ROBERT ALTER ON BIBLICAL POETRY: A REVIEW ESSAY

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The modern study of biblical poetry has concentrated on analyzing and seeking to design a system to describe the forms of verse in the Bible. Within the past decade alone, books by Stephen A. Geller, T. L. Collins, M. O'Connor, Adele Berlin, Wilfrid G. E. Watson, and others have presented detailed, largely technical formats to account for the patterns that we find in what we refer to as biblical poetry. Even James L. Kugel, who has questioned the propriety of speaking of "poetry" in the Bible as a distinctive genre, has in *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (1981) suggested a simple formula to describe the patterns of parallelism that have been identified as the hallmark of biblical verse. Kugel's formula, "A, and what's more, B" clearly deals only with the external characteristics of biblical poetry, the two-part construction of parallel units. It is this that gives rise to the special halting rhythm of biblical verse, in which, in the words of G. B. Gray, the poet "harks back in order to repeat in a different form the thought or statement which he has already expressed, and only after this break and repetition pursues the line of his thought or statement."[1]

What is behind the recent academic preoccupation with technique in biblical verse one can only guess. But among the influential factors seem to be the discovery of ancient Ugaritic (North Canaanite) epic verse on the one hand and a growing familiarity with structural linguistics on the other. Ugaritic verse, which is in many respects of a piece with biblical poetry in its formal aspects, provides comparative material by which we can corroborate our theories about the historical conventions of ancient Hebrew verse. The importance of this factor is evident in the fact that most treatments of biblical poetry make reference to Ugaritic. Structural linguistics offers a method of viewing the patterns of biblical verse within the framework of ordinary language, and it plays a decisive role in how most recent students of biblical poetry deal with their subject.[2] Yet another factor demands that students attend to the formal aspects of biblical poetry: we cannot agree on a description of what constitutes or characterizes biblical verse. The so-called "standard description" of verse in the Bible has been abandoned by many, and many if not most recent discussions seek to replace it.[3] Until such time as we reach consensus on defining formal properties, many may not allow themselves the "luxury" of delving into the hazier but much more richly textured areas of meaning in biblical poetry. What does it say?

The first major exponent of the modern study of biblical poetry, Robert Lowth, in his classic *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753; translated from

Latin into English in 1787) combined his influential insights into the style and imagery of biblical verse with extended and suggestive interpretations of many biblical poems. In his work, matters of technique are subordinated to and put into the service of the poem's meaning. Since Lowth's truly epoch-making study, biblical scholars have largely operated within Lowth's system. They have found meaning in Biblical poetry in terms of Lowth's conception of parallelism. Their exegetical insights they have incorporated into innumerable commentaries, articles, and thematic volumes. Few biblicists have blended technical or theoretical analysis with exegesis in the explicit way that Lowth did.

Sensitive to this lack, Robert Alter, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, has given us *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. In this companion volume to his earlier enthusiastically received book on biblical narrative (*The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 1981), Alter delineates his understanding of parallelism and endeavors to illustrate how different manipulations of parallelism serve to convey the diverse meanings of the various types of biblical poetry. Adopting the concise description of biblical prosody presented in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* by Benjamin Hrushovski, Alter sees the principle behind parallelism as a network of shifting formal linguistic and semantic patterns. In any given couplet, parallelism may be realized by repetition of sound, morphology, lexical association, syntactic construction, semantic association, or meter — or, in most instances, a combination of these features. What is crucial is the coupling of lines and their expansion into larger sequences. Although Hrushovski does speak of prosodic elements within biblical verse, Alter pays little attention to meter as such. Lowth had perceived that beneath the Hebrew text with its many layers of transmission lies some sort of meter — otherwise, how account for the balance of line-length within couplets? — but he realized that in the absence of a record of ancient pronunciation or performance of the Hebrew, we cannot retrieve any system.[4] Alter does, however, attend to rhythm; indeed, with Hrushovski he regards the phenomenon of parallelism as a rhythm composed of overlapping structural and semantic elements.

