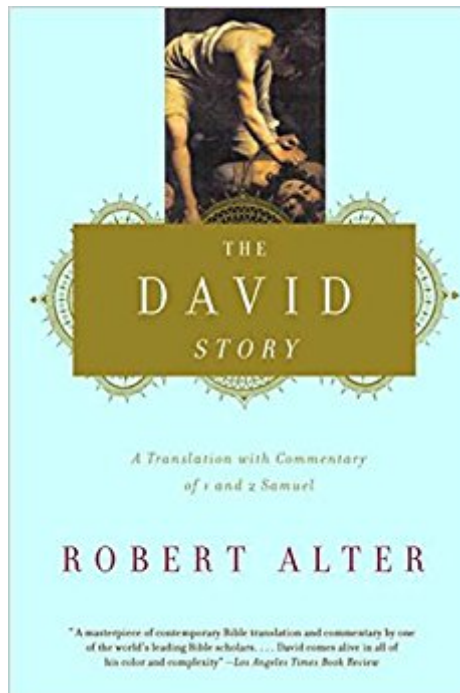




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# The David Story: A Translation With Commentary Of 1 And 2 Samuel



## 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

There are countless good reasons to read *The David Story*, Robert Alter's new translation of the story of King David (beginning in I Samuel and ending in I Kings 2). In the book's introduction, Alter contends that the story of David is "probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behavior warped by the pursuit of power." Alter's translation is more literal than the King James version, which makes his rendering of Scripture newly immediate and jarring. (When Samuel

anoints David in I Samuel 16, for instance, "the spirit of the LORD gripped David from that day onward.") This David Story is worth reading for the footnotes alone, which describe in vivid detail the mechanics of sheep-shearing festivals, sacrificial feasts, and other cultural phenomena that add depth and life to this familiar story. --Michael Joseph Gross --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In his latest effort, Alter (Hebrew and comparative literature, Univ. of California, Berkeley) has produced a compelling literary translation of the story of the beginnings of the ancient Israelite monarchy and of one of the Bible's most colorful characters. He argues hereAas he did previously, in his translation of Genesis (LJ 8/96)Athat this story is a literary whole rather than merely a stitched-together collection of independent bits. Alter's translation bears a resemblance to the King James Version (sans "thee" and "thou"), which he considers a true literary translation. But in many instances, his version surpasses King James's by more accurately reproducing the rhythm, syntactical arrangement, and word plays of the Hebrew text. His faithful representation of the Hebrew wawAtranslated as "and"Agives a sense of the story's forward movement and leaves some current translations, in which subordinate clauses often obscure the waw, seeming flat. This is a translation for readers; recommended for all collections.ACraig W. Beard, Univ. of Alabama at Birmingham Lib. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

After reading Robert Alter's work on the Pentateuch, "The Five Books of Moses," I noted at the time that for someone wishing to take up the Scriptures for the first time, it would be wise to do so under the literary and scholarly guidance of such a man of letters. This advice is equally true for "The David Story," the title Alter gives to his translation of the two books of Samuel.The novice reader will find the Samuel narrative a virtual seamless garment, predating Aristotle's "Poetics" but adhering to its principles of unity of motion and catharsis. Looking at the entire Judaeo-Christian canon of Biblical literature, one can make the argument that the Samuel books, plus the opening chapters of 1 Kings which follow, comprise the most tightly knit and psychologically gripping narrative of the Bible.Theologically speaking, the original author was probably of the Deuternomic school of Israel's history, a conservative outlook on Israel's history whose writings [including Deuteronomy itself] appeared much later than the events they covered, perhaps around 600 BCE when the Jewish monarchy had wandered far afield from the ideals of Sinai and terrifying consequences were massing just beyond the horizon.The Samuel narratives succeed the Book of Judges, itself a

summary of the two-hundred year era of uncertain Israelite governance whose leaders or "judges" juggled identities as prophets, military leaders, and community cultic organizers. 1 Samuel begins with the remarkable birth of the book's namesake, Samuel, who judged Israel throughout his life and was successful in recovering the pilfered Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines. In 1 Samuel 8 the old judge/prophet attempted a dynastic arrangement by establishing his sons in succession as judges, but the elders demanded a king. Neither Samuel [nor evidently the Lord Himself] thought this a wise move, though the hand of the Almighty is clearly in the selection and job description of young King Saul, Israel's first monarch.<sup>1</sup> Samuel introduces us to Saul, Israel's first true king and the Bible's first true Peter Principle personality: deeply insecure, probably mentally ill, and unnerved by a young up-and-coming fighter in his ranks who slew the notorious Goliath with a shrewd military ploy that obviously advanced his standing among the fighting men. David's rise in stature corresponds to Saul's increasing paranoia; that his own son Jonathan loved David as a brother certainly complicated matters. But almost in spite of himself Saul came to love David, too, in the kind of relationship that could only mean death for one or the other. The exiled and hunted David rallies his fortunes with the strength of God that Samuel's premature anointing had assured, and he returns from a foreign land with a savagely recruited army and eventually takes Saul's throne--though the denouement of Saul is Greek tragedy as much as Jewish history. The Deuteronomic author is respectful of David the king though it is important to note that some of David's finest hours were getting to the throne. In 2 Samuel, which covers David's reign exclusively, the King enjoys a communion with the Lord that is unique among all the kings of Israel. That said, his personal life is hardly saintly: he laments that the Lord has no proper housing but proceeds to build his own residence instead. Far worse, he commits adultery and murder in the Uriah/Bathsheba episode, and though he does take rebuke and mortal retribution through the intervention of the prophet Nathan, Alter sees the Bathsheba/Uriah events as the beginning of David's moral and political deterioration. As David approached death his power was so precarious that succession of Solomon to the throne was no sure thing. The story of that "royal succession," such as it was, is contained herein with considerable detail. Modern readers will probably see David's farewell advice to Solomon as "taking care of family business" akin to Vito Corleone's final counsel to his son, Michael. Alter fully appreciates the literary gem that is the Samuel narrative; his translation is sterling. But it is his commentary that draws special attention. A lesser scholar might have obstructed the text with too much technicality or worse, obscured the artwork with too much commentary. Alter always seems to find the right balance, as he does in his commentary on the Pentateuch. His own treatment draws the reader to those subtle points of the text or the narrative

