



The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary

Robert Alter

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A brilliant new translation and commentary of one of the Bible's most cherished and powerful books.

Like the Five Books of Moses a cornerstone of the scriptural canon, the Book of Psalms has been a source of solace and joy for countless readers over millennia. The cleansing purity of its images invites reflection and supplication in times of sorrow. The musicality of its powerful rhythms moves readers to celebration of good tidings. So today as it has been throughout our past, this is a book to be cherished as the grounding for our daily lives.

This timeless poetry is beautifully wrought by a scholar whose translation of the Five Books of Moses was hailed as a "godsend" by Seamus Heaney and a "masterpiece" by Robert Fagles. Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms* captures the simplicity, the physicality, and the coiled rhythmic power of the Hebrew, restoring the remarkable eloquence of these ancient poems. His learned and insightful commentary shines a light on the obscurities of the text.

Robert Alter is a widely acclaimed literary scholar. He is the Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary Details

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Joseph R. says

Having listened to Alter's translation and commentary on the Book of Genesis on the Forgotten Classics podcast, I was looking forward to reading this book and finding out more about the Psalms.

The introduction covers the historical and literary background of the Psalms. The discussion gets a bit technical, especially reviewing the nuances of the Hebrew language and the various purposes, styles, and quirks of ancient poetry. The text is rather dense and requires a re-reading to get a better sense of it all. The effort is worth it.

The translation of the Psalms walks the hard line of conveying both the more literal sense of the words and the (to modern ears) foreign cadence and rhythm of Hebrew poetry from thousands of years ago. Often, ideas are repeated in the Psalms to give them more vividness or more concreteness, such as in Psalm 35: 5-6, where the psalmist prays for his enemies to undergo misfortune: "Let them be like chaff before the wind,/with the LORD's messenger driving. [6]May their way be darkness and slippery paths,/ with the LORD's messenger chasing them." (p. 122)

Alter's comments point out sections where the text is difficult to translate due to awkward constructions, which may be due as much to scribal error as to the poetic license of the author. He's honest enough to admit when he is making intelligent guesses and presents his decisions well enough to be persuasive.

Alter more or less rejects a theological interpretation of the texts and limits such comments mostly to possible liturgical uses by the ancient Hebrews or how they compare to other ancient texts and poems about the gods. On the other hand, he often compares the Psalms to other biblical literature, like Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Pentateuch (as well as other Psalms) to give a context for and a possible explanation of difficult passages or to highlight a contrast. For example, in Psalm 37:25, the psalmist says, "A lad I was, and now I am old,/ and I never have seen a just man forsaken." (p. 132) Alter points out this is the exact opposite of what Job argues in his book, that the suffering of a man is not necessarily because he has done something evil. Alter puts it this way: "The Job poet challenges this received wisdom and proposes a more complicated, indeed paradoxical, moral vision." (p. 132, footnote to verse 25)

The footnote ends there and left me wanting more. More than just saying, "they don't agree." It left me wanting a deeper exploration if not some final say on the matter. The book lays aside 2500 years of Jewish and Christian reflection on the Psalms in favor of the ancient context that is less relevant to our lives today, if not less interesting. I did enjoy the book but it was not fully satisfying for me. It's a strange result since I liked his translation and commentary on Genesis so much. Perhaps the historical context is more relevant for that book of the Bible than it is for the Psalms.

Jackson Cyril says

Someone here described these translations as "masculine" and that's a nice Victorian term that captures the essence of these poems. For those of us who grew up hearing the majestic and sonorous cadences of the KJV (or, in my case, an 18th century, somewhat Baroque Tamil translation from the KJV), hearing the Psalms in

a translation which is ruthlessly faithful to the blunt Hebrew is quite an eye-opening experience. I will probably always hear "valley of the shadow of death" or "maranabariyandham" in my head, but knowing how the Hebrew reads is pretty damn exciting.