Along lines that are familiar to us from James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry,* Alter emphasizes that the second of two parallel "versets" often does not so much repeat the gist of the preceding verset but either heightens or intensifies it, or carries it further in a quasi-narrative fashion. The semantic relationship between the two versets of a poetic line may be one that is static and stabilizing or one that is dynamic and advances the image in depth or time. Because biblical scholarship has, in Alter's view, overstressed the static side of parallelism, he chooses to demonstrate extensively and convincingly the dynamic side.

Because Alter is concerned always to relate form to meaning, he has, I believe, made a contribution to biblical poetics by suggesting that certain literary genres favor certain types of parallelism:

> On the one hand, one frequently encounters, especially in the Prophets and Job, a structure of intensification, a sort of crescendo development, in which certain images and ideas introduced in the first parallel versets — they often may be binary oppositions — are stepped up from line to line and brought to a certain climax. On the other hand, a good

> many poems are worked out through a consequentiality of images and ideas that is incipiently narrative and may include brief sequences of explicit narrative development (p. 29).

Prophecy, which is forward-looking in the sense that it holds out relief for fulfilling the covenant and doom for dismissing it, uses a dynamic form of parallelism that underscores the inevitability of what the prophet asserts. The parallelism in Psalms, with their pious devotion and reflection, is more often static (as Alter demonstrates statistically in Psalm 18). Proverbs employs dynamic parallelism to relate didactic "narrative vignettes" (p. 169), while the two-part nature of parallelism serves well to represent antitheses and riddles, which so often function as Proverbs' medium. In the Song of Songs, which Alter understands as "purely secular love poetry" (p. 185), the parallelism is relatively relaxed, as "the relation of the second verset to the first is not really parallelism but explanation" (p. 187). Alter's characterizations, in striving to generalize, necessarily oversimplify, but his close reading of individual poems reflecting all of these genres displays his appreciation of the more nuanced usages of parallelism in the texts.

Poetry in the Bible, however, is not constituted by parallelism. Alter distinguishes himself from most recent writers on biblical poetry by stressing that the essence of a poem is not in its formal devices but in its representation of its reality in images, in metaphor. Most impressively in his readings of Job and the Song of Songs, but throughout his exposition, Alter explores the ramifications of the Bible's imagery. Although the Bible does not narrate extensively in verse, Alter notes that biblical poetry will often develop a metaphor through narrative extension (see pp. 39-40). Robert Lowth, who also observed that the Hebrew poets "frequently run [a simple metaphor] into an allegory,"[5] dealt over several lectures with the central place of metaphor in biblical poetry. In fact, he described the style of poetry in the Bible as "parabolic," a metaphorical mode of representation. This conception of the poetic had been formulated already by Vico and has been most recently expounded for the Bible by Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982). Alter speaks of poetry in this context as "a way of seeing," not merely a rhetorical manner of expression. By this description he steers, one would hope, the attention of biblical scholarship toward the poetry of the literature and not only its poetic form.

Keeping the essential metaphorical quality of poetry distinct from forms of versification demands concentrated thought and clear terminology. M. O'Connor, by entitling his 1980 book on the formal aspects of biblical poetry *Hebrew Verse Structure,* sought to maintain the distinction. Alter somewhat undercuts his own contribution by defining a poem, with Barbara Herrnstein Smith, as a literary unit manifesting a "sustained rhythm" and "a continuously operating principle of organization" (quoted in Alter, p. 6).[6] Although Alter, as noted above, continually relates parallelism to its deployment in poetry, parallelism itself is not poetry in the deeper way that Alter conceives it.

