *waw*-consecutive is repeatedly employed. The clause beginning “And Hoshaiahu son of Shobi came” is treated by Alter in accordance with his approach, as a sentence beginning with “and.” However, as an inspection of the standard editions will show, not only is this not the beginning of a sentence; it is a main clause following a circumstantial clause and *cannot* be translated with “and.” See the noncontroversial translation I presented two paragraphs above.¹⁸ In fact, this not infrequent use of the *waw*-consecutive—to convey the verb in a main clause following a circumstantial clause—provides a paradigm of instances in which the *wa-* prefix on *wayyiqtol* verbs very clearly *does not* evoke the conjunction.¹⁹ It is therefore not integral to the meaning of the verb form. Implicitly, Alter acknowledges this point, although it does not, as it should, give him pause with regard to his theory of the *waw*-consecutive. Here, for example, are two examples in which Alter translates main clauses following circumstantial clauses without “and”:

When God began to create heaven and earth..., God said [ויאמר אלהים], “Let there be light.”
And there was light (Gen 1:1–3).

On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens..., then the LORD God fashioned [וייצר] ה' אלהים the human... (Gen 2:5–7).

In the first example, Alter omits “and” altogether; in the second, he replaces it with “then,” exactly the sort of substitution for which he criticizes other translations. If Alter were correct about the *wa-* (actually *waC-*) prefix on *wayyiqtol* verb forms, there would be no way in Biblical Hebrew to express the preterite without “and”—an absurd situation.

With respect to textual criticism, Alter is appropriately circumspect in dealing with the received text. The ways by which modern translators have handled the problem of text have been recently treated in Daley’s large and detailed monograph.²⁰ Alter elaborates on his approach in the introduction to his Psalms. He will emend a text when it seems called for but will rely as much as possible on the ancient versions and Masoretic manuscripts. At 2 Sam 13:39 he follows a long line

17. See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions, with an Introductory Essay by W. Randall Garr* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 150–51; but see Garr’s cautionary remarks on xxix–xxx and the historical survey in Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 544–46.

18. See Sandra Landis Gogel, *A Grammar of Epigraphic Hebrew*, SBLRBS 23 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 262.

19. See, e.g., Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 553–54; for additional conditions in which the *wa-* is certainly not a conjunction, see 551–52.

20. S. C. Daley, *The Textual Basis of English Translation of the Hebrew Bible*, SuppTHB (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

of critics in reading ותכל רוח המלך, “The king’s spirit she-pined...” for ותכל דוד המלך, “King David she-pined...,” which manifestly lacks in gender agreement. As Driver had long ago explained, the syntagm “So-and-so the king” instead of “King So-and-so” is a Late Hebrew formation, unexpected in Samuel, and, as Alter points out, a Qumran text (Alter refers to “the Qumran Samuel scroll”) supports that reading.²¹ For some reason, however, Alter translates “And David’s [why David rather than the king?] urge to sally forth against Absalom was spent...” In this instance, as in many others, one can suspect from which commentary Alter drew his information. Here Alter seems to follow McCarter in interpreting the verse to mean that the king had no more “enthusiasm for marching out against” Absalom.²² However, since, as Driver points out, the phrase *kālā(h) + nepēš* (Ps 84:3; 119:81), conveys a longing for something and *rūaḥ* in such a context is more or less synonymous with *nepēš*, the verse more likely means that “the king’s spirit longed for Absalom.” Alter objects that in the succeeding episode David refuses to see Absalom, but to me it makes good sense that, once the king had gotten over the death of his son Amnon, he began pining again for his beloved Absalom. Isn’t that what so irritated Joab? Compare, for example, the New American Bible’s translation of the verse (1970): “The king continued during all that time to mourn over his son; but his longing reached out for Absalom as he became reconciled to the death of Amnon.”²³

Readers of this review may feel that I have dwelled disproportionately on the deficiencies of the translation. Alter, however, invites a critical response to his work through his chronic disparagement of other people’s efforts. He leads his audience to expect that he will reproduce, to a reasonable extent, the “extraordinary concreteness” of the original. In a verse such as Gen 49:6, which Everett Fox renders rather strictly, “To their council may my being [*napšī*] never come, / in their assembly may my person never unite!,” Alter submits: “In their council let me never set foot, / their assembly my presence shun.” Alter replaces the Semitic “my life, my self” in the first line with the more contemporary and Western “foot.”²⁴ Poetic license, perhaps. But at Isa 1:12 he translates the idiom *biqqeš miyyad*, “to hold (someone) to account,” which is semantically equivalent to Akkadian *ina qāti bu”û*,²⁵ through the insipid expression, “who asked this of you?” Had Alter hewed more closely to the Hebrew, “who demanded this of your hands?,” he would have honored the reader with a neat and ironic sequence: “When you come to see My face, / Who demanded this of your hands— / to trample my courts?” Face-hands-(and by implication) feet! A

21. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 305.

22. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 344.

23. One would have expected a note on the text here.

24. Both Alter and Fox resist reading *kābēdī*, “my liver, i.e., myself,” in the first line, for *kābōdī*, which is necessitated by the feminine singular verb *tēḥad*. In Akkadian, and here in archaic Hebrew, the feminine term for liver, Akk. *kabattu*, is often used metonymically as a person, like *napšī*, literally “my throat,” in the first line. See, e.g., the material and references in Tawil, *Akkadian Lexical Companion*, 154-55.

25. See Edward L. Greenstein, “Trans-Semitic Idiomatic Equivalency and the Derivation of Hebrew *ml’kh*,” *UF* 11 (1979), 329-36.

top-to-bottom reproach. One does not receive such particular detail in the conventional translations. But, given Alter's declarations of intent and assertions of superiority, one has the right to expect better.