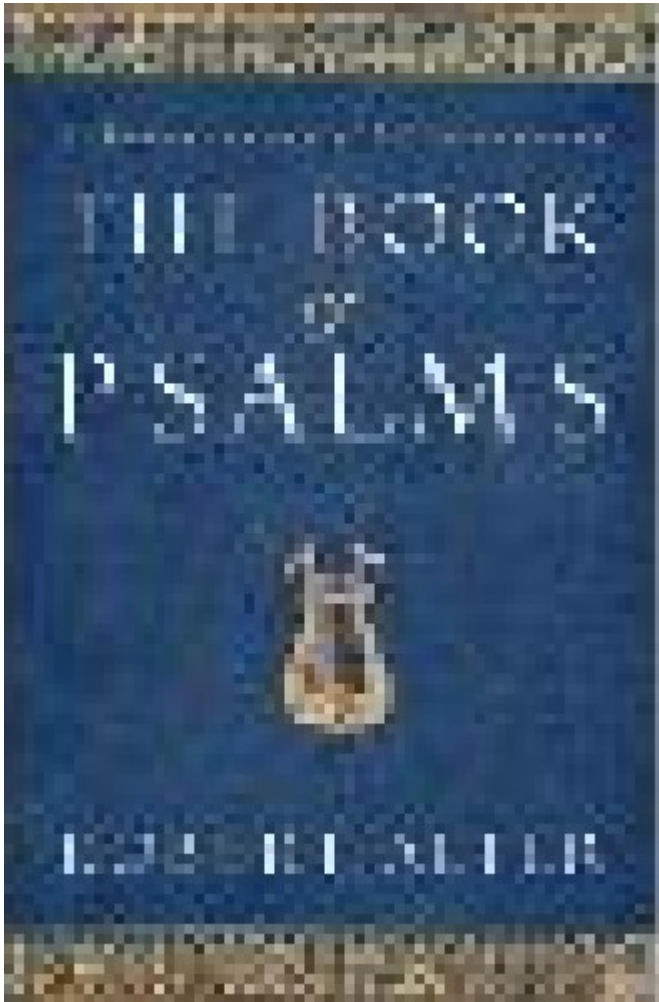


The Book of Psalms

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary

Robert Alter

Norton

Though not reckoned as a scripture scholar in any conventional sense, Robert Alter has affected the study of the Hebrew Bible in immense ways. His influence stems

primarily from two remarkable books, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (published by Basic Books in 1983 and 1987 respectively). In the first of these Alter took up “close reading” of scriptural narrative texts with reference to plot, character and type scenes, and he showed how a rhetoric of narrative works. In the latter book he primarily paid attention to poetic parallelism, the defining mark of biblical poetry.

Both books are partly theoretical argument and partly concrete textual interpretation. Alter focused on the *art* of interpretation, evidencing his enormous sensitivity to the nuance of the text. It is fair to say that he introduced a new dimension into contemporary scripture interpretation, indicating that those schooled primarily in historical criticism might begin again in a different way.

Alter has followed these two programmatic discussions with scripture translations in which he primarily pays attention to the function of rhetoric as he renders the text from Hebrew into English. In his welcome translation of 1 and 2 Samuel (*The David Story*, Norton, 1999), he focuses on the art of narrative, which he outlined earlier. In the present volume, a translation of the Psalms, he works out in practice his sense about poetry in general and parallelism in particular.

The present book consists of an extended introductory essay, a translation of the 150 Psalms, and lean notes that assist the reader in modest ways to understand either the meaning of the text itself or Alter’s decisions concerning translation.

Alter is, of course, well versed in the critical tradition of Psalms study. In important ways he voices his reservations about the work of the scholarly giants who have defined critical study. On the one hand he resists the notion of liturgical use of the Psalms; he regards Sigmund Mowinckel’s “purported enthronement rite” as “the chief offender” among scholarly conjectures. His objection is not to a focus on liturgical practice itself (he appeals to such practice in other contexts), but to a particular hypothesis concerning liturgical practice. On the other hand, he notes the limits of form-critical preoccupation with genres even though he elsewhere refers to specific genres:

Though these generic categories are sometimes useful for understanding the thrust of a particular text, there is more fluidity of genre than they allow, with many psalms being hybrids or switching genre in mid-course and at least a few psalms, such as Psalm 137, standing outside the system

of genre. What can be concluded from all this variegated evidence is that the psalm was a multifaceted poetic form serving many different purposes, some cultic and others not, and that it played a vital role in the life of the Israelite community and of individuals within that community throughout the biblical period.

