



At the Altar of Alter's Literary Approach: Great Strengths, but a Few Telling Misgivings

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Abstract: This essay constitutes a critical review and examination of Alter's unique literary hermeneutic to the interpretation of biblical passages, mainly the Hebrew Bible. It begins by sketching some of Alter's stellar academic credentials and the reasons he provided for developing his particular literary approach. The essay proceeds to place Alter's writings within its proper historical context in order to grasp its theological significance within biblical scholarship, particularly the key roles played by Muilenburg's contributions and problems associated with standard scholarly interpretations of Jewish history. Then the central features of Alter's distinctive literary analysis are critically examined and discussed point-by-point. First admitting the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text, Alter professes the aim of exposing the unique literary principles driving biblical narratives, arguing that the meanings underlying those narratives go far beyond the technical social-scientific skill level of most biblical scholars into ancient Hebrew literary conventions. Alter's major claim that the Hebrew Bible is best understood as theatrical art or prose fiction with biblical writers 'artfully' choreographing written texts to create indeterminacy of meaning is profoundly insightful and illuminating, and represents a major contribution to biblical scholarship. However, its strengths are complimented by a few telling weaknesses.

Keywords: literary approach; biblical interpretation; prose fiction; form-criticism; source-criticism; choreographing texts; literary conventions; fictionalized history; biblical prose fiction.

Introduction

The theoretical starting point of Alter's masterful work (2011) is to apply what he believes to be a distinctively 'literary' hermeneutic to the interpretation of biblical passages. By 'biblical', the author means the Hebrew Bible, not the Old Testament, although the clear implication is that the literary hermeneutic is indeed applicable there as well. Many individual chapters of this book, six out of nine, in fact, had been previously published in scholarly literary journals like *Poetics Today*, for example, some in revised form and some exactly as they were initially published (Rogerson, 1983, p. 194).

These previously published articles were put together with new material and organized into a coherent and specifically 'literary' framework. Given that Alter is currently an American professor of English and comparative literature at Berkeley trained at Columbia and then Harvard, it is not difficult to understand why he would prefer to apply a specifically 'literary' approach to the Old Testament. It is also not difficult to understand how he does so in such a profoundly skillful and moving way that the book remains a classic in its field, unsurpassed by modern biblical scholarship in my estimation.

From Alter's point of view, modern scholars of every stripe have engaged in largely "wretched interpretations" of the Bible¹. This rather condescending view of modern biblical interpretation led Alter to complete his own translation of the Old Testament, largely considered to be his crowning achievement. Beyond the 20-plus books he has written and countless articles in scholarly

journals, he has received many awards and positions for his literary work quite beyond the present book. For example, he is currently the president of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, and he was an active member of the Library of Congress Council of Scholars. He was twice a Guggenheim Fellow and a Fellow at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

As well, he was Old Dominion Fellow at Princeton University and Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities. An honorary doctorate in the Humanities from Yale university is among the plethora of honors, titles, and awards he has received, too numerous to fully list in this short book review essay, but still highly pertinent to the quality of this work and the legitimacy of its claims. His latest work, "The Art of Bible Translation" (2019), is expected to become the first and last word on biblical translation for many decades to come, perhaps yet another unsurpassable classic in its field.

Therefore, in terms of Alter's credentials, most assuredly he is much more than qualified to define and apply with expert acumen a literary approach to enlighten and expand our understanding of the meanings contained within biblical passages presumably from a first-century Christian point of view. So, then, what exactly are the contours of this creature called, the 'literary' approach to biblical interpretation? Before we dive into a reasonably acceptable answer to this question from Alter's perspective, we must place Alter's writings on the Bible within a proper historical context. Then perhaps we would be better able to grasp the origin and theological significance of that perspective.

The Historical Context

To properly understand the full import of Alter's unique contribution to biblical scholarship, we must realize that the interpretation of biblical text has always been a matter of hot debate and controversy in the history of the Christian faith virtually from its inception, first at the level of oral tradition followed by the level of the writing and printing traditions. These claims and counter claims about the correct way to interpret key elements of the Christian faith system based on particular biblical texts continued into the contemporary era especially at the secular scholarly level.

