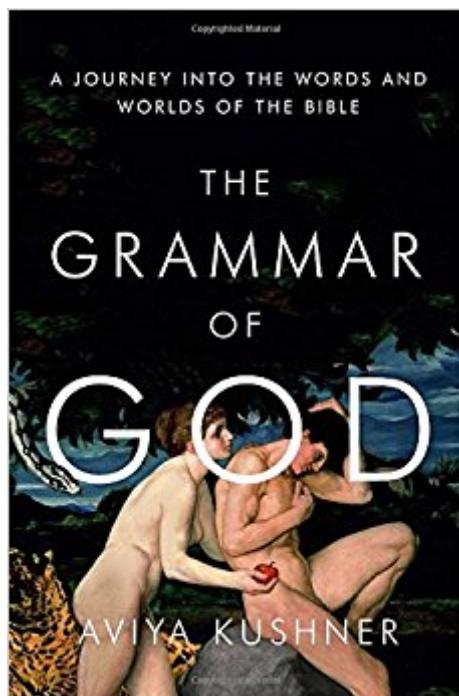


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The Grammar Of God: A Journey Into The Words And Worlds Of The Bible



Synopsis

For readers of Bruce Feiler’s *Walking the Bible* and Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk* comes a powerful exploration of the Bible in translation. Aviya Kushner grew up in a Hebrew-speaking family, reading the Bible in the original Hebrew and debating its meaning over the dinner table. She knew much of it by heart—and was therefore surprised when, while getting her MFA at the University of Iowa, she took the novelist Marilynne Robinson’s class on the Old Testament and discovered she barely recognized the text she thought she knew so well. From differences in the Ten Commandments to a less ambiguous reading of the creation story to a new emphasis on the topic of slavery, the English translation often felt like another book entirely from the one she had grown up with. Kushner began discussing the experience with Robinson, who became a mentor, and her interest in the differences between the ancient language and the modern one gradually became an obsession. She began what became a ten-year project of reading different versions of the Hebrew Bible in English and traveling the world in the footsteps of the great biblical translators, trying to understand what compelled them to take on a lifetime project that was often considered heretical and in some cases resulted in their deaths. In this eye-opening chronicle, Kushner tells the story of her vibrant relationship to the Bible, and along the way illustrates how the differences in translation affect our understanding of our culture’s most important written work. A fascinating look at language and the beliefs we hold most dear, *The Grammar of God* is also a moving tale about leaving home and returning to it, both literally and through reading. Praise for *The Grammar of God* —“The highest praise for a book, perhaps, is tucking it into a slot on your bookshelf where you’ll always be able to effortlessly slide it out, lay it across your lap and soak it up for a minute or a long afternoon’s absorption. *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*, Aviya Kushner’s poetic and powerful plumbing of both the Hebrew and English translations of the Bible, now rests in just such an easy-to-grab spot in my library. In a word, it’s brilliant. And beautiful.”—Barbara Mahany, *Chicago Tribune* —“Aviya Kushner has written a passionate, illuminating essay about meaning itself. *The Grammar of God* is also a unique personal narrative, a family story with the Bible and its languages as central characters.”—Robert Pinsky —“Kushner is principally interested in the meanings and translations of key Biblical passages, and she pursues this interest with a fierce passion. . . . A paean, in a way, to the rigors and frustrations—and ultimate joys—of trying to comprehend the unfathomable.”—Kirkus Reviews —“A remarkable and passionately original book of meditation, exegesis, and memoir. In Kushner’s

redemptive vision, the Bible in its many translations is a Noah's ark, and her book, too, does a work of saving. When I put it down, I wept. • Rosanna Warren, author of Stained Glass "What a glorious book! From Sarah's laughter to the idea of Jewish law being a dialogue and not a rigid set of rules, this is a book not only to learn from but to savor." • Peter Orner, author of Love and Shame and Love "In this splendid book, each page is a wonder." • Willis Barnstone, author of The Restored New Testament

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Spiegel & Grau; First Edition edition (September 8, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0385520824