Tom Mayer says

I won't write much here because I'll have to do it all again for the press release (Full disclosure: I work as an editor for Norton). Suffice it to say that Alter is a sterling translator and his commenatry on the translation -- in many cases with notes longer than the passages rendered into English -- is authorative and thought-provoking. He first translated GENESIS, then the EXODUS, then he continued and put together one book on the FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES. I gather that the BOOK OF PSALMS is the next step in what could be the greatest single-handed translation of The Bible in our times.

SPOILER ALERT: 23:4 reads "Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, / I fear no harm, / for You are with me. / Your rod and You staff -- / it is they that console me." I reacted strongly at first, too, but after reading in his Introduction about the concision of the original Hebrew, and after reading his note on reducing syllables from the baggy lines of the King James edition, I begin to see his point.

Nicole says

This is one of those books where I either started reading from beginning to end but didn't finish or one of those where I will continually be reading it. It's pretty much both of those things. I am sure at one point I would've read all of Alter's translations on the Psalms but for now I am reading it not in order. Overall though, I really like his notes and appreciate his translation. He is taking the Hebrew as is and trying to make notes of the culture and it's surrounding, as well as possible time periods. He is a secular Jew so there is no reference to Jesus but it really focuses on how the people would've meant it and why. I enjoy pretty much almost anything Alter writes, I say almost because you never know.

Melting Uncle says

Wow

I read every last one of these puppies

Sometimes it got tedious

My advice to you if you want to read through the Bible for whatever reason-

Start with the Psalms early on and just read a few here and there as you make your way through the other books

If you try to go straight through in sequence they start to get repetitive and your eyes may glaze over

As always Robert Alter does an excellent job, but in the future I would feel equally comfortable going with the KJV if I had reason to reread any of these

Which I very well could

Because regardless of what you believe...

Some of this stuff is quite lovely

(These are the ones I dog-eared: 34,82,87,119,143)

Colin says

This really helped me understand the Psalms, reading each psalm again after reading the commentary to each one really helped me make sense of them (even basic stuff like telling you which verses are the voice of the psalmist, God or the psalmists enemy which helped a lot).

The translator has avoided words which have later religious connotations (like Salvation which he translates as rescue as the Psalmists were not referring to being "saved" in a spiritual sense but from physical dangers like being killed by enemies or from illness). He tries to avoid abstract words and use more physical ones, in keeping with the original tone of Hebrew language, for example translating *nefesh* as neck (it's literal meaning) rather than soul, although when I compared one Psalm in the NRSV (63) which has the physical sounding "my flesh faints for you" suggesting physical exhaustion from lack of water, Alter replaces "faints" with "yearns" but presumably there is a reason he chose to translate it that way (not explained in the footnotes).

The commentaries concentrate on the psalms as works of poetry rather than religious texts and he explains things like the structure of the poem and alliteration. He also has many comments on the difficulties of translating the text, pointing out possible scribal errors, for example how changing one letter of a word can turn a phrase that doesn't make sense back into something intelligible.

Russell Fox says

Working through all 150 psalms in this book of the Old Testament wasn't nearly as surprising, entertaining, or informative as many of the other books I've read, at least not in terms of history, mythology, or theology. Many of the psalms are repetitive and kind of banal. But I have to give those ancient psalmists some credit: this was the first book I've read in my long journey through the complete Bible that sometimes I honestly felt was *speaking to me*. That is, for the first time since the first page of Genesis, was finding real spiritual perspective, insight, and comfort in the Old Testament, and that's saying something. Some more of my thoughts, with some specific spiritual gems, can be found here.

Michael Austin says

It has been clear for some time that Robert Alter is in the process of doing for Hebrew poetry what the great Robert Fagels did for Greek and Latin epics: he is creating this generation's definitive translations and making them available to readers who would never have picked up *The Iliad* (or the Wisdom books, or the Psalms, or the Five Books of Moses, or 1 and 2nd Samuel) in any other translation. This translation of the Psalms may be well be his most important translation yet--and may survive as such until (and I seriously hope that this happens) he translates the Book of Isaiah.

