

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Robert Alter holds a B.A. in English from Columbia College (1957) and a M.A. (1958) and Ph.D. (1962) in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. Before serving in his current position, Alter served as an English instructor (1962-64) and assistant professor (1964-66) at Columbia University, and as an associate professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at UC-Berkeley from 1967-1969. Since 1989, he has served as Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. In addition to *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter has authored twenty-one books with the majority being in the field of comparative literature.

Thesis/Purpose

The express purpose of the book is to “illuminate the distinctive principles of the Bible’s narrative art” (ix). As noted by other reviewers, this book is essentially a series of essays that introduce “the principles and techniques associated with a literary analysis of the Hebrew Scriptures.” The need for this work arose from the author’s conviction that the excavative measures of diachronic critics were insufficient to address the complex literature of the Hebrew Bible. According to Alter, a literary approach is vital to understanding to the narrative portions of the biblical text.

Outline of the Book

In chapter one, “A Literary Approach to the Bible,” Alter poses the question of whether or not “literary art plays a role in the shaping of biblical narrative” (3). If the authors of the biblical text used literary conventions to present their material, then the reader must know and observe the rules that govern such literature. According to Alter, this approach is superior to the diachronic methods of historical criticism that focused more on the origin of the text at different developmental stages than on the final form of the text as it is now received. In an attempt to prove this thesis and provoke interest in the rest of the book, the author uses chapter one to demonstrate how a literary approach to biblical narrative can help solve classic problems that source critics have failed to reach a consensus on the past several decades. The remainder of the chapter is used to explore the relationship of Genesis 38 to the rest of the Joseph story in the book of Genesis (3). This example is particularly crucial in terms of demonstrating the validity of the literary approach in narrative studies given the difficulties that it has posed for other approaches.

In chapter two, entitled “Sacred History and the Beginnings of Prose Fiction,” Alter seeks to differentiate between modern historical analysis and the Israelites supposed use of “prose fiction.” It is his contention that “prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative” (24). Depending on the context of the biblical author, Alter suggests that they employ prose fiction on a scale from “historicized fiction to fictionalized history.” Anticipating the

concerns that such a designation would raise, Alter attempts to clarify himself on page 32, writing

Let me hasten to say that in giving such weight to fictionality, I do not mean to discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all the God of history: the working out of His purposes in history is a process that compels the attention of the Hebrew imagination, which is thus led to the most vital interest in the concrete and differential character of historical events. The point is that fiction was the principal means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.

Other reviewers have noted that, for Alter, the concept of prose fiction represents a “sudden and marvelous leap forward in literature history.” Alter considers this form of storytelling to be the innovation of the Hebrew authors. Furthermore, he believes that this form of representation is fundamentally related to the Israelites’ monotheistic beliefs. Chapter two concludes with Alter re-iterating the need for a literary approach, saying

The Bible presents a kind of literature in which the primary impulse would often seem to be to provide information or at least necessary information, not merely to delight. If, however, we fail to see that the creators of biblical narrative were writers who, like writers elsewhere, took pleasure in exploring the formal and imaginative resources of their fictional medium, perhaps sometimes unexpectedly capturing the fullness of their subject in the very play of exploration, we shall miss much that the biblical stories meant to convey (46).

In chapter three, the reader is introduced to the concept of a “biblical type-scene.” Alter considers himself to be somewhat of a pioneer in identifying this convention in biblical literature. He refers to the “type-scene” as a “central... unrecognized convention in biblical narrative” (48). Alter implicitly defines the type-scene as “more or less the same story” being “told two or three or more times about different characters, or sometimes even about the same character in different sets of circumstances” (49).

In chapter four, Alter highlights the role that dialogue plays in the development of characters and “event” discernment in the narrative. Instead of simply reporting an event, Alter argues that the authors use dialogue to vividly portray the dynamic nature of biblical narrative. Alter writes, “Articulated language provides the indispensable model of defining this rhythm of political or historical alternatives, question and response, creaturely uncertainty over against the Creator’s intermittently revealed design, because in the biblical view words underlie reality” (69). Alter continues, saying “Spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that transpires in the Bible, that the Hebrew tendency to transpose what is preverbal or nonverbal into speech is finally a technique for getting at the essence of things, for obtruding their substratum” (70).

In chapter five, Alter explores how the biblical authors used repetition as a rhetorical device. Contrary to the suggestions of some diachronic critics, Alter argues that the repetition found in the biblical text should not be viewed as problematic but intentional. Alter advances his position on this matter by considering the “operation of the *Leitwort*” in biblical narrative. Alter records Buber’s definition of a *Leitwort*, which says

A *Leitwort* is a word or a word-root that recurs significantly in a text, in a continuum of texts, or in a configuration of texts: by following these repetition, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of the text, or at any rate, the meaning

will be revealed more strikingly. The repetition need not be merely of the word itself but also of the word-root; in fact, the very difference of words can often intensify the dynamic action of the repetition (93).

Following his description of Leitwort, Alter “proposes a scale of repetitive structuring and focusing devices in biblical narrative running from the smallest and most unity elements to the largest and most composite ones” (95). This scale begins with Leitwort then moves to Motif, which recalls “concrete image sensory quality, action, and or objects that occur through a particular narrative” (95). From Motif, Alter moves to Theme, which he defines as “an idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative” (95). Sequence of Actions is the next point on the scale for Alter. It refers to patterns that appear in “the folktale form of three consecutive repetitions... with some intensification or increment from one occurrence to the next, usually concluding either in a climax or a reversal” (96). The final position on the scale is that of Type-scene, which Alter covered at length in chapter three.