Alter allows that the book of Psalms consists in a collection of smaller collections, and he notes “the editorial decision to conclude the book with six psalms of praise,” the final one “a grand orchestral climax.”

It is in Alter’s discussion of poetic parallels that his introduction becomes especially interesting, reflecting the passion of his own work:

The “synonym” in the second verset is often a more unusual term, a stronger word, some sort of specification of the first term, or a metaphorical substitution for it that carries with it the vividness or heightening involved in figurative language. Thus, from the first verse to the second, there is typically an intensification or concretization, . . . a focusing of the initial idea, and sometimes a narrative development of it.

Alter invites readers to slow down, to pause and notice that we are dealing with a most remarkable artistic practice, a practice that we may miss in our rush for content or because the lines have become too familiar to us. For leaders of worship and for those who voice public prayers, the art of parallelism, which has a “strong forward thrust,” is an art worth replicating.

Alter’s intention is to translate in such a way that each English verse is “readable as poetry but sounds something like the Hebrew”—

emulating its rhythms wherever feasible, reproducing many of the effects of its expressive poetic syntax, seeking equivalents for the combination of homespun directness and archaizing in the original, hewing to the lexical concreteness of the Hebrew, and making more palpable the force of parallelism that is at the heart of biblical poetry.

He seeks to deliver the Psalter from excessive abstraction and from the spiritual, otherworldly seduction that has long haunted Christian Psalm usage and that vexes every Old Testament teacher. Specifically he mentions three frequent misrepresentations that his translation intends to correct: instead of translating

certain words as “iniquity” or “transgression,” he prefers to translate them as “crime” or “wrongdoing”; instead of using “soul” as a rendering of *nephesh*, he chooses either “I,” “self” or a metonymy concerning the body; where other translators might use “salvation,” he will use “rescue.” He explains the reasons for this last interpretive decision:

The speakers in these poems . . . do not seek some transport to a different spiritual realm, some radical transformation of their inward self. Instead, they implore God to extricate them from terrible straits, confound their enemies, restore them to wholeness and safety. Notions of the heavens opening and flights of angels in glorious raiment bearing redeemed souls on high have their own excitements, but they are not within the purview of these Hebrew poets. This translation is an effort to reground Psalms in the order of reality in which it was conceived, where the spiritual was realized through the physical, and divine purposes were implemented in social, political, and even military realms.

Though there is no polemic in Alter’s work, this Jewish scholar is addressing a common temptation among Christians: to “dress up” the faith voiced in these texts. Attention to Alter’s translation might be an important step in a recovery of the historical materiality of faith—a recovery that is urgent in a religious culture that is tempted in a variety of gnostic directions.

It is neither possible nor necessary to call attention to all of the many specific cases wherein Alter’s translations make a difference. These translations are not dramatically different from others, nor do they call attention to themselves. But Alter knows, as does every good poet or writer, that getting the right word in the right place is crucial. Thus in Psalm 46, where the NRSV translates the three uses of *môt* variously as “shake,” “be moved” and “totter” in a way that destroys the constancy of the term, Alter renders all three as “collapse.” In Psalm 12, where “language serves as a weapon or rather an army for the wicked,” he renders key phrases as “smooth-talking lips” that will be “cut off or cut away.” In Psalm 22, he twice offers “cur” instead of “dog,” thus catching the imagery of an assault by a wild and dangerous animal in such a way that one can nearly feel the unrestrained snap of teeth. In Psalm 23, his preference is for “my life he brings back” to “the paths of justice” rather than the familiar “he restores my soul.” In Psalm 31 he uses “shelter” as a verb—“In you, O Lord, I shelter”—a very nice touch indeed.

Every reader of this translation will be led toward fresh thoughts and will discover favorites that inspire the imagination in new, rich ways. Alter's careful reading and attention to detail is an attestation that a community of faith is fundamentally a community of speech. Alter persuasively moves away from religious speech that is abstract; he knows that a poetic imagination cherishes the concrete.

It may well be that care and precision in speech is crucial for an adequate ecclesiology in a time of seduction, for communities that are careful in speech are always given "fresh from the word." Alter's preference for what is terse and brusque in the Psalter might be an invitation to recover the entire range of dialogic speech in this corpus—in passages beyond a few favorites. When the repertoire shrinks to the overworn and the familiar, as it often does, faith shrinks to mere convenient truth. Alter has given us a Psalter that is at many points inconvenient and therefore worth recovering. Like every verbal artist, Alter knows that the God we speak is the God we get.