

Reading the Psalms as Poetry Overview

In this seminar we will be learning from a new translation of the psalms by Robert Alter. We will get closer to the sense and feel of the psalms than any previous translation, even the venerable King James version. Reading aloud Robert Alter's superb translation makes our experience of the Psalms closer to the thoughts, feelings and concerns of the original psalmists, even though they were recited and sung over two thousand years ago. Reading his translation of the Psalms gives us the feeling that we are there as participants in the temple services and long, solitary night watches when they were first uttered.

The Hebrew language is quite different from contemporary English. The language is completely concrete and its expression is extremely concise. The translation employs very few abstract and polysyllabic words. You will not find the word "soul", for example, for the Hebrew word translated as "soul" really means "neck" or "throat". In psalm 69, for example, the psalmist cries

Rescue me, God , for the waters have come up to my neck.

The psalms are written in poetry, not prose. Most of us are aware of the parallelism of verses in Hebrew poetry. An equally important feature of the poetic structure of the Psalms is punctuated rhythm, overlooked by many contemporary translators, or misused in ancient renditions where the verses of an entire psalm might be cast in iambic pentameter. Such poetic effects do not work in the Hebrew psalms. Psalm 12:1, for example exhibits a jaunty punctuated rhythm:

Rescue, O LORD! For the faithful is gone,
for vanished is trust from the sons of man. (4 beats in each verset)

Though the Psalms are very different from contemporary poetic expression, they are not different in meaning. True, they are religious -- a psalm is a song or prayer to God and we live in a secular world -- but the psalmist sings about the problems, hopes, and joys of everyday life. Their feelings and concerns are little different from those of today. The psalmist experiences political and legal conflict, war and betrayal, oppression and exploitation, sickness and depression. We can take comfort from the daily recitation of the psalms, and also guidance and hope.