In terms of the specific historical context of debates and controversies surrounding interpretation of Biblical text that were in place at the time of Alter's contributions, we know that Muilenburg (1969) played a paramount role. A doctoral graduate from Yale in 1926, he was a pioneer translator in the field of rhetorical criticism of the Old Testament who later played a key role in the (1952) translation of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. As far back as at least 1924, Muilenburg was attempting to forge a new 'literary approach' to biblical interpretation which by 1969 came to be termed "rhetorical criticism" (Sprinkle, 1989).

Along with many others, Muilenburg became part of the strong scholarly reaction at the time against the dominant much more 'technical', scientific, secular, and scholarly methods of biblical interpretation, especially form- and source- critical approaches directed toward the Old Testament. Since these latter biblical interpretative approaches were also strongly associated with historical-critical reconstruction methodologies, there was a strong reaction against these methodologies as well.

In terms of the form- and source- critical approaches, Muilenburg argued that although they were fruitful methodologies, they also contained some serious weaknesses. Among the many harsh criticisms Muilenburg made was the strong proclivity of form criticism to emphasize the typical and representative features of biblical texts, thereby losing sight of personal and unique features. Moreover, he argued that this particular weakness operated in practice to obscure the thinking and intentions of the biblical writers themselves especially since textual 'form' is irretrievably and integrally connected to its 'content'.

A second weakness he identified was the tendency of form critics to lump together examples of pure genre with instances of the same genre where the form is modified. In Muilenburg's mind, this kind of approach also functioned to obscure versatility and artistry in form usage by biblical writers. Another major concern for Muilenburg was to identify the specifically 'literary' structure within the biblical text, how the textual parts formed and tied together as an organized whole, how specifically 'rhetorical' devices were employed to express sequence and movement within the biblical narrative (such as parallelism, chiasmas, word or line repetition, acrostics, stanzas, use of particles, and so forth), and where and why shifts and breaks occurred in the biblical writer's thought.

This is where Muilenburg meets Alter or vice versa. His argument here was that paying careful attention to such ways of composing or so-called 'choreographing' biblical text reveals, at the very least, the high-level skills and artistry of biblical writers ². Although Muilenburg's own rhetorical-critical approach to biblical

texts was heavily criticized at the time for having a rather inadequate or undefined formulation of rhetorical criticism insufficiently distinct from the form-critical approach he was negatively evaluating, it did in fact give rise to more adequate and methodologically detailed literary approaches by others, one of them being Robert Alter's singular attention to "the artful use of language" (Alter, 1981, p. 13).

Enter Stage Right Alter's Literary Approach

This approach to biblical interpretation leads Alter to ask a series of questions not typically asked by biblical scholars such as questions about: attaching motives or feelings to characters in some cases but not in others; minimizing versus detailing some actions and not others; shifting time-scales of events drastically versus gradually; introducing dialogue at certain points and not at other points in a biblical narrative; selecting and assigning specific words to specific characters and not others; noting particular identities of characters at certain points in the narrative and not at other points; timing of the start of literal repetitions and noting variations in repeated verbal formulas of the same repetitions; and so forth. Alter suggests it is precisely these sorts of questions that allow for identification of the uniquely 'literary' features of the redaction of biblical texts.

So, then, if this is such an important key or tool for unlocking the meaning of ancient biblical texts, why wasn't it pursued before Alter? He says it tended not to have been done by biblical scholars before primarily because they assumed the Bible to be composed of a mosaic of separate documents, not documents weaved together as part of an organized integral framework of the Christian faith system. Given this foundational assumption, these scholars tended to devote time and energies to detective work, that is, trying to discover or uncover hidden original meanings to be found in the life situations (various 'contexts') within which biblical texts were employed as well as the varied sources from which lengthy biblical texts had been assembled. The result? Biblical scholars could not fully appreciate the specific 'literary' features of redacted biblical text (Sprinkle, *ibid.*, p. 302).

What's more, in an earlier article published way back in 1924 just after graduating from Yale with a Ph. D in English Literature, much of its central ideas later included in his seminal 1981 book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter says that all these weaknesses previously characterizing biblical scholarship have functioned to water down and even undermine the majority of writings on American Jewish history ³. There he thoroughly reviews all the best texts in biblical scholarship one by one concluding, however, that "the general level of work" they supposedly represent "is absolutely no reason to "celebrate the beginning of a new era in the scholarly study of the American Jewish past". So, then, perhaps that's why Alter complained in print as early as December 1975 that there existed little, if any, "serious literary analysis of the Hebrew Bible" (Alter, 1975, p. 1).

