

Alter's *Art of Biblical Narrative* and Oral Biblical Storytelling

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Robert Alter's *Art of Biblical Narrative* is a classic in the literary study of biblical narrative.¹ While Alter specifically addresses *Hebrew* narrative, indeed "classical" (pre-exilic) Hebrew narrative,² I have found little difficulty in applying his methods and insights to biblical narratives written in Greek.³ And while Alter approaches his biblical texts *as texts*, in which literary art plays a crucial role, "determining in most cases the minute choice of words and reported details,"⁴ I have found his insights remarkably helpful in working up oral tellings of biblical stories. How is it that a book with such firmly textual focus has become such a valuable resource for me in doing and teaching oral biblical storytelling? One possibility is that the features highlighted by Alter are not in fact unique to written artistry, but characteristic of oral narrative as well. Another possibility is that the book is helpful to me because verbatim biblical storytelling, as often practiced in NOBS, is still saturated with the ideology of written textuality.⁵ In this paper, I will revisit Alter from the standpoint of questions about the balance of oral and literary features in classical Hebrew narrative, and the same balance in our own "by heart" biblical storytelling.

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981).

² Alter, p. ix. "Classical" Hebrew narrative would include the Torah strands referred to by many scholars as the "J" and "E" narratives, Judges, and the books of Samuel. I obviously disagree, to a first approximation, with Alter's statement that it "does not seem...that these two bodies of ancient literature [the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament] can be comfortably set in the same critical framework."

³ I studied Greek narrative most intensively in my 1992 Vanderbilt dissertation, later published as *Gardens in Babylon: Narrative and Faith in the Greek Legends of Daniel*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). My work with Second Testament narratives has been less formal, in conjunction with curriculum writing, teaching Greek, storytelling, and conversation with my colleagues Ron Allen and Holly Hearon.

⁴ Alter, p. 3. He does note, however, that "the narratives were written chiefly for oral presentation," p. 90.

⁵ I thank Holly Hearon for her persistence in sensitizing me to this question.

Biblical Style and Characterization

Chapter 1 of Alter's book calls our attention to the same narrative features highlighted by Auerbach's famous study of Genesis 22: brevity, "indeterminacy of meaning," and the impact thereof on characterization. "The biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character." He sees "an abiding mystery in character as the biblical writers conceive it....This unpredictable and changing nature of character is one reason why biblical personages cannot have fixed Homeric epithets."⁶ My first impulse is to agree not only on the succinctness and roundness of biblical characterization, but on the distinctiveness of this over against both oral storytelling and other ancient written stories. Even a character like Isaac, whose historicity is suspicious indeed, tends to come off realistically, over against what I perceive as a tendency of oral tradition to flatten characters into standard types. Alter concurs: "The national archetypes have been made to assume the distinct lineaments of individual human lives." He specifically characterizes this as a feature of "the particularizing imagination of the individual writer" over against "the immemorial inventions, fabrications, or projections of folk tradition."⁷

To what extent, however, might cultural distance account for our sense of the mysteriousness of characters' motives, and how much is the "roundness" and "development" of characters a function of our own interpretive generosity? I recall Lord's comment about too-careful reading of metrically determined epithets in Homeric poetry: "One might even term this kind of criticism 'the pathetic fallacy' in that it attributes to an innocent epithet a pathos felt only

⁶ Alter, pp. 12, 22, and 126; Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," Chapter 1 in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957). Alter discusses Auerbach's study on p. 17. Alter's interest in the "rigorous economy" of biblical narrative resurfaces in the title of Chapter 6, "Characterization and the Art of Reticence."

⁷ Alter, pp. 42-43.

by the critic, but not acknowledged or perhaps even dreamed of by either the poet or his audience.”⁸ Were Alter to give a transcribed telling of a Native American Coyote story the same careful treatment that he gives to Gen 38, might it yield similar treasures? On the other hand, in reading the Greek Daniel narratives with a generosity and attention to detail comparable to Alter’s (and partly learned from him), I discerned considerable nuancing in the tellings, but *not* a particular development of Daniel’s character, so the method does not inevitably yield round characters.⁹ This might support Alter’s notion that post-classical biblical narrative has a different character than the early material—do my Second Testament colleagues find in gospel narratives a characterological depth like that which Alter sees in Tamar’s story?