ISBN-13: 978-0385520829

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.9 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 92 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #206,727 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #270 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Criticism & Interpretation > Old Testament #288 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Commentaries > Old Testament #894 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Old Testament

Customer Reviews

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this interest with a fierce passion. . . . A paean, in a way, to the rigors and frustrations— and ultimate joys— of trying to comprehend the unfathomable. — Kirkus Reviews

— A remarkable and passionately original book of meditation, exegesis, and memoir. The biblical passages are of a piece with stories of Kushner’s childhood, her quest to become a writer, and commemoration of her Israeli grandfather, the only one of his German family to escape extinction at the hands of the Nazis. In Kushner’s redemptive vision, the Bible in its many translations is a Noah’s ark, and her book, too, does a work of saving. When I put it down, I wept. — Rosanna Warren, author of *Stained Glass*

— What a glorious book! From Sarah’s laughter to the idea of Jewish law being a dialogue and not a rigid set of rules, this is a book not only to learn from but to savor. — Peter Orner, author of *Love and Shame and Love*

— In this splendid book, each page is a wonder. — Willis Barnstone, author of *The Restored New Testament*

— Kushner reminds us in *The Grammar of God* that in Hebrew beautiful things are also beautiful words. Her gift as a writer is to take us very near to the text, breathe into it, and give it a new life. — Rodger Kamenetz, author of *The Jew in the Lotus*

— For the many readers who have encountered the Bible only in translation, Aviya Kushner’s compelling book will serve as an eye-opening introduction to the richness and nuance of the original Hebrew text. She has transformed what could have been yet another scholarly addition to the biblical canon into a new genre. Her book lies at the intersection of scholarship and memoir, territory rarely explored and a worthy model for future writers. — Rosellen Brown, author of *Half a Heart*

Aviya Kushner has worked as a travel columnist for *The International Jerusalem Post*, and her poems and essays have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *The Wilson Quarterly*. She teaches at Columbia College Chicago and is a contributing editor at *A Public Space* and a mentor for the National Yiddish Book Center.

Aviya Kushner’s gentle, engaging prose in *The Grammar of God* pulls you along on what might seem at first to be a nitpicking journey into the words of the Bible, in its original Hebrew and its subsequent translations into various languages, principally English in the best-known King James Version of 1611. Then it turns compelling. You discover such “mistranslations,” or perhaps intentional choices, as in the Commandment (in the English KJV) not to kill. Which has occasioned more than 400 years of conscientious objection to war. In the original Hebrew the word is murder. “In

biblical Hebrew," Kushner writes, "there is a gaping difference between the verb 'to kill'---laharog---and the verb 'to murder'---lirtzoach....This word choice matters because there are acceptable forms of killing in the Bible (such as self-defense)." Moreover, "the phrase 'the Ten Commandments' appears nowhere in the Hebrew," she concludes. Instead they are "the ten sayings." Which makes it even more obvious that the KJV translators in particular and probably other translators of the Hebrew into Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, Chinese, etc., have brought their own interpretations to the texts which millions rely on for spiritual guidance. Some of them on the exact wording. Nevertheless, Kushner is at pains to forgive such issues: "Translators throughout time have faced impossible choices. They could not bring everything over in the great journey from Hebrew to another language---and maybe they didn't want to." For such surprising discoveries, alone, the Grammar of God is worth your time and money.

