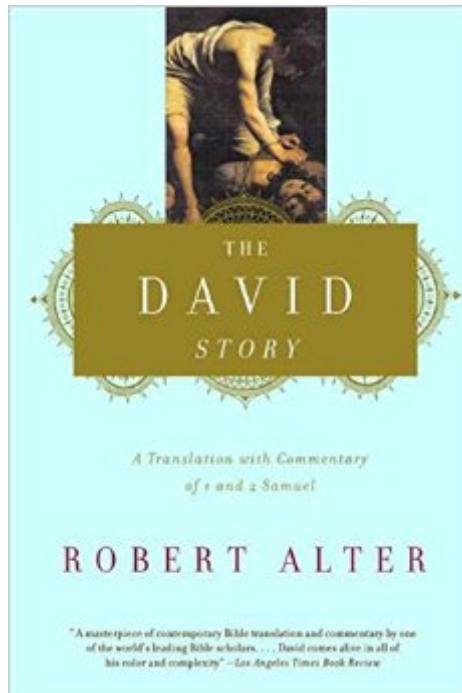


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The David Story: A Translation With Commentary Of 1 And 2 Samuel



Synopsis

"A masterpiece of contemporary Bible translation and commentary." •Los Angeles Times Book Review, Best Books of 1999 Acclaimed for its masterful new translation and insightful commentary, *The David Story* is a fresh, vivid rendition of one of the great works in Western literature. Robert Alter's brilliant translation gives us David, the beautiful, musical hero who slays Goliath and, through his struggles with Saul, advances to the kingship of Israel. But this David is also fully human: an ambitious, calculating man who navigates his life's course with a flawed moral vision. The consequences for him, his family, and his nation are tragic and bloody. Historical personage and full-blooded imagining, David is the creation of a literary artist comparable to the Shakespeare of the history plays. One map

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Customer Reviews

The stories of Samuel, Saul, and David are high points of Biblical narrative, and Robert Alter's superb new translation with commentary is geared to make the slightest nuances of the richly woven stories available to the reader who must read them in English. Both translation and commentary are first-rate: *The David Story* alerts the reader to puns and plays on words in the Hebrew, while Alter's own interpretations are enriched by his use of insights by other fine scholar/critics such as Fokkelman, Polzin and Sternberg, along with the traditional rabbinic sources. (A gentleman as well as a scholar, Alter gives credit where it is due.) The Book of Samuel comes down to us in a Hebrew text that is clearly faulty in spots, and it is also obvious that more than one

author has been at work. Some scholars, like Kyle McCarter, editor of the Anchor Samuel, looking for documentary origins, emphasize the breaks in the text, the inconsistencies that suggest that different traditions have been incompletely harmonized with one another. In accordance with his views in "The Art of Biblical Narrative" and his practice in his translation of the book of Genesis, Alter plays down the "documents" approach and instead emphasizes the skill of the final redactor of Samuel who wove those disparate stories into a single skein. For example, we are confronted by two disparate stories of how David comes to be introduced into Saul's court, first as a skilled musician in Saul's entourage and second as the shepherd boy from Bethlehem who comes from his flock and slays Goliath. Early in chapter 17, that harmonizer is at work when he tells us that "David would go back and forth from Saul's side to tend his father's flock in Bethlehem" (1 Sam 17:15). For me the problem is that the work of the redactor seems inconsistent. By the end of the chapter, Saul seems not to know who David is, for he asks his general, "Whose son is the lad, Abner?" How can Saul not know his own musician? How can he not know the shepherd boy to whom he wanted to lend his armor? Alter argues that "for the ancient audience, and for the redactor, these contradictions would have been inconsequential in comparison with the advantage gained in providing a double perspective on David," and Alter compares this feature of Biblical narrative with the competing versions of Greek myths. Alter may be right in this, but there may be a different sort of explanation here. Perhaps Saul is asking whose son David is, not because he does not recognize David, but because he now wants desperately to make David his OWN son. Saul has already been told by Samuel that no son of his will succeed to the throne of Israel. Recognizing in David his successor, with all the ambivalence one might expect, Saul is soon negotiating for David to become his son-in-law, offering him first Merab and then Michal from among his daughters. Even after they have become bitter enemies, Saul asks "Is this your voice, my son, David?" (1 Sam 24:17). Alter is as good at seeing the forest as the individual trees, and keeps us aware of how the individual stories of Samuel, Saul and David repeat and echo each other. These narrative patterns include the way the sons of Eli, of Samuel, of Saul, and of David rebel against their fathers and betray their principles. All in all, The David Story is a genuine feast for the mind.

At the beginning of the book of Samuel, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, prays wordlessly. The priest, Eli, accuses her of being drunk. Professor Alter points out that the priest misunderstands the situation and that this is a theme that will recur throughout the story - characters misunderstanding the actions and motives of one another. I was knocked off my seat because I had read this passage many times before and had never appreciated that Eli just didn't get it! Later, Eli will be physically

blind, but in this scene he is spiritually blind. From beginning to end, Professor Alter offers fascinating insights into the text. He analyzes it to bring out both specific detail and broad general themes. His explanation of the role of the redactor in putting together various sources to make a thematically cohesive story was new for me. There are multiple explanations about how David came to Saul's court which seem to be contradictory. But, if they are seen as illustrating different aspects of David's personality, then the contradictions no longer matter. Every page has interesting interpretations. I have mentioned just two examples of the sort of interpretation that occurs on every page of this book. As Alter points out, biblical Hebrew language is terse. Therefore every modern reader is able to project new ideas into the interstices of the language. This book is masterful at presenting new and plausible interpretations. I have read and reread this book. I recommend it to all, both those new to the story and to those who are familiar with it but want new insights.

Robert Alter covers I Samuel, II Samuel, and the first part of I Kings. With these books, the historical span of the life of King David is covered. Alter translates in such a way as to give us a better feel for the narrative that the original writers may have intended. Not only does he try to get the original words, but also the original tempo of the words that give it a lively effect. Throughout the text, he explains his choices when sources disagree. Each choice is explained linguistically and in some instances, poetically. This was a definite plus! Along with commentary on the translation, Alter explains how actions fit historically and geographically. He has definitely done his homework! Further, he explains some parts in modern analogy (a comparison to the mafia in a few instances), which really help the reader connect with the narrative. I would highly recommend this book for people wanting a good translation and a better understanding of the story and details of King David.

Most versions of the biblical text succeed either because of a superb translation or because of thought provoking commentary. David Alter gives the world one of those rare treatments that succeeds on both scores and provides a truly important addition to biblical scholarship. Alter's analysis of the language can be a true bridge for those who want to know the text but do not speak Hebrew. By pointing out to the reader places where the language is unclear, he lets him or her make the choice of what the text's real meaning is. Only the Everett Fox translation is equal or superior. As for commentary, Alter's literary critique of the text helps bring it to life and helps the reader understand how those in the period of redaction read the text. Alter has already made many noteworthy contributions to biblical scholarship. With this work, he assures his place in the illustrious pantheon of important biblical scholars.

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