



The Art Of Biblical Poetry

Robert Alter

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Continuing his exploration of the art of the "Bible," Robert Alter provides a fresh interpretation of the poetry of the Old Testament and a lucid, original account of how biblical poetry works.

The Art Of Biblical Poetry Details

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Melissa says

Most of Alter's work can be summed up like this: What at first appears simple, even mechanical, is in fact a work of highly skilled artistry.

This book, on poetry, seemed like a bit of a slog when I was reading it; having read it I find myself noticing biblical poetry and paying more attention to the finer details that I might otherwise have missed. Alter spends the first three chapters explaining how poetry works in the Bible, especially the relationship between the smaller units that make up a line of Hebrew poetry (he calls them "versets"). A lot of the information seemed really familiar, since I'd taken Dr. Leithart's theology class and have heard James Jordan talk about Hebrew poetry quite a bit. The only really new piece of information was that some lines of Hebrew verse have THREE versets, not just two. That helped make sense of some poems that I hadn't been able to figure out before.

The real fun starts when Alter applies those principles to the various "genres" of poetry (psalm, proverb, prophecy, etc). His exegesis of Job is really astonishing, particularly how he points out the poet's insertion of cliches and simplifications into the mouths of Job's friends and compares them to the same point made with greater grandeur in the Lord's speech from the whirlwind. The section on Proverbs is also really good, as he treats each saying as an individual mini-poem with all the movement, contrast, and complexity of a larger verse crammed down into a very small saying.

All in all, quite excellent.

Brian says

Post-script: I really love this book and hopefully I'll be able to use it in re-reading various parts of the Bible. No question, Alter makes one realize that the Bible was a radical book including poetry to put the most subversive freeverse poet to shame. My favorite chapter remains the one on Job. After reading Nietzsche, it is especially good. My only complaint is I wish there had been a chapter on Ecclesiastes. This is the sort of poetry that Christians should begin any poetic education with.

Original: Whoa! Didn't see that one coming.

This book opens the Evangelical Christian to perhaps one of the few contributions of the 20th century.

Rest assured, Alter is as unnecessarily dense as ever, buying into the enlightenment pretensions about writing. But this time his more pointed barbs are aimed at modernists, whose attempts to get at the 'real' circumstances of the poems fail miserably, tearing them apart for historical origins and giving only the broadest technical understanding.

If Alter dislikes more Christian readings, it is because they tend to obscure poetic enjoyment and with that I must solidly agree: Christians need to see and explore the concrete beauty of the Psalms, avoiding enlightenment proposition-hunting and going beyond the most rudimentary appreciation.

I will go back to Alter's first chapters explaining how Hebrew poetry work as narratives with the tools of intensification, parallelism, specification, heightening, sequence, and more that I wish I knew better. Shame,

shame, shame on me.

He then goes on to describe the different genres: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Prophets, and the Song of Solomon. Ecclesiastes, alas, is not here. (Alter's book is very vulnerable to being exceeded.)

His chapters on Job and the Song of Songs are especially memorable. I had heard alternate interpretations of God's response to Job, but was unpersuaded, yet left with the uneasy feeling that God's words as traditionally interpreted are far too similar to those of the three friends. Alter easily points out the theological mistake: ignoring the form of Job as a poem makes us miss the key distinction between God and the friends. The friends speak of the world as understandable, orderly, ho-hum, the sun rises and sets, the good receive good and the bad receive worse. Yahweh in the whirlwind speaks with strong, vigorous imagery. The world He describes is wild, untame, fierce and far bigger than Job.

(To indulge in interpretation: God has raised up man for trouble, for wrestling. Job understands, unlike his friends, that the world is dangerous. It could eat them and no encyclopedia could stop it. God takes Job out of Himself so that he can see the bigger picture of creation, the creation that man like Job was meant to subdue and rule much like God did. Job is being told, "Come on, I want you to be strong enough to grapple with this!")

The Song of Songs chapter badly needs the kind of balance. Biblical, allegorical interpretation is necessary, but it is on the literal level, a secular song. This quote is too good not to quote: "Prevalent preconceptions about the Hebrew Bible lead us to think of it as a collection of writings rather grimly committed to the notions of the covenant, law, solemn obligation, and thus the very antithesis idea of play. ... Only in the Song of Songs however, is the writer's art directed to the imaginative realization of a world of uninhibited self-delighting play, without moral conflict, without the urgent context of history and nationhood and destiny, without the looming perspectives of a theological world-view. Poetic language and, in particular, its most characteristic procedure, figuration, are manipulated as pleasurable substance: metaphor transforms the body into spices and perfumes, wine and luscious fruit, all of which figurative images blur into the actual setting in which the lovers enact their love, a natural setting replete with just those delectable images."

The last chapter, though short, is perhaps the best stuff Alter has written. As with Job, traditional interpretations of the Bible need to have drilled the idea that form is content: "poetry is quintessentially the mode of expression in which the surface is the depth, so that through careful scrutiny of the configurations of the surface--the articulation of the line, the movement from line to poem, the imagery, the arabesques of syntax and grammar, the design of the poem as a whole--we come to apprehend more fully the depth of the poem's meaning."

He then explains how the sad state of affairs has not always been the case. The English Renaissance in particular could interact with the poems quite freely because they shared a common communal view of poet that broke down with Romanticism and its vision of the artiste.

"Wordsworth looking at the light dawning over Westminster Bridge tries to evoke in words an experience that is uniquely his, though of course he wants to make it intelligible to others through the act of writing. The psalmist, looking up at the moon and stars and pondering the majesty of the heaven and earth God made, uses his own feeling and perception as his point of departure, but they are not really his subject. Rather, in seeing this moment of the natural world's splendor, he is reminded of the timeless truth of the creation story, and he celebrates the created world not as an individual with a unique freight of personal experience but as a member of and eloquent spokesman for the generic category--man."

