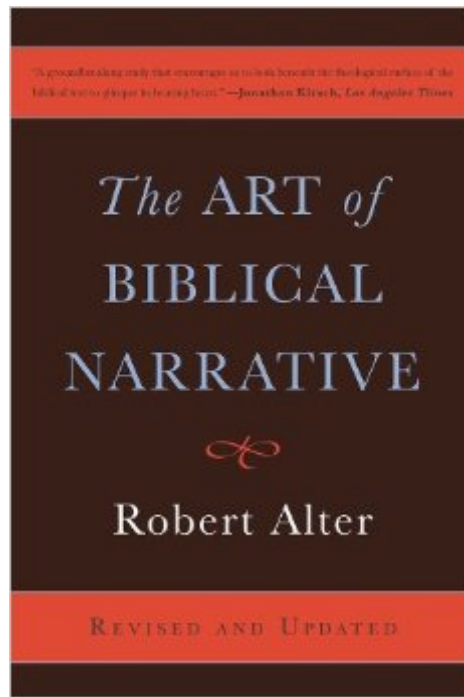


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The Art Of Biblical Narrative



Synopsis

Since it was first published nearly three decades ago, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* has radically expanded the horizons of biblical scholarship by recasting the Bible as a work of literary art deserving studied criticism. Renowned critic and translator Robert Alter presents the Hebrew Bible as a cohesive literary work, one whose many authors used innovative devices such as parallelism, contrastive dialogue, and narrative tempo to tell one of the most revolutionary stories of human history: the revelation of a single god.

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Customer Reviews

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is the sort of book that comes around once in a generation. For the most part, modern Biblical scholars are divided into two camps - homileticists, who tend to reduce every story in the Bible to a moral, and source critics, who chop up the text into various sources. Alter goes a third way. Alter's thesis is that the literary quality of the Bible has been sadly overlooked. To atone, so to speak, for this glaring omission, Alter sets out to show how the narratives in the Bible, even if constituted from a redacted text, nevertheless exhibit exquisite literary qualities. Alter convincingly demonstrates that if we overlook the art of how the stories are told, then we miss much of their meaning. Alter reveals various techniques used by the Biblical writers to make the stories so compelling. One technique is the reserve of the narrator who often leaves unspoken the motives of the characters, thereby drawing us into the story by compelling us to try to supply what the narrator has withheld. Wordplay, the skillful repetition of words and phrases - so often lost

in translation, connects seemingly disparate narratives into a fascinating montage. Type scenes, similar settings and stories such as meeting a future spouse at a well, play off each other, inviting the reader to compare and contrast what happens in one scene with its counterpart and to find meaning in these similarities and differences. The often laconic and subtle remarks of the narrator tend to support or undermine the words spoken and poses struck by the characters, which most of us will miss unless we learn to read the stories closely. Perhaps the most delicious part of Alter's book is his frequent recourse to the stories themselves in order to demonstrate his points. For example, Alter begins his book by examining the story of Judah and Tamar that falls in the middle of the Joseph story. Tamar, you will recall, was Judah's daughter-in-law. His son and her husband dies and the other brothers do not fulfill their obligation by levirate marriage to carry on the dead son's name by fathering children with Tamar. Tamar ultimately rights this wrong by seducing Judah and conceiving two children by him. Alter reads the story closely and convincingly argues that the story has been woven tightly into the Joseph story by various narrative techniques so that it becomes the fulcrum upon which the stories hinge, making Judah a different person in time for his momentous meeting with Joseph in Egypt. Alter's treatment of the Judah and Tamar story alone is worth the price of the book. Buy the book and read it, you'll never regret having done so. In fact, you'll find yourself rereading it over and over.

Modern Biblical scholarship has tended toward a process of atomization: how many editors were involved in the creation of the Bible? How many different strands of tradition can we find in a given story? Robert Alter's "The Art of Biblical Narrative" at once provides a corrective to this tendency, and a striking alternative way of understanding the Good Book. Although recent scholarship has emphasized historical- and textual-critical methodologies, Alter chooses a literary-critical approach; that is, he asks how we should read the Bible first and foremost as literature. Ancient Hebrew storytelling conventions were often radically different from those we use today, so we must learn to be attuned to things like a character's silence, or minor, telling variations in a scene that is repeated several times. In this way, Alter takes much of what may make the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) seem "boring" today--its Spartan narrative style, the apparent redundancy of many of its stories--and shows how these elements are actually integral to how the Bible tells its story. Alter's prose style is scholarly without being suffocating. It is, however, dense with ideas. I often found myself reading as little as five pages at a sitting, as each sentence seemed so full that it was all I could take in before I had to stop for a mental breather. (I recommend reading the Conclusion first, which ten pages provide an excellent summary of the book's main ideas and may make it easier to

digest them as the author investigates each one in detail in the rest of the book.) His examples are profuse, and well-chosen to illustrate his points. Alter mostly steers clear of ideological disputes about what the Bible is or isn't, sticking to his purely literary analysis of the text. He occasionally makes comments to the effect that he sees the stories of the Bible as "historicized fiction," but his approach can still fit into any faith framework; it is just as possible for a devout Christian and an atheist to read the Bible as literature. What's more, Christians will not only find an enriching way of appreciating their sacred text here, but may even gain comfort in the face of some scholars who seem to think that a Bible with editors is inherently an unreliable Bible. Alter, to the contrary, shows that the Biblical author-editors must have been very sophisticated storytellers, and that what are often taken for mere inconsistencies today may well represent a deeply thoughtful approach to depicting the moral and social ambiguities the authors saw in their world."The Art of Biblical Narrative" takes effort to read, but those willing to take the time to absorb it may find their understanding of the Bible enhanced, deepened, even changed.~

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