This is the historical context within which Alter's seminal contribution to biblical scholarship should be read and understood. It remains now to outline in more detail the general contours and primary characteristics of his literary approach.

Central Features of Alter's Literary Analysis

Alter begins his literary analysis of biblical texts by first admitting the Bible as a sacred text, but one that has great literary

significance. As such, what he wants to do is to provide a well-functioning literary compass to the biblical reader exposing or extracting the distinctive literary principles driving the biblical narrative. He hopes to demonstrate to biblical scholars as well as anyone seriously concerned about extracting accurate meanings from biblical texts that the literary subtlety and craftiness of Hebrew narratives go far beyond technical social-scientific skills.

In order to accomplish this task, he divides his book into eight chapters with a brief preface and lengthy conclusion. The first chapter demonstrates the usefulness of his literary approach by applying it to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. He applies his method of literary analysis to demonstrate an interconnected textual unity that effectively countered prevailing scholarly views that it lacked any continuity at all to the Joseph narrative. By "literary analysis", he means "the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else" (Alter, 1981, p. 11).

Next, Alter asserts that prose fiction was the most effective way of presenting and communicating history to others at the time. What the biblical writers do is an artful or imaginary reproduction of a past event to make it easier for the listeners or audience to comprehend. During biblical times, the chief means of communication to audiences, especially large ones, was a sort of theatrical performance. What this means is that biblical writers tended to employ a theatrical writing motif in communicating the import of past historical events, activities, actions, and characters so that the people who were listening or reading could acquire the details as close to the original version as possible. For this reason, biblical writers would tend to encase their writings within a performance format almost as if they were writing a script for re-enactment of a play or a movie by modern terms, if you will ⁴.

That's why Alter states that the 'art', albeit theatrical art, of biblical prose fiction is really the art of treating biblical history as a dramaturgical play, but not in a negative condescending, farcical, or comedic way. Quite the contrary, to biblical writers and their audiences, life was anything but farcical or comedic. Rather, life was the material acting out of a serious relationship between God and humanity, all of it founded upon the doctrine of Creation.

So, when Alter uses the expressions "historicized fiction" and "fictionalized history" he is explicit in stating that he does not mean that Biblical content is not historically factual or untrue (Ibid., pp. 26-7, 30,36, 40, 47). He means that biblical writers are trying to place their writings within a form that promotes easy acquisition of details and a solid wholistic and stable remembrance of highly significant events, activities, and people in the history of the relationship between God, Israel, and humanity.

Alter then identifies what he describes as a "grid of conventions" (ibid., p. 55) through which biblical writings operate. Through these so-called conventions, we can determine the unique literary features of biblical texts such as different types of repetition patterns, symmetry, contrast, verisimilitude, exaggeration, directional clues, etc. This is where Alter begins to fill in the gaps in the literary groundwork or "grid" biblical writers used: repetition, composite artistry, characterization, type-scenes, and narration and dialogue, each one of which can be broken down into a number of classifications or sub-types, if you will.

Alter's main argument here is that contemporary biblical scholars and Bible readers generally, many times find the Bible difficult to appreciate or comprehend partly because they have "lost most of the keys to the (literary) conventions" (Ibid.) biblical writers used to frame their narratives. Then he uses the different betrothal scenes of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and so forth to demonstrate how knowledge about the biblical convention of "type-scenes" identified earlier allows the modern reader to understand all of these "betrothal" scenes mainly in reference to each other as an integrated whole rather than as separate isolated events, some much more important than others.

The subsequent chapter shifts the focus of analysis from demonstrating the applicability of Alter's "type-scene" literary convention and its usefulness for achieving a better understanding of biblical texts to showing how biblical writers are not really interested in the activities of the cast of characters when they are employing the biblical literary convention of "narration and dialogue". Instead, these writers want to emphasize the differential responses of these characters within dialogue and narration-through-dialogue (Ibid., p.87). In other words, in dialogue the biblical scene or event or activity is viewed and incorporated almost fully into verbal dialogue.

The underlying foundational assumption here is that all that is significant about a scene or character or event (or whatever the case may be) can be incorporated without significant loss or change of meaning into dialogue. Absolutely nothing at all is permitted to enter the "scene" that pulls the listener's or reader's attention away from the dialogue (Ibid., p. 88). This is why there is a distinct preference in biblical dialogue for "direct speech" over "indirect speech" (Ibid., pp. 83-85). This is what Alter calls the "bias of stylization" in biblical dialogue.

