



Reading the psalms

Although selections from the book of Psalms are frequently used in Jewish life, it may be one of the least studied books of the Bible. The words of these ancient poets offer comfort to mourners at funerals. Recited as part of healing groups, they give their readers hope for the future. During morning services, their recitation helps create a mood to bring one closer to the Divine. On Friday nights, synagogue-goers celebrate the coming of the Sabbath with psalms that allow us to "sing to God a new song" and rejoice in the day of rest. The psalms may be such a part of our lives that we no longer see their true depth and beauty. Two works, "The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary" by Robert Alter (W. W. Norton and Company) and "I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms" with illuminations and commentary by Debra Brand and literary commentary of Arnold J. Brand (The Jewish Publication Society), offer new and very different looks at the psalms, although both hope to reawaken our interest in these ancient works.

In his new translation, Alter aims "to represent [the book of] Psalms in a kind of English verse that is readable poetry yet 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 the heart of biblical poetry." This is not an easy task, especially since he seeks to write as literal a translation as possible. While I am not an expert on biblical poetry, I do know that translating any kind of poetry is difficult. Translating an ancient text is even more difficult due to scribal errors that have appeared over the centuries, which can change the meaning of the text. Any scholarly work must, therefore, also consider the different variations of the psalms that appear in alternative ancient manuscripts. The beauty of Alter's work is that not only has he done the extensive research necessary, but, even more importantly, he notes the reasons for his decisions in his commentary, which also attempts "to reground [the book of] Psalms in the order of reality in which it was conceived, where the spiritual world was realized through the physical, and divine realms were implemented in social, political and even military realms."

Alter's introduction provides an excellent overview of the history of the psalms, including a discussion of when the psalms were written (he notes that while it is nearly impossible to date individual psalms, most were written between the 10th and fourth century B.C.E.) and the debate about their original purpose. While some scholars believe that these poems were used as part of the sacrificial cult, others propose they were written for personal use. Alter notes that there are many different types of psalms, some of which were probably used for different purposes, a point made clearer when he explains how the biblical work actually consists of five different collections that were combined to form the book as it is now found in the Bible.

In order to give readers an idea of how different his version

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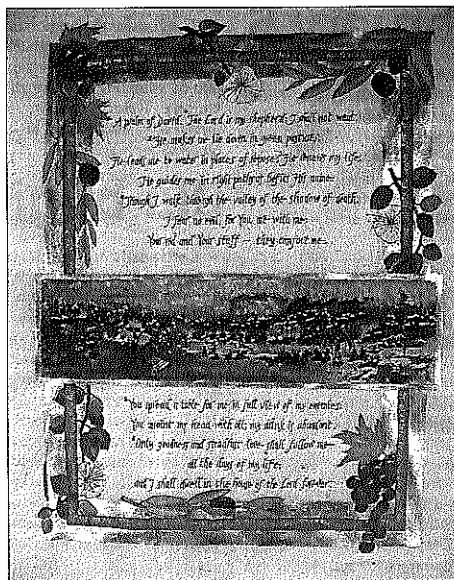
◆ "Grandeur and glory You don." — Alter's translation.

In my mind, Alter's version hews closer to the original Hebrew, since in the Hebrew text, the adjectives precede the subject and verb. It also makes for a more poetic reading, with the emphasis placed on the last two words, which describe God's actions.

While I enjoyed reading Alter's translation of the psalms, for me the best part of his work was the commentary, particularly the way he shows the meaning of the text in light of the theology of the period in which it was written. For example, in his commentary on psalm 27:4, he discusses how the person "dwelling in the house of the Lord" (meaning the Temple in Jerusalem) would see the building not only as a religious refuge, but also "as a sanctuary in the political sense—a place of secure refuge from threatening foes." In this latter sense, it served as "a safe hiding place." The idea of why God might need praise is looked at in his comments on psalm 30, which speaks about a "recurrent theme shared by the psalms of thanksgiving and supplication: man cannot fulfill this vocation of celebrating God if he is engulfed by death. It is living human beings whom God needs to sing His praises. It looks as though the giving of praise to God is imagined as a replacement of the pagan idea in which sacrifices were thought of as food necessary to the gods."

