

ACADEMIC ROUNDTABLE

Robert Alter and the Resistance to Theory

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Before there was Robert Alter the biblical translator and commentator, there was Robert Alter the literary critic, who published with Basic Books a pair of immensely stimulating and evocative monographs, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981, hereafter *ABN*) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985, hereafter *ABP*), along with a third book, *The World of Biblical Literature* (1992, hereafter *WBL*), a fascinating collection of largely occasional essays that extend his discussion of narrative and poetry and go on to critique specific works and methods of biblical scholarship and literary criticism, detailing the implications from his own perspective of views that differ from his. The translations, all published by W.W. Norton, begin in 1996 with his *Genesis*, and now include the Alter version of the book of Samuel (*The David Story*, 1999), the entire Pentateuch (*The Five Books of Moses*, 2004), and most recently *The Book of Psalms* (2007).

Everywhere the commentaries are richly detailed, whether original with Alter or carefully and generously attributed both to post-biblical commentaries (the Talmud and the Midrash, along with medieval annotators such as Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Nachmanides, and David Kimchi) and to more contemporary scholars and critics writing in English or modern Hebrew. In addition to enhancing our sense of the text's meaning, Alter uses his below-the-line notes to discuss, in ways that will be appreciated by the general reader as well as the scholar, some of the textual and translational cruxes that complicate the smooth rendering of the Masoretic Hebrew text into stately contemporary English. Alter's translation-commentaries are so judicious and extensive that teachers of Bible as Lit courses like me may feel they have little to add. Going through his annotations to one of my favorite episodes in Genesis, Cain's slaying of his brother Abel, the only verse Alter skips over where I tend to pause is 4:13, where Cain's reply to the LORD's judgment, "*gadol 'avoni minso'*" can mean either that Cain's "sin" or his "punishment" is greater than

he can bear, an ambiguity that suggests that Cain may be the first guilt-ridden penitent as well as the first murderer.¹ Alter evidently had less fun annotating the legal and ritual sections of the Pentateuch than the narratives and poetry, as indicated by the volume of commentary on different passages, but nowhere does he give short shrift to his texts. Even when Alter endorses a particular interpretation of some notorious crux (e.g. the vexed question of precisely what Moses and Aaron did at Meribah to be denied entry into the promised land, Numbers 20:12), he presents other solutions and arguments and leaves the reader with the sense of an open question. Alter's great gift is a critical "negative capability": he is willing to believe not only that he has not found the solution to all difficulties, but that the biblical authors may in fact not have meant for every narrative episode to be transparently clear.

Whatever giddy financial prospects may have induced Alter to undertake these arduous translations-with-commentary, they derive programmatically from his 1990 review of the first three volumes of *The JPS Torah Commentary*, reprinted in *WBL*. There Alter elucidates the internecine warfare within that multi-volume work, where the learned commentators (Nahum Sarna on Genesis, Baruch Levine on Leviticus, and Jacob Milgrom on Numbers) implicitly argue against one another's views of Jewish history and law, while all three commentators attack, on the basis of contemporary philological study, the 1962 JPS translation of the Pentateuch that was the occasion for bringing them together (*WBL* 136–137). In contrast, Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* has the virtue of consistency and coherence: translation and the commentary are mutually illuminating. My own interests being primarily theory of narrative rather than Hebrew philology, what follows will concern primarily the critical commentary to the first two translations and their relation to Alter's biblical narratology as he presents it in *ABN* and *WBL*. And it is at this level, what we might call that of the theoretical crux, that we sometimes find incoherence and inconsistency in Alter's readings and commentaries.

Sources and Redactors

From the very first page of his critical explication of the Bible, Alter has been leery of, or perhaps merely impatient with, the scholarly obsession with source criticism. Alter introduces his analysis of Genesis 38 (*ABN*, chapter 1) with a glance at Speiser's commentary in the Anchor *Genesis*, which consigns the Judah/Tamar chapter to limbo as a mere interruption to the Joseph story, which had begun with chapter 37 and is complete, really, only with Joseph's death in Genesis 50. For Speiser, chapter 38 is a fragment of pure J-narrative, etiologically explaining the birth of Peretz, the remote ancestor of King David,

intruded into a longer narrative about Joseph consisting primarily of two sources, J and E, edited together after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Alter's literary exegesis, by contrast, is an elaborate demonstration that, far from being an intrusion, the Judah/Tamar story links up with the Joseph story on both verbal and thematic levels, and, more important, contributes to our ethical and psychological understanding of why it should be Judah, rather than any of the other brothers, who is capable of pleading for the life and liberty of Benjamin as he does in Genesis 44.

