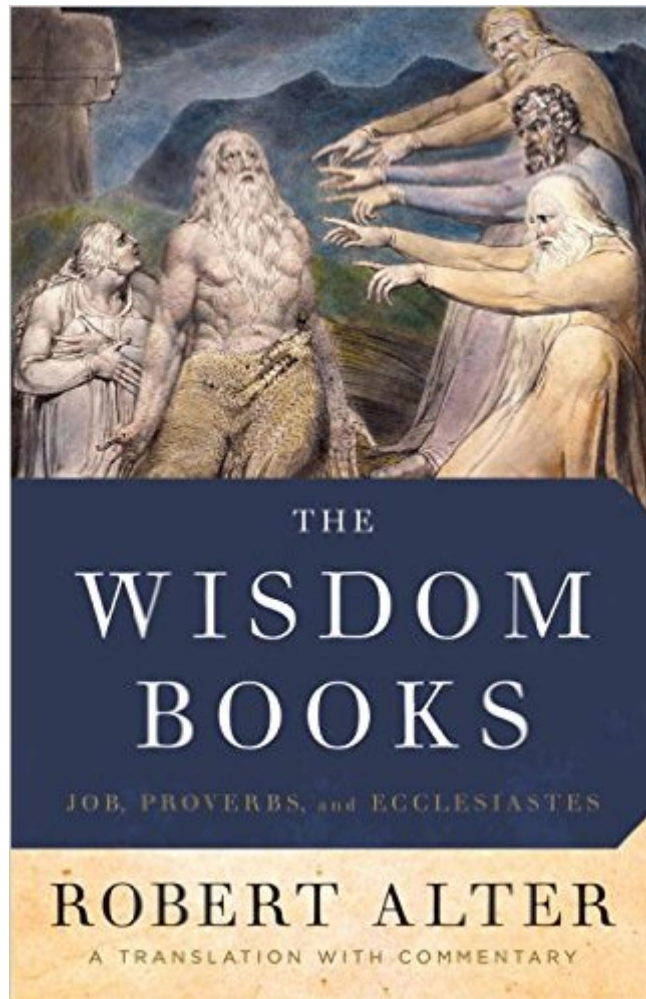


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The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, And Ecclesiastes: A Translation With Commentary



Synopsis

A magnificent new volume in Robert Alter's award-winning, landmark translation of and commentary on the Hebrew Bible. Here, in Robert Alter's bold new translation, are some of the most magnificent works in world literature. The astounding poetry in the Book of Job is restored to its powerful ancient meanings and rhythms. The account of creation in its Voice from the Whirlwind is beautiful and incendiary—an unforgettable challenge to the place of man in the universe. The serene fatalism that construes life as ephemeral and without purpose suffuses Ecclesiastes with a quiet beauty. The pithy maxims of Proverbs impart a worldly wisdom that is still sound and satirically shrewd. Each of these books conveys and undermines the universal wisdom that the righteous thrive and the wicked suffer in a rational moral order; together they are essential to the ancient canon that is the Hebrew Bible. In Alter's translation they regain the energy and force of the original, enhancing their ongoing relevance to the lives of modern readers.

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Customer Reviews

Alter's translation of the Wisdom Books is very impressive. Highly recommended. It is a great improvement on his translation of the Psalms, where every literary effect was subordinated to carrying over the compactness of the Hebrew. Alter is generally thought to be a better translator of prose than poetry, but he does a very good job here. There is new insight into these books on every page. The commentary too is always illuminating.

