

# VARIA

## Bibliopolium

### The art of Robert Alter

Robert Alter: *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, 1983.

Robert Alter is the professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, in Berkley. Having a sensitive ability to work with Hebrew and an artistic sensibility to work with the text he impresses the reader, while his attitude towards the text helps him to abstain from excessive or premature theological judgement. The following quotation from Mark Coleridge, in my view summarises in a very simple way what Robert Alter in his book exposes in a scholarly, and complex way, his attitude towards the Bible.

“The Bible insists upon a common narrative, but one which includes a diversity of voices; many stories comprise the story. God’s story is both single and several. It also insists upon a narrative which at times is most disjointed and the connectedness of which is perceived only by way of struggle. The Bible is not easy to read.”<sup>1</sup>

As it follows I will try to give a short picture about the ‘art’ of Robert Alter as I understand it. In his view the literary text was considered an autonomous work of art, to be studied independently of its authors intentions and of the socio-political currents of the time in which it was produced. The literary approach promulgated by Alter differs from (the classic) historical-critical study in significant ways.

Whereas historical study tended to be concerned with the prehistory of the text (oral traditions and written source materials) and with its development through successive redactions, literary study is focusing on the final form of the text. Historical study is interested in the world referred to by the text; Alter directed his (and our) attention to the world constructed in the text. What he is doing, is an imagining of history, that is analogous to what the great writers have done and still are doing with their historical figures and events in their historical plays.<sup>2</sup>

A popular appreciation of the narrative art of the Bible has always existed. Its stories were represented in the sculpture and stained glass windows of medieval churches, and its characters, themes and symbols have profoundly influenced European but in general ‘western’ literature.<sup>3</sup> But in conventional biblical scholarship the literary analysis of the biblical narratives has been a marginal concern. Alter gives an analysis, which is dealing with the formal and structural aspects of biblical narratives, including details of their linguistic fashioning.

He attempted to isolate distinctive features of ancient Israelite narrative art (such as modes of characterization, the use of type-scenes, techniques of repetition, forms of plot development), which were

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Coleridge, *Life in the Crypt or Why Bother with Biblical Studies*, in *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (July 1994), 148.

<sup>2</sup> He several times refers to Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Dante, T. S. Eliot, etc.

<sup>3</sup> I’m using the term “Western”, to refer to the Western culture in its classical meaning, but I have doubts, that we can speak any more about it in its classical meaning. *Anfänge 1533–1541*, 67.

not necessarily the same as the techniques used in modern 'Western' narrative.

He argues, that the Bible is literature before it is anything else, and to read it as "literature" really means to read it again in its complex continuities. Although he mentions the name of Ricoeur only once it seems for me, that he inspired very much form his ideas. What Ricoeur formulated as 'hermeneutics', and philosophy, he is expanding and applying it to the Old Testament exegesis. He speaks of 'interpretation' or simply 'reading', and newer uses the term exegesis.

His process of 'reading' is full of challenges and discoveries, as he summarizes in another book: "The way a writer shapes a scene, reports details, bends language into dialogue, and builds the symmetries of a line of verse and the development of a poetic image tells you a great deal about how he conceives human and divine nature, history, causality, and destiny, and also something about his relation to the literary medium in which all this worked out."<sup>4</sup> Speaking very less about the sociological context, devotes the bulk of his attention to issues of genre, convention, style, structure, diction, literary allusion and thematic organization. He is more interested in the referential qualities of the biblical texts as an interest in their internal

relationships, particularly as these relationships are controlled by language.

I could say much about Alter's relevancy, but I will restrict myself to those examples, which astonished (or surprised?) me. Maybe the most impressive was his explanation of "techniques of repetition". Most instances of repetition prove to be quite purposeful. He has the opinion that the books of the Hebrew Bible were written chiefly for oral presentation. As several indications in the Bible suggest, the narratives would typically have been read out from a scroll to some sort of assembled audience. The purpose of repetition in first instance could be one didactic. Alter wants the fullness of the narrative to have its own say. The repetitions of "Leitwort", of Motif, of Theme, of Sequence of actions, and of Type-scene comprise all types of repetition in certain narratives, and in the "Narrative". The art of allusions could be a second one. But the others, as parallelisms, inter-textual connection, flash back, foreshadowing follows, just to mention them.

Alter argues, that the Bible is literature before it is anything else. As interpreter he is before anything else a literary critic. He gives new ways of reading and interpreting Scripture, illuminating tools of literary criticism.

János Simon

## The Chronicler as Historian,

edited by M. P. Graham, K. G. Hoglund and S. L. McKenzie,  
*JOTSUP* 238; *Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.*

The present book is a collection of fourteen essays, and is dedicated to the the memory of Raymond B. Dillard (1944-93). Its history goes back to the Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah Section meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in

1994. Dillard himself was involved in planing the meeting, but his unexpected death stopped him to participate.

The first three essays can be generally said, that deal with the "Framing an Approach", like comparative, historical and

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*, SPCK, 1992. XI.