It isn't exactly that Alter rejects the "Documentary Hypothesis" as such (as many Conservative and almost all Orthodox Jews would), although he does claim that "efforts to distinguish between J and E on stylistic grounds have been quite unconvincing." Rather he contends that academic scholars have now gone far beyond the basic notion with which he would concur, that the book of Genesis is a composite of three documents (J, E, and P), and have begun to see temporal layers within each of these traditions (a J₁, J₂, J₃, etc.), and have bickered with what he terms "diminishing returns" about where each source and each layer within the sources starts and leaves off (*Genesis* xli). In place of this uninformative hairsplitting, Alter propounded an exegesis where "the weight of literary interest falls upon the activity of the final redactor" (*ABN* 20, quoting Joel Rosenberg).²

That would be a coherent position, except that, just one page earlier, Alter had attacked the analyses of Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, which operate on the reader's interaction with the redacted text and ignore any hypothetical sources, arguing that "they tend to write about biblical narrative as though it were a unitary production like a modern novel that is entirely conceived and executed by a single independent writer who supervises his original work from first draft to page proofs. They turn their backs, in other words, on what historical scholarship has taught us about the specific conditions of development of the biblical text and its frequently composite nature" (*ABN* 19). Accusing Perry and Sternberg of treating biblical narrative like a modern novel is not merely unfair, but ironic in the light of Alter's own practice as a commentator on the narrative of Genesis and Samuel, whose success owes so much to his ability to illuminate the terse and subtle hints by which the biblical narrator portrays the complex personalities behind the rise to power and wealth of Jacob and David, the slow establishment of their family and line, and finally their pitiable degeneration into passivity, weakness, and senility, which in their different ways form the story arcs for both patriarchs.

Similarly, in his introduction to his translation and commentary on the Book of Samuel, Alter contends that "much of the richness and complexity

of the story is lost by those who imagine this book as a stringing together of virtually independent sources" (*The David Story* x). These hypothetical sources include an early "Ark Narrative" ending around 1 Samuel 7; a set of variously oriented traditions (some pro-Saul, most pro-David) concerning the accession of Saul and his adoption of and then conflict with the youthful David, ending with the establishment of the Davidic kingdom at 2 Samuel 5:12; traditions about the wars of David; and finally a Succession Narrative, elsewhere known as the Court History of David (2 Samuel 11–20 plus 1 Kings 1–2). Alter is willing to grant the idea of an originary Ark Narrative, so long as one is not thereby blinded to how skillfully it has been integrated into the David story as a whole, in particular to the parallels Alter sees between the aged Eli waiting in the gate of Shiloh for news of the war with the Philistines (1 Samuel 4) and the aged David waiting in the gate of Mahanaim for news of the civil war with Absalom (2 Samuel 18). But that is as far as Alter is willing to go: "The argument for an independent Succession Narrative, long embraced by scholarly consensus, is shakier. [Leonhard] Rost's contention that it is stylistically distinct from the preceding text is unconvincing, and his notions of style are extremely vague" (*The David Story* xi). And Alter ridicules the idea that there are "Saulide" and "Davidide" strands knitted together in the narrative of 1 Samuel.

This would sound like an argument for a pure redaction criticism, except that the ultimate redactor of Samuel was the editor of the Deuteronomistic History (the five books of the Hebrew Bible from Deuteronomy through Kings), and it is precisely this set of editorial contributions that Alter both minimizes and wants nothing to do with.³ Alter in fact wants us to separate out the Deuteronomistic moralizing in David's last words to Solomon—that he "keep what the LORD your God enjoins, walk in His ways, keep His statutes, His commandments, and His dictates and His admonitions, as it is written in the Teaching of Moses..."—from the practical content, urging Solomon to execute on his accession both Joab, David's general and nephew, and Shimei ben Gera, an opponent in the civil war whose life David had promised to spare. Alter argues in the introduction (*The David Story* xiii) and all over again in a lengthy note to 1 Kings 2:3-4 (374) that the phraseology quoted is taken direct from Deuteronomy and that no one else in the David story talks in such terms. Alter sees this as an editorial intrusion, with David's "real" last words found in verses 5-9. Alter seems to have lost track of the fact that the David story is not factual but textual, not reported but constructed, and that we experience no reality apart from the reality-effect generated by the narrative.⁴ Another problem that arises, once one begins

questioning the narrative, asking whether dialogue in a private moment is genuinely historical, is deciding where to stop. If the first part of David's last words are Deuteronomistic moralizing, the second part may be considered Solomonic propaganda, laying on David the guilt for the execution of Joab, a powerful man whom Solomon had ample reason to hate and fear, since Joab had supported the accession of Solomon's elder half-brother Adonijah.