Meanwhile, one might suppose that biblical personages do not have fixed Homeric epithets because they do not *need* them. If epithets are, as Lord suggests, a product of oral-formulaic performance demands, we should not be surprised to find freer naming of characters in prose.¹⁰ Furthermore, the nuanced shifting Alter observes in naming (such as the varying references to Michal by name, as “Saul’s daughter,” and as “David’s wife”) is not unique to carefully crafted written work, but observable in ordinary spoken prose: “Just you wait until *your father* gets home... Harry, do you know what *your son* did today?” (Note also how paraphrasers of biblical stories shift the naming of characters, usually in the direction of more pious presentation.) I would then judge that even significant-seeming shifts in character-naming probably have little to do with the balance of oral and literary qualities in the narratives.

⁸ Lord, Albert B, The Singer of Tales (New York: Atheneum, 1971, originally published by Harvard University Press as Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24, 1960), p. 66. Others, of course, would charge Lord himself with intentional fallacy. One might regard this as a question of genre, in which our judgment of the work’s balance of oral and written qualities determines the appropriateness of particular reading techniques.

⁹ *Gardens in Babylon: Narrative and Faith in the Greek Legends of Daniel*, by Marti J. Steussy, Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1992, later published in the SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). I focused especially on the Old Greek and “Theodotion” versions of Susanna and Bel and the Dragon; Theodotion’s version of Susanna seemed clearly to be a literarily dependent expansion of the Old Greek, while Theodotion’s Bel and the Dragon appeared to be an orally derived variant of the story.

¹⁰ Lord, pp. 65-66.

Sacred History and Prose Fiction

In his second chapter, Alter makes the case, less controversial now than when the book was first published, that biblical narratives fall somewhere between historicized fiction and fictionalized history. Several points are at stake here. First, Alter insists, against the tendency of some historical-critical scholars to assume that biblical writers felt obliged to transmit received tradition verbatim, that “the writers exercised a good deal of artistic freedom in articulating the traditions at their disposal.” We may then justifiably interpret nuances on artistic grounds rather than being obliged to explain them as variances in the transmitted traditions. Second, Alter says that in contrast to poetic epic with its “stable closure of the mythological world,” the prose medium lends itself to a view of human nature as “caught in the...double dialectic between design and disorder, providence and freedom.” This supports Alter’s claim that a literary approach is not only compatible with but necessary to proper theological understanding of the narratives. Finally, while he assumes that the purpose of the ancient Hebrew writers is “to reveal the enactment of God’s purposes in historical events,” he proposes that “the literary imagination develops a momentum of its own,” so that at points literary playfulness may override the writers’ didactic agendas.¹¹

Amidst all this, I find my attention most caught by Alter’s discussion of the fact that the biblical narrative is written in *prose*, rather than the poetic epic form used in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, Alter sees this as a shift “away from the stable closure of the mythological world and toward the indeterminacy, the shifting causal concatenations, the ambiguities of a

¹¹ Alter, pp. 24-25, 27, 33, and 46. I am less confident than Alter of the role of religious motives in classical Hebrew composition, especially with regard to the J narratives and Samuel.

fiction made to resemble the uncertainties of life in history.”¹² Alter’s comments on epic somewhat resemble those of Mikhail Bakhtin, who (to put the argument in outrageously simple terms) characterizes epic as an authoritative, pious, ideologically unified poetic form, in contrast with the prose novel which features a multiplicity of voices and characters who learn and grow.¹³ Like Alter, he sees poetic epic perpetuating a status quo which it represents as fixed and unchanging. By contrast, Bakhtin underscores the multivoicedness of non-epic “novelistic” literature, articulating not a simple unified narratorial outlook (*pace* those who have made the novel’s “artistic unity” a primary interpretive principle), but a variety of social experiences and perceptions. This rather resembles Alter’s characterization of biblical narrative as challengingly indeterminate and open-ended in its report of human experience. Although Bakhtin himself categorizes the Bible as epic (authoritative and ideologically univocal), a great many contemporary biblical scholars including myself observe that not only do particular stretches of biblical narrative show a fine feel for the varying standpoints and perceptions of characters (so, for instance, the upper-class arrogance of Nabal’s message to David in 1 Sam 25, the macho impulsiveness of David’s response, and the wordy favor-carrying of Abigail’s diplomacy), but many books seem *literally* multi-voiced, or at least so effective in presenting different points of view that generations of scholars have been persuaded that they are hearing multiple sources and redactors!