As in his book on biblical narrative, Alter attempts not only to relate form to meaning; he suggests that form in the Bible stems from the unique worldview of its ancient Hebrew authors, ethical monotheism. Most classical literature of the ancient

Near East, such as the Mesopotamian and Ugaritic epics, was formulated in verse. But in order to tell about a complex God who is open to change, who singly governs the world in a special relationship with humanity in general and Israel in particular, the Bible needed the much more pliant medium of prose. This claim is not very different from what some biblical scholars have written.[7] Compare, for example, this by Georg Fohrer: "Yahwism is again and again the decisive force that makes possible an autonomous Israelite literature despite the unfavorable presuppositions. The Israelite literature differs profoundly in its religious conceptions from the other literatures of the ancient Near East."[8] Yet, prose was widely used in ancient Egypt and in Akkadian and Hittite texts, too.[9] Fohrer, accordingly, speaks more cautiously:

> The forms customarily used in Israel for . . . narrative . . . are basically identical with or similar to those employed elsewhere in the ancient Near East . . . It is therefore all the more important to notice where changes or innovations have taken place and to inquire whether they have come about through the influence of Yahwism or for some other reason.[10]

Umberto Cassuto, who also remarked that "even in prose the forms of rhetoric and the methods of expression were largely similar in all the literatures of these peoples [of the ancient Near East],"[11] attributed the development of prose narrative in ancient Israel to Israel's natural literary maturation.[12] Yet in treating biblical poetry, Alter reiterates his argument about the way in which prose narrative articulates a unique Israelite mindset:

> The frequent fierceness of the narrative verse [in the Song of Deborah]. . . expressed a deep and even predictable current of ancient Hebrew sensibility, but, given the imperatives of ethical monotheism, it was not the main current; and in order to show, in story form, the fluctuating and ambiguous behavior of man as a moral agent acting from the peculiarity of his own character writers had to run from the emphatic progressive rhythms of parallelistic verse to the freer and more flexible medium of prose (p. 50).

Whatever the origins of biblical prose narrative, Alter will have to consider the phenomenon of prose narrative in the pagan world of the ancient Near East, and reflect perhaps, too, on the ability of epic writers to convey moral ambiguity in verse.

The conflict adumbrated here between Alter and historical biblical scholarship is one that Alter has invited. When, in 1896, the scholar of English literature Richard Moulton sought to enhance his audience's understanding of the literary character of the Bible, he carefully delineated the different functions and methods of historical criticism and the literary approach. He spoke of biblical scholarship in appreciative and respectful terms:

> There is no longer any need to speak of the splendid processes of modern Biblical Criticism, nor of the magnitude even of its undisputed results. I mention the Higher Criticism only to say that its province is distinct from that which I lay down for myself in this book. The Higher Criticism is mainly an historical analysis; I confine myself to literary investigation. By the literary treatment I understand the discussion of *what* we

> have in the books of Scripture; the historical analysis goes behind this to the further question *how* these books have reached their present form.[13]

Moulton, like Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* sees an occasional "clash" between the historical and synchronic approaches,[14] but he does not himself step into the arena of professional biblical scholarship. He aims to supplement more than to supplant. Alter, on the other hand, persistently and quite unnecessarily berates and attacks the field of biblical criticism. He states at the outset of his book on poetry that "most of what has been written on biblical poetry is in some way misconceived and . . . tends to be guided by rather dim notions of how poetry works" (pp. x-xi). He sees himself as a latter-day Prometheus:

> The aim of my own inquiry has been not only to attempt to get a firmer grasp of biblical poetics but also to suggest an order of essential connection between poetic form and meaning that for the most part has been neglected by scholarship (p. 205).

As I explained above, Alter's book marks a significant change in direction for the study of biblical poetry. But in criticizing biblical scholarship Alter does not demonstrate his claim to be familiar with "most of what has been written on biblical poetry."[15] Nor does he seem to understand correctly what Bible scholars have said. Although, for example, Alter refers a few times to Robert Lowth, he never cites Lowth's most important book directly. In one place (p. 23, n. 13) Alter quotes from the original German edition of J. G. von Herder's classic, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry,* which was translated into English in 1833, but he misrepresents the quotation. Herder was not saying, except by way of analogy, that "the two [parallel] members strengthen, heighten, empower each other" (Alter, p. 11). He said that when oriental herdsmen would sing antiphonally "The two divisions of their chorus confirm, elevate, and strengthen each in their convictions or their rejoicings" (Herder as translated by James Marsh, p. 40). Alter repeatedly caricatures historical scholarship as totally oblivious of literary concerns and thoroughly obsessed with dividing the text into sources:

> What I am pointing to is not one of those contradictions of sources [between the frame story and poetic core of the Book of Job] on which biblical scholarship has too often thrived but a culminating moment in which the vision of the poet transcends the limited terms of the folktale he has chosen to use (p. 99).