In chapter six, Alter illustrates how the biblical authors developed characters not simply with the use of dialogue and narrator detail, but also through the details that are absent. By leaving out these details, the biblical authors create an environment for the reader to dynamically respond to the details without the commentary of a narrator. Alter refers to this as the art of reticence.

Chapter seven attempts to acknowledge the contribution of the diachronic criticism to the literary analysis of the final form of the biblical text in terms of composite artistry. Alter affirms the composite nature of the Hebrew Bible, but does not view it as problematic to his literary approach. Instead, Alter believes that the composite nature of the final form of the text actually reflects the artistic intention of the redactors. For Alter, then, the final form of the text does not demonstrate a redactor’s slavish composition of multiple, untouchable sources, but rather, it reflects the work of a redactor that had freedom to arrange and edit his sources in a way that reflected literary intentionality.

Chapter eight brings the reader to a final discussion regarding the narrator’s role in the biblical narrative. Alter writes, “The ancient Hebrew writers, or at least the ones whose work has been preserved because it was eventually canonized in the biblical corpus, were obviously motivated by a sense of high theological purpose.” In the case of the biblical text, the narrators take on the perspective on omniscience; yet withhold details for the sake of dramatic effect. As Alter says elsewhere, the fact that the narrators theoretically have all the details at their disposal, they only provide what is necessary. Therefore, the details that are provided are important.

Alter concludes the book by summarizing the “kind of things one might usefully look for in reading the biblical narrative.” He lists words, actions, dialogue, and narration as important aspects of biblical narrative. He ends the chapter with a final encouragement to the reader to learn “to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories” so that they will come “to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.”

Critique

Alter’s work is an important book for biblical scholarship. He is obviously an expert in the field of comparative literature. He is an engaging writer, and he is exceedingly thorough in his demonstration of concepts. In fact, according to multiple other reviewers, nearly half of the book consists of examples and sustained exegesis of the Hebrew text. In this reviewer’s estimation, one of the strongest points of the work is Alter’s argument for the literary unity of the

final form. The benefit of his approach is that the actual text (and not what is supposedly behind it) gets the attention from the reader. Alter's work helpfully moves biblical scholars away from some of the trappings of source criticism and to an actual engagement with the text. This is to be applauded.

In addition to his contribution to the study of a unified text, Alter's chapter on the "techniques of repetition" is exceedingly helpful. Unlike most of the other chapters, this chapter has a strong internal structure that helps the reader define and apply its concepts. For this reviewer, this was the most helpful and well-structured chapter in the entire book.

Having briefly considered the helpful aspects of Alter's work, the reviewer now turns their attention to points of critique. The first point of critique regards the style of composition. At least for this reviewer, the inductive illumination of literary principles of interpretation was not helpful. While Alter criticizes the excavative methods of diachronic study, one nearly has to adopt such practices to simply follow the argument of many of his chapters. Compared to the works of men like Berlin and Walsh, Alter's work was not accessible to the "non-specialist." On this front, the book failed to meet one of its objectives. There were very few delineations of content throughout the chapters and most had weak conclusions. Admittedly, the convoluted structure of many of the chapters may have been the result of using too many multi-page examples. One must ask: At what point do examples cause more confusion than clarification? It may be that the book read this way given that many of the chapters originally appeared as independent essays.

A second point of critique would be with the assumptions that Alter makes with very little to any support. Of those assumptions, his position on the Israelites pioneering use "prose fiction" seems to demand more support. Alter asks promising questions at the beginning of chapter two regarding the nature of the Hebrew that the reader cannot help but hope for a well-reasoned and studied answer to, but, is sadly left with dismissive answers that are no answer at all. It may be true that Alter contends "that prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative," but this reviewer wants a compelling reason to abandon a clear reading of the text as history. Simply stating that the "sundry biblical narratives" are not "bound to documentable facts that characterizes history in its modern acceptance," is not enough. Alter owes it to the reader to explain what governs the modern acceptance of historical facts and what constitutes a documentable fact. Furthermore, what are modern readers of the Hebrew bible to make of the generations of biblical interpreters that came before Alter who did not embrace or even recognize this invention of "prose fiction?" Regardless of whether Alter agrees with them or not, shouldn't he at least be forced to reckon with their readings and understanding of the text? This reviewer recognizes that Alter is Jewish and does not recognize Jesus or the New Testament to be authoritative. However, the New Testament provides ample examples of 1st century commentary on the Hebrew bible narratives in a societal context that was highly influenced by Greek culture, which was steeped in the arts. Is it of no consequence that these 1st century authors, who would have been familiar with conventions like "prose fiction" and "type-scenes" from Homeric literature, never appear to analyze the Hebrew bible as if it were not "documentable fact?" At what point do modern readings and conventions become imposition on the text? While Alter rightly criticizes certain aspects of source criticism, he fails to apply the same scrutiny of evaluation to his own work.

In the end, Alter's book is worthy of careful and critical study. The fact that many of his conclusions are genuinely derived from a close reading of the Hebrew text commends it to all

serious students of the Bible, even those have fundamentally different presupposition about the historicity and intention of the biblical authors and their narratives.