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Strong As Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, A Translation with Commentary

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Robert Alter’s award-winning translation brings new immediacy to five beloved books of the Bible.

The Song of Songs; Ruth; Esther; Jonah; and Daniel offer readers a range of pleasures not usually associated with the Bible. As distant in time from the Five Books of Moses as Updike is from Shakespeare, these Late Biblical books are innovative, entertaining literary works. Women often stand center stage. The Song of Songs is a celebration of young love, frankly sensuous, with no reference to God or covenant. It offers some of the most beautiful love poems of the ancient world. The story of Queen Esther’s shrewd triumph is also a secular entertainment, with clear traces of farce and sly sexual comedy. The character of Ruth embodies the virtues of loyalty, love, and charity in a harmonious world. Enigma replaces harmony in Daniel’s feverish night dreams. The apocalyptic strangeness of Daniel echoes in works from the New Testament’s Book of Revelations to the lyrics of Bob Dylan. And Jonah, the tale of a giant fish who, on God’s command, swallows the prophet and imprisons him in his dark wet innards for three days, ends with a question that lingers, unanswered, leaving the reader to ponder the many limitations of humankind.

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