Here, as with Genesis, we see a preference for redaction criticism over source criticism but with fatal reservations that render Alter's position incoherent. I don't doubt that the Deuteronomist had a hand in 1 Kings 2:3-4, but my own feeling, reading the redaction we have, is that David's last words are even more horrifying in their combination of hypocritical moralizing with brutal *raison d'état*. But I can say this partly because I take far more seriously than Alter does the dreadful things we learn about David and his reign in what is sometimes called the Samuel colophon (2 Samuel 21-24), which Alter calls "stylistically distinct" from the rest, an unusual claim coming from him, and one which, turning the tables, I myself find less than convincing.⁵

Twice Told Tales

A similar incoherence operates wherever Alter deals with the biblical narrative elements that are often called "doublets": episodes that seem to happen more than once in slightly different ways, as in Genesis 20 and 26, where Abraham and Isaac each tells King Abimelech that his wife—Sarah and Rebekah, respectively—is actually his sister, or as in Genesis 27 and 28, where Isaac transmits the Abrahamic blessing to Jacob twice, the first time by mistake, deceived by Jacob's masquerade as his elder brother Esau, and the second time with full intention. Doublets are usually explained in terms of the composite text: Jacob's deception belongs to the J document, about which P, from which the start of chapter 28 derives, knows nothing. But why does the redactor of these documents allow implicit contradictions to stand? Some biblical scholars argue that the redactors included as much as possible of each of their original documents. But Alter ridicules the idea that "the redactors" of Genesis or Samuel "were in the grip of a kind of manic tribal compulsion, driven again and again to include units of traditional material that made no connective sense" (*ABN* 20). Alter's lengthy note on the double blessing of Jacob in Genesis argues that the "tension" between chapters 27 and 28 is not necessarily a contradiction, that the two blessings agree with Isaac's character, accommodating what he cannot change, and that the Priestly writers have artfully combined two strands of tradition (*Genesis* 147). This accords with

Alter's chapter on "Composite Artistry" (*ABN* 131–154), which contends more generally that doublets can be complementary rather than contradictory, explicating a complex truth by seeing it from different directions. Thus the creation story of Genesis 1:1–2:3 evokes God as the transcendent ordering principle and man as made in God's image, while the complementary creation story of Genesis 2:4ff evokes God as an immanent principle of moral choice and man as a flawed moral and social being (*ABN* 141–147).

But of course there are more intransigent doublets whose contradictions can be harmonized thematically but which fail the test of story logic. David may be both the warrior king and *na'im z'mirot Yisroel*, the sweet singer of Israel, but, if David first meets Saul on the battlefield just before slaying Goliath (1 Samuel 17:31), then he cannot also have first met Saul earlier on, as a musician brought in to assuage the king's melancholy who becomes his armor-bearer (16:21). Alter suggests at one place that the solution lies in understanding that doublets function as alternatives, like conflicting sources in contemporary historiography. "We may still not fully understand what would have been perceived as a real contradiction by an intelligent Hebrew writer of the early Iron Age, so that apparently conflicting versions of the same event set side by side, far from troubling their original audience, may have sometimes been perfectly justified in a kind of logic we no longer apprehend" (*ABN* 20). This notion of a paleo-postmodern version of spatial form sounds like fun, to me at least, but the harmonizing maneuvers of the Samuel redactor suggest that in fact temporal contradictions were perceived then precisely as we perceive them now. The redactor's solution was to make the positions of shepherd, court musician, and armor-bearer into part-time jobs. "And David would go back and forth from Saul's side to tend his father's flock in Bethlehem," we are told at 1 Samuel 17:15, and later at 18:2, the redactor brings the Bethlehem job to an end: "And Saul took [David] on that day and would not let him go back to his father's house" (*The David Story* 103, 112).

The really problematic crux comes at 1 Samuel 17:55, when Saul seems not to know who David is, even after meeting him twice for the first time. Alter rejects pathological solutions like amnesia, and returns in his commentary to the argument that for the audience and for the redactor the contradiction was "inconsequential" because thematically justified (*The David Story*, 111). He who dares this far might dare further, though, by more closely reading the form of the question Saul chooses: it is, "Whose son is the lad?" (*ben mi zeh ha-na'ar*), repeated twice more at verses 56 and 58. Given that Saul already knows who *David* is, his insistent question about the identity of David's

father may be taken as expressing a wish to become the father of David, which he accomplishes, in the only way he can do so retroactively, by marrying one of his daughters to David.⁶ That desire is of course highly ambivalent, as one might expect from a man welcoming his already-anointed successor into the royal family. Saul first offers his elder daughter Merab, then reneges and gives her to Adriel, then offers his younger daughter Michal, who becomes David's first wife until she too is taken away after David's defection from Saul's court and given to Palti ben Laish. Nevertheless, Saul several times thereafter refers to David as "my son" (1 Samuel 24:16, 26:17, 26:25) although David reciprocates by calling Saul "my father" only once, at 24:11.