It is true that, as Moulton acknowledged, historical scholars had engaged in historical literary research. But the implication of scholarly myopia in Alter's typical comment is belied by comparing the following remarks of a leading biblical scholar of the historical school, H. L. Ginsberg:

> It is, or ought to be, obvious that in [Job 3-42] a great genius has taken advantage of a chink in the armor of the orthodox doctrine of retribution, in order to drive a wedge into it. Tradition itself admits that Job, though blameless, suffered for a time. It therefore occurred to our poet to make Job, at the height of his suffering, a mouthpiece for a protest against the prevailing doctrine. So our poet switched the roles traditionally assigned to

> Job and his friends. Job becomes the protestant and his friends become the champions of orthodoxy.[16]

Alter's unsympathetic view of historical biblical scholarship leads him to pick, ironically, on the great Bible scholar Hermann Gunkel, of the early twentieth century, the man who more than any other introduced literary concerns into historical criticism. Many of the observations on the art of biblical narrative that one finds in Alter's book on that subject one will find in Gunkel's *The Legends of Genesis.* (Unfortunately, much of Gunkel's work has not been translated into English.) Gunkel labored at a time when it was necessary to emphasize that so many literary forms in the Bible are patterned on conventional models that were common not only within the Bible but within the literature of the ancient Near East in general. Gunkel's interests were patently historical: he wanted to write a history of the genres of biblical literature and place them in what he hoped to establish as their historical contexts. His work on the Psalms, for example, demonstrated that most psalms follow a circumscribed set of outlines, according to the function of the psalm at hand. Alter maintains that Gunkel's classification of the conventional types of psalms in the Bible "miss[es] an essential point about literary convention . . . Convention gives writers of both verse and prose a solid framework in which to construct their own discourse, but good writers always exert a subtle pressure on convention, in certain ways remaking it as they build within it" (p. 112). Gunkel could not have agreed more, as his *Ausgewälte Psalmen* (1904), in which he closely reads many psalms, attests. He says there, for example, of Psalm 50 (my translation): "The psalm contains prophetic ideas in prophetic form. The author is a prophetic disciple who does not, however, slavishly imitate a single passage but is filled with the spirit of the old prophets."[17] In the same form-critical tradition, this is what Artur Weiser says of the development of literary forms in the Psalms:

> The dissolution of the pure "types" and the intermingling of their formal elements, as well as the adoption and digestion of originally foreign ranges of ideas, is to be understood in the light of the living creative energies which were at work in the cult of the Covenant and its tradition. These creative powers burst the restricting chains of the traditional fashion of stereotyped forms and by their own inner relatedness to God welded these heterogeneous elements into an entity which, compared with the proto-types of the Near East, was absolutely original in character, for its specific meaning was determined by the revelation of Yahweh and the realization of his salvation as the heart of the cult of the Covenant.[18]

Even in Gunkel's literary-historical classification of the Psalms, he acknowledged the creative contribution of the individual to the formulation of many psalms.[19] Form criticism as a literary historical enterprise sees the genre-type, the *Gattung,* as a convention. The type-scenes of narrative and genre-types in biblical poetry, which Alter has tried to differentiate from the form critic's *Gattungen,*[20] are not different from them in form or function within their literary contexts. What is different is the use to which historians and literary critics put them.[21]

Nor does Alter show much sympathy with or awareness of recent biblical scholarship. The most comprehensive analysis of poetic form in the Bible, M.