The nature and function of repetition as a biblical literary convention if the focus of analysis in Chapter 5 where Alter introduces readers to the German concept "Leitwort" or the "purposeful repetition of words" or "word-roots" as a "distinctive convention of Biblical prose" (Ibid., pp. 116-117, 120-122), a concept first developed by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in the mid-1960s. Moving from the smallest to the largest frequency of repetitions per biblical text under analysis, Alter then creates a scale of repetition from Leitwort to motif to theme to sequence of actions to type-scene (Ibid., p. 122).

The general point Alter wants to make here is that there are different "techniques of repetition" (Ibid., pp. 111-141) in biblical narratives. Each one of these techniques when used by themselves and even more so when they are executed in framing a biblical narrative are intended to convey differential levels and types of meaning. The point Alter wants to make is that the biblical reader at the time is flawlessly sensitive to picking up even the slightest variations in repetitions of words and recognizing significance in meaning.

Alter addresses the biblical literary convention of characterization in Chapter 6. Contemporary ideas about characterization tend to be revealed by the novel. But to the biblical Hebrew, characterization is illustrated through narrator commentaries, actions, dialogue, and even what Alter terms is "drastic selectivity" (Ibid, p. 158). What Alter means here is that the Hebrew narrator within biblical dialogue or speech often states things to make the listeners or readers feel like he is letting us in on

a profound and privileged divine secret. That is, we are brought to believe that he is selecting or favoring us with God's view of a particular character or action, or what Alter coins, "omniscient narration" (Ibid.). He shows the fruit of this concept by applying it to the example of Michal portrayed now as David's wife and later as Saul's daughter constant alternating style.

The final biblical literary convention identified by Alter is composite artistry, essentially meaning that the biblical writer wants the listener or reader to view two events, or parties, or "agencies of destruction" as one or as "mutually enforcing" (Ibid., p 170). In the stories of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16, Alter shows that the biblical writers wanted to portray the attempt to seize power in one event and the usurpation of priestly function in another event as indicating one event, namely, the rebellion against God's authority, not as two separate events.

Then Alter uses the example of Joseph's story in Genesis 42-43 to demonstrate how the biblical literary convention of composite artistry is also used on occasion to combine duplication with apparent contradiction (Ibid.). The basic general point that Alter is trying to make in this chapter is that biblical writers are quite capable of moving beyond the "fusion of views in a single utterance" of speech in dialogue to the incorporation of "multiple perspectives" into a "montage of viewpoints arranged in a sequence" many times hierarchically ordered in terms of meaning.

In the last chapter, titled "Narration and Knowledge", Alter wants to take readers back full circle to the centrality of narration in the biblical literary motif. Here he shows that the biblical writer is often adopting the role of "omniscient narrator" within writings in order to portray the divine significance of knowledge. From the point of view of biblical listeners or readers, "the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows..." (Ibid., p. 195). Again, Alter discusses the story about Joseph but this time the final scenes in Egypt with the brothers and the putting of silver into their bags without them knowing to convey insight into deeper meanings about God and the enigmas of the creaturely status of human beings. As Alter points out emphatically about Joseph:

"From time to time, a human figure is granted special knowledge or foreknowledge, but only through God's discretionary help: Joseph can interpret dreams truly, as he repeatedly affirms, only because the interpretation of dreams is the Lord's. Various...biblical protagonists are vouchsafed promises...but the future...remains for the most part veiled from them...." (Ibid., p. 196).

But partial access to divine vision or wisdom is not deletion of the boundaries or restraints of human knowledge, to be sure. The biblical message here is that there is absolutely no escape from the limitations and bondage of human existence save through the revelation of God's presence and will, which is a mystery.

Final Thoughts at the Altar of Alter

Alter's final thoughts in the concluding chapter are revealing, if not shocking from a scholarly point of view. To say the least. Those who view themselves as diehard Christians from every stripe as well as biblical scholars who may view themselves as some version of such would do well to ponder Alter's ruminations here. He begins by re-stating the obvious: conscientious biblical readers, students and scholars can benefit a great deal by applying usable literary tools to scrutinize and critically assess biblical texts

which biblical writers themselves used at the time of writing in order to reach a higher-level accuracy of meaning of those texts to those writers and their audience of listeners and readers.