that make the story compelling. His footnote on 1 Kings 1:11 for example [366], contrasts Bathsheba's courtly role in David's prime with her new and rather ambiguous position in David's old age--a critical piece of the puzzle in her son Solomon's ascension to the throne. Alter is a masterful commentator but he is equally successful in his restraint: he does not preach, he does not draw premature conclusions, and he does not tell his reader the "correct spin." He is that rarest of Biblical scholars, one who understands that God's revelation comes in the form of history and art. In that respect he would never intrude upon the reader's initial visceral reaction to this compelling drama, for the emotional or affective power is precisely the content of the Revelation. Not for nothing did the psalmist speak of "fear of the Lord" rather than "comprehension of the plan." As a Roman Catholic reader I am aware that as late as a century ago my tradition was guilty of "proof-texting." Perhaps in reaction to this methodology Catholic theology, particularly pastoral writing, has become guilty of excessive "theme texting" through the twentieth century. Alter subtly makes the case for Biblical experience, pure and simple, as the gateway to a wisdom that does justice.

Literary scholar Robert Alter follows up his translation of the Torah with a new translation of the books of Samuel. A Hebrew scholar and literary critic, Alter brings the techniques of secular criticism to biblical scholarship. This translation is not a book of exegesis, but a lucid, readable application of cultural and ethnic studies to scripture, in an attempt to make clear what has historically been muddled by theological intervention. Alter's Samuel text aims for a broad audience with applications distinct from the manner of religious translators, who sometimes perform remarkable literary gymnastics to sanitize scripture for their pious readers. This version is unashamed of the fact that David is not the well-scrubbed young hero of Sunday school and the Mitzvah, but is actually a deeply conflicted and troubling figure. Alter points out the almost-lurid language the biblical historian uses to describe the fall of Eli, Samuel, and Saul, followed by David's decline into a parody of himself. This translation makes use of multiple sources to reconcile the sometimes troubling Hebrew, and the extensive footnotes point out how much information has actually been lost to the passage of three millennia. Alter's attempts to trace multiple emendations of the master text are sure to be controversial, but these attempts point out just how conflicted the whole process of scripture inevitably must be. David, Saul, and Samuel are truly fascinating characters as they appear in this translation, but the most interesting figure may be the author who gave us the text we now celebrate. Alter attempts to trace the literary and theological choices which that author made in setting this powerful story down for posterity. Even for readers who have little interest in theological issues, the literary study in this translation is fascinating, controversial, and a

real education. Some readers are likely to balk at parts of this translation. The supporting critical literature Alter has chosen is more utilitarian than encyclopedic. And because there are some linguistic gaps in the master text, there are several conjectural leaps on the page, which Alter acknowledges in his copious notes. Anyone who takes a dogmatic attitude toward the translation of scripture is likely to balk at some of this scholar's less-than-pious decisions. But for improving comprehension of the original Hebrew literature for English-speaking audiences, Alter is a valuable addition to most libraries of study. His snappy, readable translation pairs well with his educational notes to create a book that is sure to spur discussion and more intense thought about scripture. And it also makes the ancient epic into a fun read.

Robert Alter is the perfect translator: well-annotated, accurate, imaginative. The David Story itself is one of the top 10 greatest stories in world literature, and Alter makes it highly readable and historically informative. This is one of 5 books I make a point to reread annually. Some of the poetry of the King James Version is timeless and one should be familiar with it, but Alter keeps the story all of a piece in masterfully precise prose.

When Robert Alter writes comments about the text and content of Bible stories, he speaks on the basis of broad knowledge of the language and culture of ancient Israel coupled with deep understanding of the literary forms that shape the stories internally and in relation to each other. Alter's "The David Story," translation and commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel is, among other things, a good read. Alter's translation is extremely readable all by itself. In his comments he reveals problems with the various manuscripts that contribute to translation challenges. He also applies literary analysis that assist the reader to hear the story as a story, not just a raw Bible fact. I highly recommend this book to anybody who is serious about studying the Bible or about telling Bible stories authentically.

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