When I first encountered The Grammar of God, I was immediately struck with the juxtaposition of those two nouns. It had never occurred to me that among the countless attributes of God, grammar was among them. Taking the book into my hands, I opened to the Introduction where I read this sentence: "When I was a child I assumed that all families discussed the grammar of the Bible in Hebrew at the dining room table." Reading on, I learned that the author, Aviya Kushner, didn't learn English until she began kindergarten and continued to speak Hebrew with her parents at home. This extraordinary woman went on to become a travel columnist for the Jerusalem Post before pursuing a graduate degree at the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. It was there that the idea for this book took shape and resulted in what Robert Pinsky called, "a passionate, illuminating essay about meaning itself." Indeed, this book explores the arcane and mysterious intricacies of translating meanings from the syntax and vocabulary of ancient cultures to the grammar and lexicon of today's language. A daunting task indeed! When the language of the text is ancient Hebrew, its translation into modern English is no easy undertaking. The glory of this little volume is that its author's mother tongue was Hebrew, and she was steeped in the language from her mother's knee. She not only knows the language, she loves it---and this love is conveyed in her letting us engage in the examination of ancient texts to extract meanings for today in our own language. To accomplish this ambitious goal, she employs several modern English translations side-by-side with the Hebrew text in order to give us an idea of how other translators wrought meaning from this ancient language that didn't even have vowels. The Masoretes invented a system of diacritical markings

in the early Middle Ages that are still used in deciphering the Hebrew Bible. A further strength of this book is Ms. Kushner’s familiarity with the commentary on Hebrew scriptures by Rabbis across the centuries. The community of Jewish scholars has remained in dialogue for hundreds of years, and the meanings of texts throughout the Hebrew Bible are still being discussed and debated. Ms. Kushner opens a window into this process for the uninitiated (like me), thereby allowing fresh air to blow over old meanings grown stale in time. Readers familiar with the English Bible will find her parsing of the Hebrew text both startling and challenging. Nearly all of her eight brief topical chapters opens with a side-by-side copy of the Hebrew text across from the literal English translation of some key verses. This is followed by a half-dozen English renditions, including the KJV and the 1985 Jewish Publication Society version. One readily sees the differences among these conscientious attempts to express the Hebrew text into meaningful English. A difficult undertaking at best. Her selection of illustrative texts is part of the magic in this small volume. Beginning with the Creation account in Genesis 1:1-2, she goes on to illuminate and augment the reader’s understanding of the Ten Commandments, the different Hebrew names for God, and even the opening lines from Psalm 42 (“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.”). The remaining selections address the third day of the Creation, Adam and Eve’s hiding from God after eating the forbidden fruit, Sarah’s laughter, and the opening verses from Isaiah 40 (“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.”). It is impossible to convey in this brief review the rich and abiding experience of seeing the Old Testament through the eyes of one whose entire life has been lived interacting with the Hebrew text. While the book is not strictly speaking a scholarly one, its lessons in both exegesis and hermeneutics will open the eyes of anyone who professes a love for the Holy Bible. She writes, “Certainly much is lost in translation . . . yet every translation transmits understanding. And sometimes, translations of the Bible become essential works in their own right, great works influencing every corner of literature and thought in their own language, as the King James Bible has done.”

Don’t let Aviya Kushner fool you. This is not a book about grammar or words, though there is plenty of succulent discussion of both in this remarkable offering from a young Jewish writer and teacher. It is principally a sustained reflection upon memory and how to remember well. Kushner writes from a tradition that treasures remembering as the last bulwark against disaster. She is a master chronicler

of the memory craft, passed on to her by parents who did not grow weary of arguing about words, the tradents of memory, the traditioners of a people, the access to a God who for all of us uncanny evasiveness both speaks and is spoken about. From the idiosyncratic and unpromising project of laying biblical translations beside each other in coffee shops in Iowa, New York, and Tel Aviv, Kushner spins a tale of the richness of words, the promise and portent of language that yields its treasures only to those who linger long with it, and her undying affection for a family that taught her to love words before it she made her way to ... well ... to Iowa. The author treats us to reflections on: *Love* *Laughter* *Man* *God* *Law* *Song* *Memory* *How It (Never) Ends* Her ruminations are rooted in the Bible (Hebrew and English), in the commentary of rabbis (early and medieval), and in the dinner-time rows of a family that argued as it ate. About words. About God. About matters both penetrable (if you harry them long enough) and eternally impenetrable. The truly frightening thing about Aviya Kushner's **THE GRAMMAR OF GOD** is that it appears to be the proverbial **FIRST BOOK**. After a beginning this good, what might she get up to next?

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