

Enjoying the Bible As Literature

Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. xii & 195pp. New York: Basic Books, 1981. \$14.50.

Reviewed by Carolyn Stevens Shultz

When Seventh-day Adventists talk or write about how to study the Bible, they often discuss plans for reading it through in a year or for arranging sequences of key texts to find out what the Bible has to say about baptism or the state of the dead. Unfortunately, in their efforts to supply the systematic theology the Bible lacks, Adventists may too easily forget that the Bible is largely narrative. Thanks to the writings of the renowned critic and biblical scholar Northrop Frye (see *Spectrum 13:2* for a discussion of his recent work, *The Great Code*), we have been encouraged to approach the Bible as primarily a work of literature, to see it as a unified whole, its separate elements each illuminating a part of that progress toward the ultimate restoration of order and holiness that is its pervasive theme.

Robert Alter's recent book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, also contributes importantly to this much-needed emphasis on the Bible as literature. An eminent critic of modern Hebrew literature and the modern European novel, Alter marshals his considerable knowledge and lucid prose style to propose a stimulating new approach to reading the Old Testament stories. He argues that ". . . we shall come much closer to the range of intended meanings—theological, psychological, moral, or whatever—of the biblical tale by understanding precisely *how* it is told" (p. 179, underscoring mine). In particular, attentiveness to such matters as thematic key words; the reiteration of motifs; the delineation of character, relations, and

motives through dialogue; the use of verbatim repetition with minute but significant changes; purposeful narrative shifts from strategic withholding of comment to divulgence of an omniscient overview; and the use of a montage of sources in order to convey simultaneously more than one perspective on a character or event "is important not only for those curious about matters of narrative technique . . . but also for anyone who wants to come to terms with the significance of the Bible" (p. 179).

Alter is aware that because many critics and general readers think of the Hebrew Bible as sacred history, they consider the methods of literary analysis inapplicable to the biblical stories; and he acknowledges that history and fiction are not the same thing. But because history and fiction share a whole range of narrative strategies, Alter characterizes biblical narratives as historicized prose fiction. The Hebrew writers appear to have deliberately avoided the epic genre, with its emphasis on fairly static characters and great specificity of detail, Alter argues, in favor of a narrative style characterized by "rigorous economy of means" and under-girded by "the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others" because God created him to enjoy and to suffer "all the consequences of human freedom" (p. 22). Only believers in a divine dictation theory of inspiration could disagree with Alter that recognizing the literary strategies used by various authors in no way detracts from the "truth" of the stories or their power to illuminate man's moral condition.

Acknowledging that the Old Testament books were composed by many hands over several centuries, Alter credits the final redactors with purposeful intelligence and analyzes the final products as literary wholes. This approach allows him to find

significant meaning in the habit biblical writers had of including differing accounts of the same event and in their persistent re-use of type-scenes.

Alter clearly illustrates his approach to varied biblical accounts of the same event with his treatment of the two seemingly contradictory accounts (I Samuel 16 and 17) of David's rise to prominence (pp. 147-153). In the first account, God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as Saul's successor. After repeatedly mistaking one after another of the seven older sons as the chosen one, Samuel is finally directed by God to anoint the youngest (repeating a common biblical motif of passing over the firstborn). Soon David is summoned to court to soothe Saul's fits by playing the lyre, and rises to become Saul's official armor bearer. In the second account, David remains on the family farm while three (not seven) older brothers are fighting in Saul's army against the Philistines. David has not been anointed, and no mention is made of his musical abilities or his role as royal armor-bearer. In fact, Alter observes, much is made of his total unfamiliarity with armor. David comes to the battlefield to bring provisions to his brothers and makes an impressive debut by slaying Goliath; but "he is so unfamiliar a face to both Saul and Abner, Saul's commander-in-chief, that, at the end of the chapter, they both confess they have no idea who he is . . . and he has to identify himself to Saul."

Obviously "Saul would have had to meet David for the first time either as music therapist in his court or as giant-killer on the battlefield, but he could not have done both." Alter agrees with Kenneth R. R. Gros Luis that such a contradiction could not have escaped the attention of whoever put the narrative into final form and concludes that the decision to use the two versions, one theological in emphasis, one folkloric, was deliberate. Apparently the final author chose to use both versions because "both were necessary to his conception of David's character and historical role." In the first

account God is active, David is passive; his election is a gift, or a fate. In the second, David's own initiative gains him a captaincy and finally, after banishment and a bloody civil war, the throne.

As so often in the Old Testament narratives, Alter points out, we are left "swaying in the dynamic interplay between two theologies, two conceptions of kingship and history, two views of David the man." Alter contends that biblical narrative is often purposefully ambiguous, a montage of viewpoints arranged in sequence in order to reflect what the authors conceived to be "the abiding complexity of their subjects."

Alter has tried to help us "adjust the fine focus" of our "literary binoculars" so that we can enjoy the "suprising subtlety and inventiveness of detail, and in many instances a beautifully interwoven wholeness" (p. 188). If he had done only that, his book would be useful. But Alter recognizes that the biblical writers' pleasure of imaginative play is deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores him, responds to or resists him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history (p. 189).

Alter imagined, when he undertook his study, that he would "ruffle a lot of feathers," but he discovered instead "generous receptivity" to his ideas among professional biblical scholars. His book deserves an equally warm reception from all Jewish and Christian readers.

Carolyn Stevens Shultz teaches English at Walla Walla College.