Translating the Psalms is no small task--for two different reasons. In the first place, they have been translated so many times, in so many editions, that the translator has to deal with the noise of previous versions that

have entered popular culture as set phrases. How can one ignore the King James language in phrases like "as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" or "By the rivers of Babylon . . . we wept while we remembered Zion." These have both been #1 pop songs, for heaven's sake. And what about the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter that was bound into the Anglican Book of Common Prayer for hundreds of years and provided stock phrases for generations of Britain's greatest novelists.

The greater difficulty, however, is that we really don't have a good sense of when the individual psalms were written or of what function they played in Hebrew culture. We can usually group them into two piles--pre- and post-Babylonian exile Psalms. But this gives us about 600 years of pre-exilic poetry to try to make sense out of. So the translator who (like Alter) is interested in restoring some sense of the literature's original context has a hard road, since, for about 75% of the Psalms, we don't have the foggiest idea what that context is, and, consequently, we have allowed these majestic poems to degenerate into a huge bran tub of proof texts to be used to "prove stuff from the Bible."

This said, Alter's translation is unlike any that I have ever read. First off, they are by the most important scholar of the formal aspects of Hebrew poetry now alive. Alter knows more about how Hebrew poems function in the micro-level than anybody, and he works very hard in these translations to recreate something like the original lines that made these poems poems. This means that he often sacrifices English poetic conventions for the sake of Hebrew ones. The line, "How can we sing a song of the Lord / on foreign soil?" (from Psalm 137) just isn't as poetic, in English, as the KJV's "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

If I only had one version of this Psalm, I would stay with the King James, whose language in this particular poem (by far my favorite Psalm) is majestic. But Alter is well aware that there are a lot of "good English poem" translations of the Psalms in print. What he wants to do is create a reasonable approximation of a good Hebrew poem for English readers, which is an extremely valuable sort of thing to do.

Alter also hits what I would consider to be the sweet spot of text-to-commentary. The book clocks in at more than 500 pages, which makes it a substantial book. But he does not footnote everything in the way that, say, the Anchor Bible (which requires three 500 page books to translate the Psalms) does. Rather, he footnotes two or three important lines per page and leaves some things for the reader to figure out by reading the poem closely and matching it with his or her own experiences. It is immensely helpful that the notes are on the same page as the text rather than in endnotes that one has to constantly turn to.

In the notes, Alter gives as much context as he can. But he is also honest about what we can know, what we can reasonably assume, and what we can only guess at. Several times, he tells us honestly that he doesn't know what a particular passage means. Where there are scholarly disputes about the meaning, he summarizes the debate and weighs in with his own opinion. The scholarly aspect of the book is (as anybody who knows anything about Robert Alter would expect) both accessible and extremely responsible.

The result of this is a collection of Psalms that can actually be read and understood by anybody with enough patience to read the text and the commentary. In some ways, this makes it a hard book to read--the fact that it is possible to read each Psalm in this translation as a unique Hebrew poem with its own culture and context imposes a burden on us to actually read them this way. It took me six weeks to read and understand all of the 150 Psalms. In times past, I have read them all in other versions of the Bible in a single day. The difference is that, this time, I came away from the six weeks of reading feeling like I understood the Psalms and at least some things about the culture that produced them.

David Smith says

I've read other single translations of the book of Psalms: "The Complete Psalms" by Pamela Greenberg, "Psalms for Praying" by Nan Merrill, "The Psalms in Other Words" by Dom Hubert van Zeller, "A Book of Psalms" by Stephen Mitchell. Robert Alter's "The Book of Psalms" excels them all in both content and commentary. Alter brings to bear his expertise of the Hebrew language, his sensitivity to Hebrew poetry, his grasp of linguistics and grammar, and his breadth of knowledge of biblical manuscripts. I loved it.