God still answers Job from the whirlwind (Job 38:1) in Robert Alter's new translation, but Qohelet's vanity of vanities'' is gone, replaced by ``Merest breath ... merest breath. All is mere breath" (Eccl. 1:2). The translation of this phrase is appealing in its simplicity and its attempt to stay close to the root meaning of the Hebrew, something that characterizes Alter's translation enterprise as a whole. The Wisdom books, three of the most difficult texts in the biblical corpus, present many challenges to the translator. Job, which tackles the issues of good and evil, reward and punishment, and divine providence, is renowned as a particularly difficult text that often defies understanding, let alone elegant translation. Proverbs is a collection of practical wisdom, delivered in short pithy phrases. Qohelet contains the somewhat cynical reflections of a world-weary thinker. It probably only barely made it into the canon, saved by the pious epilogue of an anonymous editor. Alter brings to the task of translation the well-honed literary sensitivity of a lifelong student of literature, and an obvious appreciation of the artistic ability of the authors of these works. Coupled with his intimate knowledge of the biblical corpus, which he has been studying, translating, and writing about for decades, the results are a translation that comes closer than most to capturing the poetry of the original. Combined with helpful introductions and illuminating commentary this volume is a welcome addition to the ever-growing corpus of English renditions of the Book of Books. Translation is a fussy business and no translation will please everyone in all its aspects. Nevertheless, Alter can be recommended as a reliable guide to these instructive but at times impenetrable books of the Hebrew Bible. Barry Dov Walfish

The Wisdom Books, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation with Commentary by Robert Alter. Robert Alter is, with James Kugel, one of the two leading writer / translators of the Hebrew Bible who write to a general, lay audience who simply wish to read parts of the Old Testament as narrative literature. As with his translations of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), The Story of David (1 and 2 Samuel) and The Psalms, Adler has selected books with the widest general interest both across religions and across the spectrum of non-religious readers. Aside from having that 'family resemblance' which lumps these three books together as 'Wisdom Books', they share the reputation for not being good fits in the Old Testament Canon. On the one hand, unlike 'the law and the prophets', books like Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, you will find selections from these works very seldom read from the lectern on Sundays. And yet, these works, especially Job and Ecclesiastes, have a broad presence in our secular culture. Job has been dramatized often and the character himself has appeared in fiction from John Steinbeck to Ken Kesey. The standard-bearer for the wisdom literature is the 8 verse

poem at Ecclesiastes 3:1 - 8, which Pete Seeger turned into the song 'Turn, Turn, Turn'. It may be part of the genius of Hebrew poesy that when you compare Alter's translation of these verses with the oh so familiar translation Seeger uses from the King James Bible, the poetic power remains the same, even when individual words are changed. But as soon as we leave this poem, the clarity of Alter's translation makes itself felt, when he replaces the KJV verse 9: 'What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?' with 'what gain is there for him who does in what he toils?' The underlying Hebrew, it seems, is meant to puzzle, but at least the 17th century phrasing doesn't compound the mystery. Other modern translators simplify as well, but they seem to lose the sense of puzzle and introduce plurals where the original text seems to be singular. My strongest curiosity with this translation was how Alter would translate that most famous of Biblical lines, Ecclesiastes 1:2, 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Every 1st semester seminary student knows that 'vanity' is not a good translation for the Hebrew word, 'hebel', but this translation started in the KJV, and one since has had the will to change it. It appears that way in the three top modern English translations of the Bible. Alter's solution is: 'Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.' I like that. But Alter's translation of verse 3 is also a big improvement, where he starts 'What gain is there for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun.' Compared to the standard NRSV translation, it places the 'gain' in the front, as the most important part of the verse, in contrast to the previous verse which had declared all gain to be 'mere breath'. Alter's work is not comparable to a modern professional commentary. In fact, for most of his 'analysis', he relies on the Anchor Bible commentaries of Michael Fox, who does his own translation of Ecclesiastes. But in the world of translation, Alter is superior to Fox, who turns 'vanity of vanities' into 'absurdity of absurdities', which runs counter to the concrete sense of the Hebrew. The unsung hero of these wisdom books is Chapter 28 of the Book of Job, nominated to be one of the 16 greatest poems in the Old Testament (James Kugel). I compared Alter's translation with Kugel's translation and as poetry, Alter wins hands down. And, as witnessed by the perennial popularity of the KJV, there are times when you simply want a very good poetic rendering of ideas. If Alter's translation does nothing else (and it certainly does more) its greatest service may be as a poetic alternative for Stephen Mitchell's translation of The Book of Job, which is less a translation than an adaptation, which has no chapter and verse references and leaves out many chapters. If, as I have now and again, wished to dramatize parts of Job, it is Alter's translation which will serve you best. One may even go so far as to see Alter's comments as 'director's notes' blocking out the dramatic aspects of these works.

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