What relationship have these observations to the orality-literacy continuum? Ancient Near Eastern epic shows many of the qualities of orally composed literature (especially in its

¹² Alter, pp. 24-27, quote from p. 27. On the topic of prose versus epic poetry, Alter cites also the work of Herbert Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent* (Baton Rouge, 1977) and Shemaryahu Talmon, “The ‘Comparative Method’ in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems,” *Göttingen Congress Volume* (Leiden, 1978).

¹³ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, no. 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), see especially Chapters 1, “Epic and Novel,” and 4, “Discourse in the Novel.”

reliance on formulaic sequences at both the epithet and stanza levels) but more importantly, such classics as the *Enuma Elish* were clearly intended for public recitation. To that extent we might well consider them fundamentally oral. On the other hand, the recording of these works on written tablets may have taken place not merely as an aid to memorization but as part of an effort to secure ideological control of the works, to fix them in a “canonical” form. Any extensive writing in cuneiform or hieroglyphics implicates an elite class, which seems consonant with the contents of the epics (the *Enuma Elish*, for instance, creates a rather strong case for the authority of the national patron deity and the king who rules under him). Whatever our judgment about the orality or literacy of the poetic epic form in the ancient near east, Bakhtin’s and Alter’s judgments about the ideological implications seem accurate. *Not quite sure how it fits this paper, but as someone currently engaged in both the writing and oral performance of poetry, I do find myself a bit surprised that this originally so-oral form is so neglected by NOBS—especially since today’s poetry is arguably MORE open-ended than narrative!*

What then of the prose form of classical Hebrew narrative? While I am wary of romanticizing ancient Israel or Judah as egalitarian utopias, and similarly wary of sentimental assumptions about the Genesis narratives, in particular, being “folk” literature, I do wonder if prose narrative represents a more popular and fluid form of storytelling than the epic. Did the alphabetic writing system of the eastern Mediterranean seaboard allow a somewhat less elite class to record their stories? (Note though that in Ugarit, where an alphabetic script was also available, extended narratives still take poetic form). When Alter writes of “the newly fashioned prose medium” in which Hebrew writers worked, he seems to suggest something particularly distinctive about the *written* medium, since surely oral prose narrative was not “newly

fashioned” at this time!¹⁴ But are the features to which he points indeed distinctive to written narrative? To answer, let us turn to some of his other chapters on technique.

Specific Literary Techniques: Chapters 3-5

In Chapters 3 and 4, Alter explores the “type-scene” (a standardized pattern, such as meeting one’s wife-to-be at a well, against which a storyteller can play by introducing variations such as having the girls at the well send Saul on to Samuel) and characteristic uses of narration vis-à-vis dialogue. It seems to me that both chapters concern techniques which one finds in oral as well as written narrative. Many jokes, for instance, turn upon twists in type-scene expectations. Joke-telling similarly evidences narrative/dialogue patterns like those pointed out by Alter. So, for instance, an episode typically begins with expository information (“there was this traveling salesman”), proceeds to scene-setting iteratives (“and at the end of a day he used to stop at a farmhouse and ask if they could put him up for the night”), and then presents the central encounter dramatically, in dialogue between pairs of characters (“so then the farmer’s daughter says to him...”).¹⁵

Chapter 5 concerns patterns of repetition, and if Alter is correct about the care with which biblical storytellers use minute variations to signal meaning, then I believe we must agree with him that they evidence a fundamentally literary, not oral, sensibility, even though he attributes the prominence of repetition to the oral antecedents and goals of biblical tradition. So, for instance, he sees considerable significance in the fact that an angel tells Samson’s mother-to-be that the child will be “a Nazarene to God from the womb, and he will begin to save Israel from the Philistines,” but when she relates this to her husband, she says “a Nazarene to God from the

¹⁴ Alter, p. 27.

¹⁵ I observe the same pattern in Second Testament narratives. In my parenthetical example, the speaker switches to present tense as she relates the central dialogue, a pattern also common in Mark!

womb to the day of his death.” But while Alter reads this as deliberate literary nuancing, one might alternatively attribute it to the looseness of the prose form. Does the noticing of such discrepancies itself arise from literary consciousness, which is able to go back and compare the two statements in writing? Would a non-reading hearer remember the angel’s words precisely enough to be sure of the shift in Samson’s mother’s words? Similarly, the echo effect noted by Alter between Saul’s question, “Is it your voice, David, my son?” and Isaac’s “Who are you, my son?” and “The voice is the voice of Jacob” is reasonable if we assume a literary mindset but unlikely (it seems to me) to be noticed by aurally-oriented audiences.¹⁶ At this point, Alter’s proposed reading seems dependent on a literary model; from an oral perspective it might well be an example of Lord’s “pathetic fallacy.”