Against Theory

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946) may have founded the practice of analyzing the biblical text on an equal footing with secular narrative and poetic literature, but Robert Alter has surely been one of its earliest and greatest exponents. It was reading Alter's *ABN* that sparked my own fascination with the Bible, which has taken me down paths I could not have foreseen. And his readings of individual passages, whether I find his arguments compelling, as I usually do, are always phrased so as to bring the text to life in ways I can only envy. I have been concerned here with inconsistencies and incoherencies in Alter's theoretical position with respect to the biblical text,⁷ but I cannot explain them. Alter may be ambivalent about source studies because the fragments that the source scholars leave us with are not by anyone's definition literature, as the redacted text is. But at the same time he may feel a need to acknowledge the importance of source studies because this research project anchors the biblical text in history, dispersing the cloudy fantasies of orthodox fundamentalists who want to believe that Moses wrote the Torah at YHWH's dictation on Sinai or that David wrote all the Psalms, including ones that refer to an era over three hundred years after his death. That is only a guess, though, and perhaps a better guess is that Alter would wonder why I would suspect him of anything so out of character as having a theoretical position, since to Alter theory in most of its manifestations is anathema.

The last essay in *WBL*, "Scripture and Culture," first published in 1985 at the height of the "culture wars," attacks feminists, Marxists, deconstructionists in general, and for some reason Jonathan Culler in particular as "a product of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] of the 1960s who has settled in comfortably as a successful member of the academy at an Ivy League institution, carrying the banner of deconstruction as his own equivalent of the QUESTION AUTHORITY bumper sticker, and of late channeling the

revolutionary impulse of his early years into a strident version of feminism" (*WBL* 198–199). Alter sees in academic culture "the tendency...to deny the privileged status and the very distinctiveness of literary discourse, putting the plays of Shakespeare on a level with menus, graffiti, and bureaucratic directives" (202). With the literary canon gone, the Bible, as the canonical text par excellence, is clearly in danger as well, since it will keep its authority only with fundamentalists who will use it to shore up their bigoted prejudices, while losing traction with liberal humanists for whom it used to be the bulwark of a civilizing culture.

Nearly a quarter of a century later, the culture wars seem to have quieted down to occasional sniper fire, and it may be possible to separate the bad manners of some of the exponents of theory who offended Alter from the trenchant questions they provoked. The Bible is one of the great wellsprings of what feminists decry as patriarchy, but many feminists are now turning to the Bible, perhaps brushing it against the grain as Mieke Bal does in *Lethal Love*, in order to understand some of the voices and silences that emerge from the women who are there represented. Marx may have called religion the opiate of the people, but Marxists too have interesting questions to ask of the Bible, about the class structure of ancient Israel, for example, and how that structure is represented and critiqued in texts by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah. And even deconstruction, Alter's particular "abomination of the desolation," may have something to teach us about the knotted and gnarled quality of biblical passages that may seem to encourage, and then punish, suspicious readings.⁸ Doing theory can be advancing a radical social program, but it can also be nothing more radical than asking yourself hard questions about the readings and interpretations that make a text live for you, and your assumptions about texts, about reading, about history, that underlie those interpretations. Greatly as I admire Alter's readings, I think there is no danger in it for him if he were also to ask himself some of those hard questions.

Notes

1. There are only four widely scattered passages in the Tanach where *'avon* seems to mean "punishment" for a civil crime or a sin against religious law, and several hundred where it clearly means "wrongdoing" or "sin."
2. Alter cites "Meanings, Morals and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to the Torah," *Response* 9:2 (Summer 1975): 67–94. This Joel Rosenberg is the scholarly author of *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), not to be confused with the neoconservative evangelical Joel C. Rosenberg.

3. Alter “strenuously disagrees” with Robert Polzin, who finds the final editor’s hand manifested all through the book of Samuel (*The David Story* xii).
4. A differently constructed reality-effect entirely favorable to David is found in 1 Chronicles 11–29, which leaves out of the narrative or reworks all of David’s morally questionable deeds.
5. See Richter (2005). Alter does not explain what he means by “stylistically distinct,” but I hope he is not merely pointing to the fact that the Samuel colophon contains lists and psalms, which are found elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History, even elsewhere in Samuel.
6. Saul’s insistent question “*Mi*” (who?) may be connected as a form of wishful thinking to the biblical idiom “*Mi yiten li*”—literally, “Who will give me,” but best translated as the optative, “Would that I were....”
7. A third issue I have not space to take up is Alter’s position on whether the narrative portions of the Bible are best read as prose fiction or as history. Alter opts for fiction (*ABN* 24), whereas Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985), opts for history, more consistently and defensibly, I think, because the biblical text usually makes truth-claims, whether or not we take them seriously.
8. See, for example, my own analysis of the readerly paradoxes inherent in 1 Samuel 15 (Richter 2005, 289), which, I should add, is not in any strict sense deconstruction.

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