

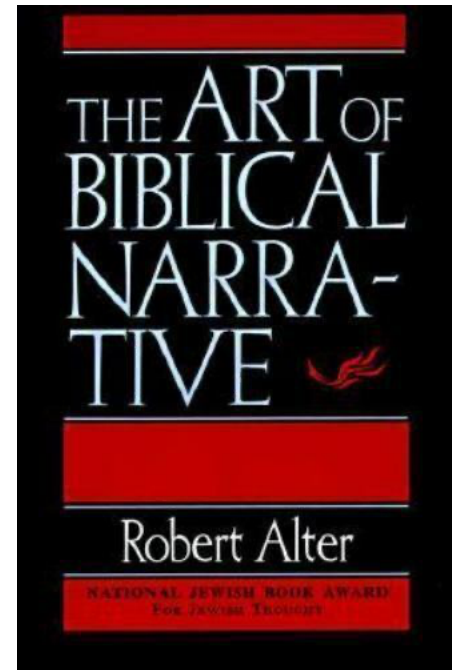
Reading the narratives of the Old Testament

Robert Alter popularised in 1981 an important idea, which is that the Old Testament could be productively read using literary tools.

Two impacts, firstly that the 'deconstruction', could be 'reconstruction' and secondly that the received text was seen as firstly literature.

Looking at the first impact¹.

Many of the insights into biblical texts since the protestant reformation (1500 onwards) had had the effect of de-mystifying the text, and de-sacralising it.



Mystery vs Problem: A mystery is a question that is taken into one's self, wrestled with, and in the wrestling wisdom is approached. A problem is a question that is externalised, and in wrestling with it information is gained.

Previous solution: Christian fundamentalism, movement in American Protestantism that arose in the late 19th century in reaction to theological modernism, which aimed to revise traditional Christian beliefs to accommodate new developments in the natural and social sciences, especially the theory of biological evolution².

Really old solutions: James Kugel talks about 4 principles of biblical interpretation from around the time of Jesus. One of those was the assumption that the Biblical text is deliberately not clear³. The other three are

- 1) Relevant to personal context
- 2) without error or contradiction
- 3) of Divine origin.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_criticism

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-fundamentalism>

³ <https://peteenns.com/podcast/> Episode 137

Techniques and tools⁴

Step 1: I hope to have already helped you through step one, because it is to accept that reading the Bible, especially the **Old Testament narrative as literature** can be a positive life-giving exercise.



Step 2: ⁵Narrative criticism analyses narratives as complete tapestries, organic wholes, and attends to the constitutive features of narratives such as characters, setting, plot, literary devices (for example, irony), point of view, narrator, implied author, and implied reader.

Step 3: Specific narrative tools of the Bible

Dialogue: "transactions between characters typically unfold through the words they exchange, with only the most minimal intervention of the narrator". Alter thinks it significant to ask whether a speech is the first speech from a particular character; how the speech reveals the character; how the speech forces us to consider ambiguities of motives.

Repetition and amendment: When things are repeated in the Bible, even the slightest variation is meant to contribute to the plot, theme, and direction of the narrative⁶. Rob Bell points to the repetition of the phrasing 'cried out' in Judges 3.15 and Exodus 2.23, as being indicators that both narratives involve the LORD acting to bring freedom.

Names: The use/change of names often conveys significant elements of the narrative. Genesis 32.28 *Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'*

Type Scenes: Recurring images, scenes or settings. (Alter points out the appropriateness of Moses meeting his wife at a well. Not only is it a standard type-scene, but it also picks up the "water theme" that flows throughout Moses' life: He was drawn from the water; he drew water for the daughters of Jethro; he led the people through the water; he struck the rock that brought forth water; and he is denied entrance to the promised land by a sin in relation to water.⁷)

⁴ Photo by Todd Quackenbush on Unsplash

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_criticism#Narrative

⁶ <https://chadashby.com/2014/03/26/the-art-of-biblical-narrative-by-robert-alter/>

⁷ <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-37-gleanings-from-robert-alter-art-of-biblical-narrative/>