Reading guide/study questions – Genesis

[Robert Alter](http://vcresearch.berkeley.edu/faculty/robert-alter) is the premier Biblical scholar of the 20th and 21st centuries. You’ll see that his faculty profile includes his membership in Berkeley’s Comparative Literature and the Near Eastern Studies departments, and the Religion, Politics, and Globalization program. His introduction and notes to Genesis are copious and scholarly. But let me tell you, he also has a sense of humor. Look for those moments in his introduction and, especially, in the footnotes.

Here are some brief study questions:

Describe the order of Creation in chapter 1. Does the order make sense? What principle do you think underlies it? God creates by speaking. Is speech creative? In what sense? What might the presentation of the creative act as one of speech imply about the Creation?

Contrast the story of Creation in chapter 1 with the story in chapter 2. How do the two accounts differ? Why, do you suppose, the redactors of the text as we have it did not smooth out the differences so that they would be less notable?

The serpent tells Eve that she will not die if she eats of the Tree of knowledge. He also tells her that if she eats she will be like gods and know good from evil. Is he right or wrong on these points?

Why does God forbid Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge? Is knowledge a bad thing? Eating, they discover that they are naked and hide themselves. Is their response to knowledge appropriate? Why did they not know until this point that they were naked?

Cain and Abel: which is the shepherd, which the farmer? Which does God prefer? Why?

What do you take to be the point of the story of Babel?

Compare the flood narrative with Uta-napishti's from *Gilgamesh*. How do they differ? What is the point? Compare the blessing pronounced by God upon mankind after the Creation with the blessing pronounced by God (ch. 9, verse 1-5) after the Flood. What is the significance of the differences between them?

Discuss chapters 18-19, where God appears to Abraham as three wayfarers and Abraham argues with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why does Abraham stop at the figure of ten? What do you think is the significance of the fate of Lot's wife?

Discuss the "sacrifice of Isaac" (chapter 22). It is described as a "test" or a "temptation", depending on the translation. Should God have tested Abraham in this way? What is the meaning of Abraham's reply when Isaac asks him what he is doing? The original audience for this story knew perfectly well that Isaac would not be sacrificed because they were all descendants of Isaac. Does this knowledge make any difference to the way in which the story is understood? What kind of god plays tricks on the faithful like that of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac?

Evaluate the roles of women in *Genesis*; you can contrast two for your response paper.

What role does Judah play in the story of Joseph? How does the story of Judah and Tamar fit into the larger story? Why does Joseph hide his identity from his brothers so long? What is he trying to accomplish? Is he angry? Vengeful? Is he testing them? Do they pass?