

Listening to the text

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, by Robert Alter

Robert Alter's contribution to current scripture studies has been immense and defining. Alter, who is professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, possesses a rare combination of interpretive gifts. He has both a sensitive ability to work with Hebrew and an artistic sensibility that allows him to grasp the aesthetic workings of a text without excessive or premature theological judgment. Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985) have had a vital influence on the methods and perspectives of the "literary study" of the Bible—an approach that has opened ways of reading and interpreting scripture unavailable to the dominant methods of historical criticism.

Alter's translation of Samuel 1 and 2 in *The David Story* allows him to return to and use the insights and suggestions of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. In his extended introduction, he invites a fresh consideration of the way we may hear and receive this text and gives something of a charter for a literary approach to it. While the writer may have been doing history, it is "an imagining of history that is analogous to what Shakespeare did with his historical figures and events in his historical plays." The author's attention to detail and dialogue cannot be reportage; it is inescapably construction. "The author approaches the David story as an imaginative writer, giving play to that dialectical fullness of conception that leads the greatest writers (Shakespeare, Stendhal, Balzac, Tolstoy, Proust, to name a few apposite instances) to transcend the limitations of their own ideological points of departure," Alter states.

His point is exceedingly important and cunningly stated. To transcend one's "own ideological points of departure" means, in a theological context, to be carried artistically beyond one's own take on the ethical and the theological—a transcendence authorized by the text but much resisted by the church. The outcome of applying such an emancipated imagination to Samuel, Alter says, is "a will and testament worthy of a Mafia chief," "the wisdom of a Tallyrand," "the first full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince in Western literature."

Alter's artistic sense requires and permits him to reject two staples of conventional criticism: the Deuteronomistic hypothesis that has never been easy to sustain in regard to Samuel and that constricts the power of the narrative; and the breaking of a unified and coherent narrative into sources, a long-established method of historical criticism. Alter wants the fullness of narrative to have its own say.

As one would expect, Alter's translation is imaginative and sensitive to nuance. But though subtle and suggestive, it is not a wholesale departure from traditional renderings. He has a generous appreciation for the King James Version:

What is clearer to me now is that the precedent of the King James Version has played a decisive and constructive role in directing readers of English to a rather literal experience of the Bible, and that this precedent can be ignored only at considerable cost, as nearly all the English versions of the Bible done in recent decades show. The men responsible for the 1611 version authorized by King James, following the great model of William Tyndale a century earlier, produced an English Bible that often, though by no means invariably, evinced a striking fidelity to many of the literary articulations of the Hebrew text. This success of course reflected their remarkable sense of English style (nothing translates the power of the original more egregiously than the nonstyle cultivated by the sundry modern versions), but it was also a consequence of their literalism. The literalism was dictated by their firm conviction as Christians that every word of the biblical text was literally inspired by God. That belief led them to replicate significant verbal repetition in the original, avoiding elegant synonymy, and to reproduce in English many of the telling word choices of the biblical writers.

Alter's commentary on Samuel consists of isolated notes on specific matters. This section of the book offered less than I had expected. Alter's literary sensibilities produce shrewd notes; one can learn a great deal from them. But the format does not permit him to say as much as he could or as we might hope he would concerning the text's literary patterns and movements.

That Alter, so able and versatile, would invest himself in the demanding, meticulous work of translation suggests that attentiveness to nuance and detail is well worth the effort. Clinical pastoral education and its dread "verbatim" has taught many of

us that how something is said matters enormously. It has taught us the difficult skill and freedom of attending to nuance. Ironically, many of us who have learned to listen well nevertheless run roughshod over the biblical text, unwilling to let its nuance subvert either social ideology or passion for certitude.

Alter's book is important because it shows a keen listener in the act of listening. It demonstrates how one who already knows a great deal about the text is again surprised and led elsewhere by its detail. Alter invites his readers to listen with him, to hear more and other than already has been heard. Listening is a countercultural activity, an activity that leads to freedom, as Alter demonstrates.