In his notes on psalm 51, Alter shows how some have misunderstood the words "in transgression was I conceived, in offense my mother spawned me" as suggesting that all sexual acts are sinful (as known as the doctrine of original sin). However, he disagrees, noting

that while this specific writer considers *this* specific act sinful, "there is not much here to support the idea that this is the case with every human born." Alter also disagrees with those who see psalm 72, which speaks of a king who will bring peace and justice to the world, as referring to a messianic figure since it was traditional when praising a living ruler to include words of "flattering hyperbole." For him, "the vision of king's reigning forever to the ends of the earth and dispensing justice could easily be a prayer on behalf of a flesh-and-blood monarch, without eschatological intentions." What Alter makes clear is that the writers of the psalms were not prophets looking See "Psalms" on page 9



Above, left and right: Debra Brand's illuminations for Psalm 23.

- sounds, Alter compares translations of the latter section of psalm 104:1 in his introduction. This led me to look for how the psalm was translated in other texts. For instance:
- ◆ "Thou art clothed with glory and majesty." — King James
 - ◆ "You are clothed in glory and majesty." — Jewish Publication Society, new version
 - ◆ [You are] clothed in majesty and splendour." — The New English Bible
 - ◆ "Thou art clothed with glory and majesty." — Jewish Publication Society, older version
 - ◆ "You have donned glory and majesty." — Tanach Stone

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to predict the future, but humans who cried out to God with songs of praise and laments of despair. It is his ability to clarify the simple meaning of the text that allows us to see what these works meant to our ancestors and to bring their cries of sorrow, joy and praise closer to our hearts.

While Alter seeks to help us understand the original meaning of the text, Debra Brand hopes her work will make the 36 psalms included more meaningful in a modern context. In her drawings and commentary, she presents a "visual midrash, an interpretation of selected psalms, which I hope will give not only aesthetic pleasure in their shimmering gold and color, but also a means of recapturing the sense of awe embodied in these verses." What she wants is for readers to "slow down" and consider both the words and her illuminations, opening what she hopes will be a "three-way conversation between the Psalmist, God, and ourselves." Her works are not illustrations, but rather illuminations; the difference is that illustrations are separate from the text, while her illuminations contain both drawing and text, borrowing on the tradition of handwritten manuscripts. She describes an illuminated manuscript as one that "fuse[s] words and images, allow[ing] the reader to focus closely on both simultaneously." Combining the two can set "up provocative tensions that can trigger unexpected insights or feelings."

Each section includes the illuminations of the psalm followed by the Hebrew and English text in traditional typescript. Following each one, Arnold J. Brand, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at UCLA, offers an analysis focusing on the religious sense of the text, which also features rabbinic interpretations and a literary appreciation of the writing. Debra then explains the symbolism used in her illuminations and the sources for her inspiration. There are also very short sections explaining why a particular translation may differ from the most recent Jewish Publication Society one and notes about the use

of each psalm in the Christian liturgical traditions.

While the commentary offered by both Brands is interesting, it's the illuminations that make the work. It was a pleasure just to turn the pages without reading any of the text. Although the calligraphy in some illuminations can be difficult to read, that shouldn't distract from the enjoyment since it is the way she imagines the words that creates the mood. (It's also easy to turn the page and read the text in the printed typeface.) Debra seeks to make these illuminations meaningful to contemporary readers by including images from modern times, for example, images that bring to mind the Holocaust, Israel or September 11. Other drawings focus on more traditional images, including pastoral imagery and representation of Jewish ritual objects.

Although I enjoyed Debra's comments on her choice of images, more often than not I just wanted to enjoy them without analyzing their meaning. I can imagine gazing at these works while someone else is reading or chanting the psalm. While all the illuminations were excellent, a few did stand out. The Hebrew illumination for Psalm 8, a multi-triangular star with images of the creation of the world, so swept me away that I resisted reading Debra's commentary since I didn't want to understand it intellectually. I also loved the Hebrew and English illuminations for psalm 122, which capture the essence of Jerusalem through several different types of illustrations.

Both "The Book of Psalms" and "I Will Wake the Dawn" offer insights to these poetic works that have spoken to generations of Jews and Christians. Those interested in a more scholarly work, though, would probably prefer Alter's book, while those seeking contemporary meaning may choose Debra's illuminations. However, I'm grateful to have both works on my shelf, which, taken together, allow me to appreciate the many levels of meaning the psalms offer.