O'Connor's *Hebrew Verse Structure,* Alter dismisses quickly without conveying a correct understanding of its views. O'Connor does not "propose . . . a bewilderingly elaborate system of 'syntactic constraints' as the basis of biblical verse . . .," as Alter asserts (p. 3). O'Connor defines the parameters of the single line, Alter's "verset," according to a limited set of syntactic constructions and combinations. But in O'Connor's description, single lines are conjoined to form couplets and increasingly larger units by an array of figures and tropes familiar to us from other literatures. In fact, O'Connor's model of the poetics of biblical verse is very similar to Alter's, except that it is formulated in linguistic terms and is based on a systematic and thorough study of a defined corpus of material.

Alter begins his book by characterizing it as a "venture" (p. ix). Had he confined his study to literary observations and not assumed the role of a professional biblicist, one would find much to admire and little to criticize. But he has chosen not only to attack biblical scholars but to make sweeping generalizations about ancient Israel and its ethos. We have mentioned above his theory about ethical monotheism and the rise of prose narrative. Sometimes he asserts with a flourish commonplaces of biblical scholarship, such as the fact that the prophets functioned more as critics of their contemporaries than foretellers of the future.[22] Elsewhere he will insist on a position that does not take possible objections into account. Considering the degree of similarity between biblical and other ancient Near Eastern images of the deity and the resemblance of these images to visual representations of gods from the world in which Israel lived, one might challenge Alter's claim that "the Hebrew imagination . . . was unabashedly anthropomorphic but by no means foolishly literalist" (p. 36).[23] As a fine Hebraist, Alter's assertions about Hebrew usage and diction in the the Bible are often correct. Some of his errors are simply careless, such as rendering *'eli* in Exod 15:3 as "my Lord" and *YHWH* in verse 17 there as "God" (p. 51). Others betray his philological limits. The word *'^{a}rubbot* does not "traditionally" mean "windows" (p. 153); it literally means "windows," as the Ugaritic contexts, where *urbt* parallels *ḫln,* indicate. He occasionally slips up in matters of grammar. The "perfect" and "imperfect" forms of the verb are, by definition, aspects, not "tenses" (p. 131), and the *pataḥ furtivum* precedes the guttural consonant (thus one should transliterate *śaboa'* not *śabo'a,* etc.). By referring to Ugaritic words and texts without any sources, Alter appears as though he is versed in Ugaritic language and literature. Yet, on page 28 Alter cites the famous lines from the Baal Epic as: "For lo, thine enemies, O Baal, for lo, thine enemies shall perish . . .," assimilating the lines to Ps 92:10. Although the Ugaritic does seem to have served as a model for the psalmist, the Ugaritic actually says (as any translation would make clear): "Here, your enemy, O Baal; here, your enemy you strike; here, you smite your adversary."

Alter has done much to sensitize students of Bible to literary concerns, but he is openly hostile to recent trends in literary criticism. Without any argumentation, Alter dismisses deconstruction — the anonymous "fashionable school of contemporary criticism" that he mentions on p. 69. What Alter says there does not undermine deconstruction; he merely proves that the author of Psalm 39 was not a deconstructionist. Although Alter has himself admittedly taken certain concepts and

analytical techniques from structuralism,[24] he criticizes structuralism in general because "it proposes patterns that are altogether too abstract and complicated to reflect the reading experience of real readers" (p. 217, n. 4). Similarly, in an argument against my own writing on deep structure in biblical parallelism, Alter contends that "surely no reader of poetry responds to a text in this way" (p. 215, n. 11). The structuralist claim, which Alter does not correctly report or counter, is that we respond to poetry as we do to all language — that we employ strategies of analysis to comprehend what we hear that are automatic and unconscious. Only a trained linguist can make explicit what analysis must be involved, but everyone can without thinking about it interpret speech by applying what must be very complicated formulas. Many of us can ride a bicycle without knowing the equations of physics that we must be performing automatically in order to retain our balance. Readers with no training at all in literary criticism can understand and appreciate much of the Bible.