Elaine says

This book is actually by Robert Alter, who has retranslated the Hebrew Bible from classical Hebrew to modern English. Besides being a noted translator of texts of ancient people's, like the Babylonians, he is a Professor of Comparative Literature at Berkely, and a two-time recipient of the Guggenheim. What makes his works so fascinating and enlightening is that he is extremely knowledgeable, not only of Hebrew, but of literary theory. For instance, he explains how poetry is created in all languages. If you've read Samuel Levin's brilliant book on poetic language, you will recognize his theory of doubling in Alter's explanation of why the Psalms are poems. No, there are no rhymes. Poetry does not have to have rhyme. Nor does it have to depend on unusual words. It must, however, have structural repetitions like rhythm caused by repetitions of strong and weak beats. Alter is ever mindful of the structure of the Psalms in their original language.

He notes that they are structured with half-lines he calls verses. Each is tied together by semantic similarity, syntactic form and/or by opposing meaning. They do not use alliteration or other possible poetic devices. They do draw upon contemporary cultures like the Babylonian and use poetic figures from other ancient poetry.

Every language has its own poetic forms, all dependent on doubling. Alter's description of versets remind me of Anglo Saxon poetry, although that tradition joined their half lines with alliteration.

Alter also notes that in ancient times, people read aloud, and certain words in some psalms refer to such murmuring, but invests it with moral meaning.

He not only explains the original structure of the Psalms, which you'd never guess from The King James or even some Jewish texts, but he explains, with reference to ancient Hebrew scribal practices and etymologies, exactly how each Psalm is structured. From these, he demonstrates what each psalm originally meant. He also has tried to imitate the ancient prosody in his English translation, giving us the feeling of the strength of the original.

The Psalms have exerted a powerful influence on English poetry through the ages, not to mention their theological influence.

Alter writes well. No academic density, no convoluted sentence structures mar his explanations. You don't have to be religious to enjoy this book. However, if you are religious, these translations and the accompanying reasoning justifying them are an absolute must. The Hebrew Bible wasn't written in English or even Greek, nor was it written to justify to the Christian Trinity. It was written by an ancient people who had a very different set of religious beliefs. Modern Christian translations often have translated the Bible from a Greek translation of the Hebrew, and who have also translated it as if it were a precursor to the

Gospels. The ancients had no notion that Gospels would someday be written, thousands of years later. However, this in no way is an anti-Christian work. He does show some mistranslations of the King James, but he also shows them in later Jewish Bibles

The translations Alter makes enriches one's feeling for the original psalms. Christians will find them as enlightening as non-Christians. Those interested in how literature weaves its magic will also find it illuminating

Zadignose says

Bible of Bibles!

I am a convert! Not to a religion, no, no, but to Robert Alter as translator. I am now convinced, if one is at all interested in reading the Bible as literature, Robert Alter's translations are a must.

I wasn't sure at first. When I first approached one of his psalm translations, it seemed odd and alien in comparison to the Catholic Douay-Rheims version I had read of the same psalm. Of course it's reasonable to expect differences in different translations. But, anyway, my first instinctive reaction was to look skeptically at Alter's version and to doubt whether it represented a better version, and since I'm not at all equipped to go back to original Hebrew texts and try to resolve for myself what is better or worse, and I didn't initially want to grapple with such questions of which text to prefer, I walked away for a while. I wasn't even sure I wanted to try to read the whole of Psalms in a relatively short time and try to get a handle on the whole of the canon. I came back later when I was in a better mood for it.

The thing is, Alter is very transparent with the reasons for the translation choices he made, the sources of ambiguity and confusion, and the elements that produce controversy among translators. His notes are longer than the text they annotate, and they have plenty of detail. His reasoning always seemed sensible even when the notes prompted me to look skeptically at some of his choices. I was only able to be skeptical because he opened up his process for me to see, and allowed for the possibility of other approaches.

Alter acknowledges the King James version as the best of prior efforts to render Psalms and the Bible as a whole into English. With regards to more modern English translations, he is far less satisfied, and perhaps reasonably so.

