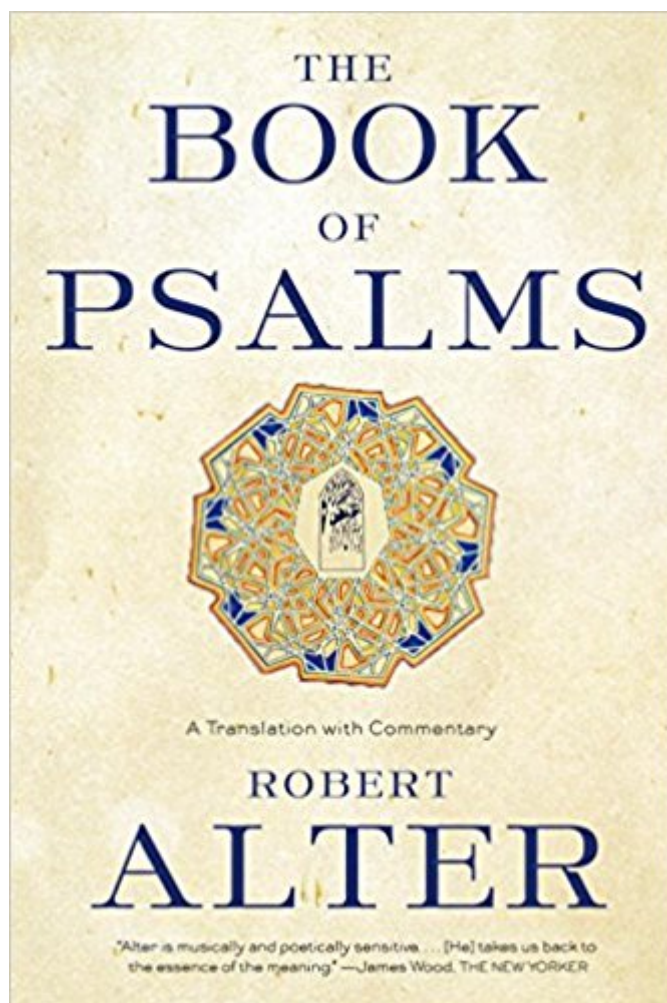


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The Book Of Psalms: A Translation With Commentary



Synopsis

One of Newsweek's Best Books of the Year and winner of the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement. A cornerstone of the scriptural canon, the Book of Psalms has been a source of solace and joy for countless readers over millennia. This timeless poetry is beautifully wrought by a scholar whose translation of the Five Books of Moses was hailed as a "œgodsend" by Seamus Heaney and a "œmasterpiece" by Robert Fagles. 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 illuminates the obscurities of the text.

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Customer Reviews

Alter takes us back to the essence of the meaning. . . . Everything is clearer, seeming to have been rinsed not in the baptismal waters of the New Testament but in the life-giving water of the desert.

--James Wood A considerable achievement. . . . Alter holds me to his darkly economical texts.

--Harold Bloom You think you know these texts . . . until you read Alter, who reignites their beauty in bracing and unexpected ways. --Malcolm Jones "Alter is musically and poetically sensitive.... [He]

takes us back to the essence of the meaning. --James Wood "Extraordinary.... We never forget, with

Alter's Psalms, that the text we are reading is the work of human hands not Holy Writ, but

something at once less and more than that, great poetry. --Adam Kirsch "A considerable

achievement.... Alter holds me to his darkly economical texts. --Harold Bloom "It is impossible to

overstate the depth, the versatility, and the value of Alter's contribution. --Barbara Berman"One of the best outcomes of Alter's translation is a sense of an abrupt, muscular intensity; he restores to the Psalms a kind of strangeness that emanates from an encounter with a culture we recognize yet is distinctly alien to us, far removed in time and frame of mind. --Mark Doty"Every reader of this translation will be led towards fresh thoughts and will discover favorites that inspire the imagination in new, rich ways. --Walter Brueggemann"In his compelling and swiftly moving translations, Alter has thrust the reader back to the place where the monotheistic religions were born out of even more ancient beginnings. "The achievement of this new translation is to present the Book of Psalms as a wonder of ancient literature. "

Robert Alter's ongoing translation of the Hebrew Bible, the magnificent capstone to a lifetime of distinguished scholarly work, has won the PEN Center Literary Award for Translation. His immense achievements in scholarship ranging from the eighteenth-century European novel to contemporary Hebrew and American literature earned Alter the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Los Angeles Times. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Alter is the Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