With Robert Alter's guidance, however, they will see and find considerably more. In the course of his book Alter shares his often penetrating insights into well over a score of poems in the Bible. Although his explications sometimes do little more than paraphrase the Hebrew, his best exegeses draw meanings out of allusions and metaphors that substantially enrich the reading experience. He finds significance in the specifically poetic aspects of the text, that which is irreducible to prose, or to any other words whatsoever. He spells out, for example, the "mythological reverberations" in the satire of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14. The reverberations carry over from their immediate historical context to refer to any earthly king (pp. 148-49). The meaning of Isaiah 49, as Alter interprets it, derives not from its explicit content but from what is evocatively suggested by the "interplay between literal and figurative elements" in the poem (p. 159). In perhaps the most dazzling reading in the book, Alter explains how the Book of Job's description of the leviathan deepens the mystery of the creature further the more it focuses its scope. "Leviathan," he says, "is nature mythologized, for that is the poet's way of conveying the truly uncanny, the truly inscrutable, in nature" (p. 110). Each image, and the manner in which the image is presented, participates in an essential way in the sense of the poem. If Alter, like Bishop Lowth before him, can redirect our reading of biblical poetry from formalism to significance, his book will mark a watershed in the study of biblical poetry.

NOTES

[1]George Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (1915; Ktav reprint: New York, 1972), p. 55.

[2]Cf. especially Roman Jakobson, "Grammatical Parallelism and its Russian Facet," *Language* 42 (1966), pp. 399-429. Cf. also the early linguistically informed contribution by Luis Alonso Schökel, *Estudios de poètica hebrea* (Barcelona, 1963).

[3]Cf. Stephen A. Geller, "Theory and Method in the Study of Biblical Poetry," *JQR* 73 (1982), pp. 65-77. I have discussed the problem of defining biblical verse in an article to appear in the 1986 volume of the *Jewish Book Annual.*

[4]Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews,* Lecture III.

[5]Ibid., vol. I, p. 216; cf. the following pages for several illustrations.

[6]Cf. my discussion in the 1986 *Jewish Book Annual.*

[7]Cf., e.g., the 1948 essay on "The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel" by Gerhard von Rad, cited in the review of Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by R. N. Whybray in *JSOT* 27 (1983), p. 83.

[8]Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament,* trans. by David Green (London, 1970), p. 36 (originally published in German, 1965).

[9]Cf., e.g., the review of Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by Susan Einbinder in *Prooftexts* 4 (1984), p. 306.

[10]Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament,* p. 63.

[11]Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies,* trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1975), vol. II, p. 16 (originally published in Hebrew, 1942- 43).

[12]Ibid., p. 74.

[13]Richard G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (Boston, 1896), p. iv.

[14]See ibid., pp. v-vi.

[15]Cf. the critique of Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by Baruch Schwartz in *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 5-6 (1978-79), pp. 268-69.

[16]H. L. Ginsberg, "Job the Patient and Job the Impatient," *Conservative Judaism* 21 (1967), p. 15.

[17]Hermann Gunkel, *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1904), p. 110.

[18]Artur Weiser, *The Psalms,* 5th ed., trans. Herbert Hartwell (London, 1962), pp. 90-91 (originally published in German, 1959).

[19]See Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1933), e.g., pp. 10, 30. Nevertheless, Gunkel was, perhaps rightly, more impressed by convention than invention within the psalms.

[20]See Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read. . .," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), pp. 118-19.

[21]Cf. Schwartz, *Shnaton* 5-6 (1978-79), p. 264.

[22]Cf., e.g., S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament,* 8th ed. (Edinburgh, 1909), p. 212; J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1973), p. 199.

[23]Cf. my remarks in *JAOS* 102 (1982), pp. 657-58.

[24]Alter acknowledges this debt on p. 113. On Alter's misunderstanding of structuralism, cf. David Jobling's review of *The Art of Biblical Narrative* in *JSOT* 27 (1983), p. 93.