Chapter 7, “Composite Artistry”

While Alter readily grants that the books of the Hebrew Bible seem to have been composed by a process involving multiple traditions, writers, and editors over a prolonged period of time, he famously challenges the notion that the result should be taken as a “confused textual patchwork” produced by editors afraid to modify their material. While granting the texts’ “discontinuities, duplications, and contradictions,” he contends that these merely show that biblical writers “had certain notions of unity rather different from our own,” to the point where “the biblical notion of what constituted a meaningful and unified narrative continuum might at times be unfathomable” for us, yet not to the exclusion of literary meaningfulness. He develops this argument in studies of conflicting accounts of events Numbers 16, Gen 1-2, the Joseph cycle, and 1 Sam 16-17. At chapter’s end he suggests that the juxtaposition of contradictory

¹⁶ Alter, pp. 90-91; 101, discussing Judges 13:5 and 7; and 26-37, discussing Gen 27:18, 22 and 1 Sam 24:17.

accounts serves to express “a sense of stubborn contradiction, of a profound and ineradicable untidiness in the nature of things” implicit in Israel’s monotheism.¹⁷

Perhaps. My own observation is that students not trained in close critical reading, even when they are *reading*, are relatively untroubled by such roughness in the narratives. Even less do church folk seem to notice, when hearing the material read aloud, that the sequence of creation in Gen 2 is different than that in Gen 1, or that 1 Sam cannot seem to get its story straight about how David met Saul. With regard to Joseph’s brothers discovering money in their baggage in Gen 42:27-28 and 35, Alter suggests that “the Hebrew writer was perfectly aware of the contradiction but viewed it as a superficial one.”¹⁸ So why didn’t the writers share our fascination with textual consistency? One might wonder if the literate habit of checking for consistency across stretches of text had yet established itself. Might the writers have been sufficiently accustomed to the plasticity of detail in oral storytelling that it did not occur to them, as it does not occur to so many of my students, that anyone would expect absolute consistency?

Reflections

Sounding a motif that will later be exhaustively treated by Meir Sternberg, Alter proposes that “the biblical tale might usefully be regarded as a narrative experiment in the possibilities of moral, spiritual, and historical knowledge, undertaken through a process of studied contrasts between the variously limited knowledge of the human characters and the divine omniscience quietly but firmly represented by the narrator.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Alter, pp. 133 and 154.

¹⁸ Alter, p. 138. Antony F. Campbell and Mark O’Brien, in *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) offer the rather different suggestion that the DH editors were aware of contradiction but unconcerned because they meant to be compiling a storytellers’ sourcebook rather than a unified narrative.

¹⁹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985); Alter, p. 157, in Chapter 8, “Narration and Knowledge.” Against both

There is no doubt that First Testament narrative *can* usefully be read in such a manner. The excitement Alter's book generates in most of my students is testimony enough to that. And my acquaintance with Alter's work has, I think, greatly facilitated my work as a verbatim biblical storyteller: having been taught by Alter and subsequent close readers to attend to the naming of characters, subtle changes in repeated sequences, and the dramatic structuring of scenes, I am a noticeably quicker study than most, the fine points being easy for me to remember because I find meaning in them.

If the oral/aural experience of a narrative is, however, really crucially different than that of reading, and if my suspicions are correct that in some respects Alter is interpreting serendipitous unevennesses in the narrative rather than deliberate artistry, *should* I be working so hard to tell the story "just so"?²⁰ Or is our very enthusiasm for verbatim telling a *textual* consciousness which would be quite foreign to the original writers and audience? As ancient writings became canon, such a textual consciousness demonstrably developed around them, but should it be perpetuated in the reclaiming of orality? I have found the discipline of verbatim telling a rich experience for myself and my students, but to what extent do I favor it because it allows me to challenge interpretations dear to the students? Earlier, I raised the possibility that prose narrative was a less socially controlled medium than poetic epic. Now, I find myself reflecting that close reading may itself be a way to claim ideological control of the narrative. ***Do we violate the character of biblical storytelling in our very effort to be word-for-word faithful to it?***

authors, I question whether the biblical narrators indeed view God as omniscient and, even more, whether it is safe to assume theological teaching as a motive for all or most writers of the Hebrew Bible.

²⁰ Again I thank my colleague Holly Hearon for pressing this question; a glance at her paper for our conference suggests she will have some comments of her own on the point.