BY DR HARRY FREEDMAN

The Book of Psalms — Poetry in Poetry

By Jeffrey M. Cohen
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Once, when I was much younger and didn't know much, I heard a poem on the radio. It was magnificent, and I listened intently, keen to know who wrote it. I was surprised and rather pleased to discover that I had been listening to a translation of Psalm 8. I'd no idea a psalm could be so sublime.

The Book of Psalms is astonishing. Much of its poetry is breath-taking, its literary techniques are frequently sophisticated, its use of language can be extraordinary. But unless one is well versed in classical Hebrew, it is so easy to miss it all. There is little as inelegant in daily prayer as a rapidly gabbled psalm.

Sometimes we can appreciate the beauty of a psalm by reading one of the standard translations. Psalm 23, The Lord is My Shepherd, is as stunning in English as in the original Hebrew. But such examples are rare. Any poem is hard to render stylistically in a different language. All the more so with Hebrew, which is much more concise than English; the first verse of Psalm 23 contains just four words in Hebrew, nine in English. Idioms also present a problem, how would you convert phrases like "mum's the word" or "gets my goat" into poetic Hebrew?

Not all translators set out with the same intent. Some translate literally, offering the closest possible meaning for each word even if it results in stylistic clumsiness. Others sacrifice the literal meaning, preferring to stick closely to the original sense. Many try to find a suitable mid-point between these two extremes. Few succeed with accuracy and grace.

That's why it is refreshing to pick up Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen's new translation of the Book of Psalms. He set himself the task of translating all one hundred and fifty psalms into rhymed verse, using contemporary, accessible English. Most of us would regard that as a challenge. Rabbi Cohen, believing that rhyme best conveys the power and vitality of the original Hebrew, describes it as a labour of love.

Rendering the psalms into rhyme demands a certain latitude with the text, which Cohen rightly describes as poetic licence. But it is never hard to discern the sense of the original Hebrew. Not for him Jerome's misconceived translation of Psalm 68:16 as a "fat mountain". The adjective that stumped Jerome, *gavnunim*, occurs nowhere else in the Bible but its root does. By translating it as "jagged" Cohen is consistent both with the root's meaning and the scholarship of other contemporary translators.

There is humour too. The King James Version's "Moab is my washpot" becomes, in Cohen's rhyme:

> There is little as inelegant in daily prayer as a rapidly gabbled psalm'

"Moab is a pot/ In which I shall wash/ Edom under my shoe / I shall squash."

In his scholarly introduction, Rabbi Cohen discusses the authorship of the Psalms, the perplexing question of what the various introductory headings signify and the various collections that are grouped together in the Book of Psalms. He stresses that the book is intended as multi-denominational, for both Jewish and Christian use.

This could cause difficulties, particularly with two psalms that feature prominently in Christian theology. Psalm 22, regarded as Jesus's lament at the crucifixion, contains an obscure phrase translated in Christian bibles as "they have pierced my hands and feet". Jewish translators see no proof that the otherwise unknown word *k'ari* has anything to do with piercing.

Psalm 110 is presented in Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews as a divine promise to Jesus; Jewish commentators consider it as an address to Abraham. It is testament to Rabbi Cohen's sensitivity that he translates both these verses in terms that are acceptable to either faith.

Such sensitivity suffuses the whole work. More than just a translation; the book is a religious text which stands on its own merits as a meditative and contemplative companion. It is a worthy addition to every library, even for those who are accustomed to reading the Psalms in their original language.

Dr Freedman's new book on Kabbalah is published in