The motives that have guided most late translations have gone along one or two basic lines: to *interpret* the Bible, in the sense of reducing ambiguity and making it clear and specific where possible, perhaps favoring some particular interpretations, and, in another sense of interpretation, making the Bible more accessible to *common* readers who want simplicity and ready comprehensibility.

Alter's approach is to attempt to *transmit* the Bible, to the degree it is possible, *including* its literary qualities and inherent ambiguities that are organic to a poetic work, and also not to try to conceal the difficulties of such a task where textual errors and editorial tampering through the ages and our ignorance of some of the

language of which the Bible is composed create significant obstacles to understanding and translation.

The poetry of the text is preserved as much as it can be, and the mystery of it remains mysterious. What we receive is worthy of the transmission.

Now, it must be admitted that, for all the sparkling gems within the Psalms, there is also a fair share of tedium involved in reading all of them, and there's some uninspired writing in those Psalms which are mainly composed of fixed phrases, and those which are stitched-together from other psalms or from fragments that were almost certainly not intended to be stitched in such a way by their original writers.

At one point in the reading, I just had to sigh and say: is every damned psalmist the victim of plotting schemers, liars, and unjust lawsuits? All of them? Can't they think of anything else to psalm about? Are they just repeating the same laments of the other psalmists, just as teenage pop stars might crib love-song ideas from others without ever having felt the same way? How many of those who sang or recited these psalms may have been hypocrites, invoking God to redeem them from wicked slander, even when the "slander" was right?

But okay, I was just moaning. In fact, maybe only thirty or so of the 150 psalms have this character, and they all still have the potential to surprise when a new turn or expression appears within one particular psalm that is unique.

On the other hand, it's interesting to observe the variety within the psalms, including variety of philosophy and belief. At times the psalms seem to present less of a unity than a debate of ideas, and perhaps these are some of the best times. Depending on how the reader approaches them, one can find arguments for the belief that God delivers true justice in this life, and just the opposite, that the persecution of the just and the triumph of the wicked can be too much to bear with the knowledge that this life is so short. There are psalms that impress us with the idea that much of what we see in this life is essentially illusory and transitory, while most would persuade us that this life is it, and for the individual the only hope is to get God's grace here and now, because there's no praising God after we die. There are psalms that suggest the need for animal sacrifice, and there are those which argue that this is not a necessity. There are psalms that might encourage the Christian interpreter to imagine that there are eternal rewards in an afterlife for the faithful, and eternal punishments for the wicked, but none can clearly and unambiguously support this, and most would seem to contradict it. There even seem to be some psalms that suggest a sort of polytheism, in that God is the greatest of gods, but not the only... while others assert strongly that there is only God, or that other "gods" are *ungods*. Nonetheless, God may have a bunch of other superhuman buddies up in heaven with him, messengers and warriors. Sometimes God is modeled on other religions' storm-gods and primordial-sea-monster-defeating gods. But one could argue this is just a borrowing of poetic imagery.

So, yeah, apparently the Psalms have been divided into five books by some of those who compiled and recorded them. For whatever reason, I think I found I liked the third-book psalms the best, so for me, most of the juiciness is in the middle. Maybe I'm just perverse in favoring the more despairing psalms.

I'm probably making a muddle of my review now, or I will if I go on further. I'll just leave off with one selected Psalm, as a sampler. Which one will it be? I haven't decided yet. Let's see, eeny, meeny, miney, moe:

Psalm 58*

For the lead player *al-tashcheth*, a David *michtam*.

Do you, O chieftains, indeed speak justice,
in rightness judge humankind?
In your heart you work misdeeds on earth,
weigh a case with outrage in your hands.
The wicked backslide from the very womb,
the lie-mongers go astray from birth.
They have venom akin to the serpent's venom,
like the deaf viper that stops up its ears,
so it hears not the soothsayers' voice
nor the cunning caster of spells.
God, smash their teeth in their mouth.
The jaws of the lions shatter, O Lord.
Let them melt away, like water run off.
Let Him pull back His arrows so they be
cut down.
Like a snail that moves in its slime,
a woman's stillbirth that sees not the sun,
before their thorns ripen in bramble,
still alive and in wrath rushed to ruin.
The just man rejoices when vengeance he sees,
his feet he will bathe in the wicked one's
blood.
And man will say, "Yes, there is fruit for the just.
Yes, there are gods judging the earth."