As a life long prayer of the Psalms, the whole psalter every month. And doing scholarly work on the Psalms for 30+ years there is very few 1 volume works that can compare to Alter's work. I have both an electronic and hard copy of the work. The hard copy is off to be rebound in a couple of weeks. It has been in constant use. Alter's translation is what I use in weekly worship service with the congregations I serve. I have not had 1 complaint and lots of positive responses. His facileness with Hebrew is beyond anything I have encountered before. It brings the text alive and in many places ways that I would not have been aware or considered. The textual notes are very enlightening particularly when bring to light the thoughts of other scholars that I would not be aware of since I am not in the Academy but parish, especially Rabbinic thoughts. I bought the electronic edition to add to hard copy since I did not want to be in a situation where Alter's text was not available to me. If a student or prayer of the Psalms this is an edition that one needs to have close at hand.

I love the King James translation and it's very interesting to read KJV side by side with Alter's version. His renditions are usually more succinct than KJV. He is fairly literal and tries to capture the often brief and terse usage of the Hebrew. In trying to capture the alliterations in Hebrew, he makes

some odd but interesting word choices. I prefer this to the "dynamic equivalence" of many modern translations. Alter's commentaries are primarily about translation issues. You won't find much of a theological or devotional nature in his notes, except to the extent that understanding the translation is devotional in itself. The lay out is nice, with single columns and verse formatting. The generous amount of white space makes the book look nice (and gives room for personal notes if you're so inclined) but also makes it a physically large book.

I've been following Alter's progress in translating since his 1999 Genesis. He has an amazing grasp of biblical poetics and a gift for explaining to readers. His style of translation attempts to capture the literary style of the original Hebrew, remain true to the original, and yet also craft a readable text. If you read not only the text but also his notes, you will spend much more time in the reading--this won't be a quick spin through the Good News Bible--but you will know infinitely more about the beauty, underlying significance, and intention of the original. If you don't know the language well enough to read the ancient texts in their originals, but really would like to know something about what it might show you, then these translations are likely something you will love.

This review is for the Kindle edition. The translation is great although in some ways quirky, and the notes are brilliant. I'd give it 4 or 5 stars. But the Kindle edition has deficiencies that detract from the reading experience. I'd give it 1 star. Problems: Verse numbers in the psalms land sometimes at the beginning of the verse, sometimes at the end, even sometimes in the middle. There are detailed and fascinating notes, organized by verse. But there are no links from the verse to the related note. So you have to page through from the verse to the note. Bad when the note discusses that psalm. Even worse when the note cross-references another psalm and you have to go to the table of contents to find that psalm. By the way, the table of contents lists Chapter 1, Chapter 2, etc. instead of the customary Psalm 1, Psalm 2, etc. Also, the table of contents is one long list, so you have to scroll through 150 items to find a specific psalm. Other translations solve this in their Kindle versions by using columns. I also have other Bible translations in Kindle editions which give a secondary level of contents: the verses. Here for a long psalm (such as 119) there's no way to find a specific verse other than to scroll through the whole psalm. Talking of Psalm 119, as in most translations there are Hebrew letters to define each multi-verse section of the psalm. But similar to the formatting problem with the verse numbers, the Hebrew letters aren't at the start of the section; they just seem to randomly land somewhere close to the start, sometimes in the middle of a verse. Also traditionally psalms are organized into 5 books. But the table of contents doesn't show the 5 books, even though

the intro discusses them. So there's no easy way to link to say the beginning of book 2. There are occasional English transliterations of the Hebrew in the notes. The Hebrew guttural that is customarily transliterated as "ch" is instead shown as an h with a dot below it. That's a common alternative method. Except here the dot is even with the bottom of the other letters and the h is lifted above the other letters, requiring that the line spacing be greater for the line that contains that letter. Visually clumsy. There is a lengthy and fascinating introduction to the psalms whose utility is severely diminished by a complete lack of links. So if the intro discusses a psalm, you have to find the table of contents, scroll through the long list, find the psalm, then find the verse. I probably could come up with a few more examples of how bad the Kindle version is, but that's enough. As I said, I'd give it one star for the technical implementation of the Kindle format. If I had to do it over again, I'd buy the dead tree edition. While it has no links, it's far easier to flip around in a traditional book than in this severely limited Kindle edition.

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