Typically, however, what has occurred far more often, biblical scholarship even when adopting a more literary approach has elaborated formal theoretical models or systems to impose upon biblical texts, or they have been "dedicated to performing on the given text virtuoso exercises of interpretation that are in principle inimitable and unrepeatable, aimed as they are at undermining the very notion that the text might have any stable meanings" (Ibid., p. 221).

Perhaps A Few Misgivings

All of this having been said is not to say that Alter's 'literary approach' does not have its downsides as Geller (1984), Leithart (1992), and a few others have pointed out. There are some problems associated with both the literary view of the Bible as a primary hermeneutic of understanding biblical meaning and Alter's distinct version of the literary approach. For example, Alter's Jewish ethnicity leads him to discount the important link between the Old Testament and the New Testament Christ.

This crucial link does not become a part of Alter's literary interpretative enterprise when he examines texts from the Old Testament. For this reason, to treat the Old Testament as simply a genre of prose fiction becomes entirely problematic for most Christian biblical scholars. Inconsistencies in his criticisms of form and especially source criticism are also problematic since, for the most part, he does not seem to reject their presuppositions even though they may work against his own literary interpretation of biblical text (Lawson, 1983).

From a New Testament Christian scholarly point of view, it is difficult to accept Alter's contention that the Old Testament is prose fiction history or fictionalized history. The assertion that there are standard intentional built-in or customized internal contradictions in the Old Testament as part of an ancient Hebrew prose writing style is difficult to swallow, particularly for readers outside of the Jewish cultural and linguistic context. These customized internal contradictions purposefully result in the indeterminacy of meaning, and its source are the theological tensions within ancient Judaism itself. The implication is that when biblical scholars are not Jewish, the interpretative task becomes obfuscated, seriously misdirected, or illegitimate.

So, then, the assumption is that ancient Hebraic biblical writers are artfully playing with texts intentionally in order to create indeterminacy of meaning so that, ostensibly, meaning can be projected to reshape or reformulate itself over time. One problem with this claim is the difficulty that biblical scholars of any cultural or linguistic ilk face in attempts to empirically and reliably verify its claims. Another problem, perhaps, is its impact upon the process and results of biblical interpretation itself. Presumably, the central aim of biblical interpretation is to arrive at an accurate and reliable interpretation of biblical texts.

However, if the meanings of biblical texts are purposefully or 'artfully' indeterminate, this would seem to defeat the entire *raison d'être* for engaging in biblical interpretation in the first place. What's more, standing at the altar of Alter's literary approach would seem to result in the relativization or perhaps even the dissipation of the absolute truths proclaimed in the Bible

viewed as ‘sacred’ since they also become a part of the intentional ‘artful’ design of biblical writers. Just something to consider.....

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¹ It’s interesting to note here that N.T. Wright basically shares Alter’s contemptuous view of contemporary biblical scholarship, although from quite a different theological point of view (Wright, 2003). For more detailed exegeses on the corruption claim about modern biblical scholarship, see Berman’s eloquent critical essay and Levenson’s insightful commentaries on it (Berman, 2017).

² The choreography metaphor as a literary device employed by ancient biblical writers is arguably unacknowledged within modern biblical scholarship due partly to a misperceived view of the skill level of biblical writers. It is simply assumed that they were primitive in their writing abilities, but the ability to ‘choreograph’ text would seem to imply a much higher skill than mastering grammar. The etymology of choreography finds its meaning in the artful design or sequencing of steps and movements in dance theater, commonly ballet or staged dance. When biblical writers ‘choreograph’ biblical texts, they are effectively making the text dance on the pages they are writing. (See Meglin and Brooks (2016) for an interesting discussion about textual choreographies.)

³ It should also be kept firmly in mind that a method of biblical interpretation developed largely out of concerns to remedy the perceived inaccuracies of biblical scholarship about Jewish history is not necessarily a biblical hermeneutic developed to capture the profound hidden spiritual meanings contained within ancient biblical texts.

⁴ To say that the Hebrew Bible is ‘sacred’ prior to literary analysis and then subsequently claim that biblical texts essentially represent imaginary theatrical reproductions of past events or prose fiction or fictionalized history is inherently problematic, not just a poor choice of words. If the result of the application of Alter’s literary approach is fictionalized history, then clearly the strong implication is that the Hebrew Bible is not the divinely inspired word of God but the artful design of biblical writers. Alter does not deal effectively enough with the inherent contradictions between pre-analysis contentions about the sacredness of the Hebrew Bible and the actual results of applying his unique literary hermeneutic.