*Note that not all Bibles number the psalms the same way. I think the Catholic Bible is in sync with the Hebrew Bible, but most Protestants number slightly differently, often one higher or one lower (can't remember) because of uncertainty over whether one of the psalms may actually have been two psalms accidentally joined together in later manuscripts.

Keith says

Other than being mean-spirited, vindictive, vengeful, intolerant, bigoted, close-minded, hateful, conceited and self-absorbed, I think the Psalms are not bad.

No where else are the Psalms presented with such precision, beauty and scope as in Alter's translation. Like his other works, the introduction is worth the price of the book alone. He explains a powerful poetic form long forgotten (especially with the KJV's prose translation). But with that you get the sparse beauty of his Hebrew translations.

As noted above, I'm not a big fan of the Psalms themselves, but they are a pivotal work in the Western Canon. My rating is more based on Alter's wonderful translation. This book is indispensable to the serious reader of the Bible.

Darwin8u says

Pseudo Psalm #149

1. For Alter.

To you Robert. I lift my pen. ?

2. And work to compose tonight
before midnight a Sunday psalm.??

3. I read your book in bed and
in the bath. ?

4. I read it until I fell asleep
until my fingers pruned. ?

5. I read it while listening to
songs of Patti Smith. ?

6. I read it while listening to
songs of Frank Black. ?

7. I read it while listening to
songs of the Cult and Floyd. ?

8 But LOVED reading it while listening
to just the iambs of my heart. ?

9. I loved the book, with its thin red ribbon
and thick white pages. ?

10. I loved the book, with its context
commentary, and poetry. ?

11. I loved your footnotes and the
transparency of your work. ??

12. Your struggles and stumbles,
your power and poetry. ?

13. I love that inside your brain
spins a poet, an Hebrew scholar. ?

14. That inside your heart beats
a mystic, and an intellectual. ?

15. I listened to the King James with
my kids in the Morning. ?

16. But later, I alone would
study Alter in the Evening. ?

17. I would feather the edge
of Psalms with Post-It flags. ??

18. To mark a line of poetry
that pierced me to the core. ?

19. To mark a footnote

that quickened my reading. ?

20. I long to face Alter's Wisdom
Books and 5 Books of Moses. ?

21. I have yet to start Alter's David
Story or Ancient Israel. ??

22. I am old, but too shall conquer since
Robert Alter is older and the
Old Testament older still. ??

Robert says

Incredible poetry, incredible translation

It's been nothing short of a joy to read these translations by Robert Alter, and this translation of Psalms just might be the best of them all. Aside from the beauty of the words and the images they conjure, the notes were equally valuable and interesting. I learned about the different genres of psalms as well as clues to when they might have been written. Fascinating stuff, really. Alter tends to dismiss a lot of scholarly speculation as to particular uses of or specific events which may have led to the composition of certain psalms, differing in this respect from Robert Price, but that doesn't take away from the pleasure of reading. I will say that reading this book straight through probably wasn't the best idea, due to some repetitiveness, but that is in no way a bad reflection on the actual content or translation. As with the last few Alter translations, there aren't any links to footnotes. Not great, but I'm used to it by now. Of course, as with the others, I heartily recommend this to students of religious texts, or people who like good poetry. This is certainly one of the ultimate collections and is high-quality in every respect.

Katrina says

He does such interesting translation work. The formatting is annoying on the kindle though--the footnotes aren't linked, so you either have to jump back and forth (which is very difficult on a kindle) or wait and read them all at the end of the psalm. That's annoying but doable with psalms, but the thought of trying to do that with, say, Genesis is preventing me from buying his other volumes, which is too bad.