Doubtless there were differences, but they are differences to be gloried in. By contrast, we are the silent ones.

This is a huge part of our heritage that we have sold for a mess of pottage. Now, more than ever, I want to read God's speech to Job in the whirlwind in the original Hebrew. To enjoy it.

David Clark says

Two dear friends and trusted bibliophiles (Brian Volk and Leslie Leyland Fields) recently commented in these Goodreads electronic annals concerning Robert Alter's poetic translations of the Psalms. I have little to add to their thoughtful words except to concur that Alter's singing translation are wonderful. Once getting over my lifetime of familiarity with the King James Version, I have come to treasure Alter's translation.

I recently taught a short course on the Psalms and found the differences between Alter's and the KJV a useful matrix to begin discussing the Psalms. I used Alter's book, "The Art of Biblical Poetry" as my supplemental text and found that volume helpful fleshing out the discussion of Biblical poetry. I would recommend "The Art of Biblical Poetry" as a useful resource for teachers less comfortable with poetic form than with theological constructs. Actually, I would recommend both of Alter's texts as essential for those wishing to study the Psalms. Both Alter's books are full of well-written prose and poetry as well as scholarly analysis and critique--who could want more?

E says

Perhaps not as rich as his previous volume on Biblical narrative, which I read earlier in the year, but this work still punches above its weight (don't you hate stupid cliches?). Understanding Hebrew poetry is primarily about understanding how parallelism works. If something is repeated in a parallel line, there is ALWAYS a reason. And it's not merely to "fill out the line" or "keep the meter right," as some have supposed. Even "synonymous" parallelism has a purpose. When reading Hebrew poetry, ask yourself why the poet did why he did with the parallelism--he is heightening a metaphor? Expanding it? Contrasting it? Moving it along narratively? And so on and so forth.

So many of us read Hebrew poetry (especially the Psalms and prophets) just like we read prose. That is a mistake. Go read some George Herbert and John Donne, then flip over the psalms. Once you have your "poetry reading goggles on" from those other great Christian masters, you'll be opened to the beauty of the psalms. It takes practice.

Jesse Broussard says

Astonishingly, I wasn't quite as taken with this as I was with his Art of Biblical Narrative (an easy five star book, and one of my favourites of all time). I assumed, thinking trochee's and speaking in dactyls as I do (you try to fit "iambic" into an iamb without rewriting that sentence), that I would gravitate to the poetry. But I've read that one book (you know, that one with the blue cover...), I think it's "The Structure of Biblical Language" or something close to that a solid half-dozen times, and I felt that a lot of this book was already known to me. It was still excellent, just not as earth shaking as his Biblical Narrative was (for me, at least). Solid four stars.

Daniel Supimpa says

An interesting study on the nature of biblical nature. This work is not as brilliant as Alter's book on Narrative, but still a valuable endeavour. Alter provides an alternative to the more recently established model of biblical parallelism developed by James Kugel and refined by Adele Berlin, among others. His treatment of biblical metaphors and escalation are worth the read. Alter, however, gives little reference of other ANE poetical literature. Alter's explanation of ancient Hebrew poetry works is justified on the basis of the rhetoric and insightfulness of the resulting analysis, rather than of the possibilities available to the ancient authors. In other words, what is the foundation to affirm that the Hebrew poets aimed to create, say, escalation in developing biblical verses? There should be at least an indication that this was their purpose or context. Other than that, the book is highly readable and pleasant.

Parker says

Pros:

- + Alter goes deep into the forms and conventions of Hebrew poetry. I already knew about the primary forms of parallelism and such, but the further understanding I gleaned from this book made SO much more sense of the Psalms, Proverbs, and Prophets.
- + Profound insights into the literary intricacies of Biblical poetry -- especially Job, Proverbs, and Song of Songs.

Cons:

- + The organization of information within the first three chapters was, at times, difficult to wrap my head around. Headings might have helped.
 - + Unnecessarily long and daunting paragraphs.
-

Keith says

It wasn't until the mid-18th century, after thousands of years of readership and study, that Bishop Robert Lowth clearly identified parallelism as the structural foundation of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament. Yet it took another 250 years for this idea to receive a thorough and thoughtful study with this book by Robert Alter.

It's a remarkable book, and anyone who has read Alter's translation of the Psalms and the Book of Job can testify to his deep and aesthetic understanding of Old Testament Poetry. He provides an intensive study of the form and its use, as well as how the form varies from the Psalms to Job to the prophets.

Some of his analysis is painstaking and painful. When he strives to prove a point, he is unceasing in his argument. This can make sections of the book drag a bit. But he is an excellent, knowledgeable guide.

I find, though, his asides about poetry almost as interesting as his main argument. While discussing ancient Hebrew poetry he makes some deft comments on the uses and writing of poetry.

Alter starts with a very basic question: How do we even know that Hebrew poetry is even poetry? He cites a quote from Barbara Herrnstein Smith: "As soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rhythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we

know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly ... expecting certain effects from it and not others, granting certain conventions to it and not others.” (P.6)

“Every literary tradition converts the formal limitations of its own medium into an occasion for artistic expression: the artist, in fact, might be defined as a person who thrives on realizing new possibilities within formal limitations.” P. 24

“The artifice of form ... becomes a particular way of conceiving relations and defining linkages, sequence, and hierarchies in the reality to which the poet addresses himself. A poet who felt moved, let us say, to celebrate the teeming variety and vastness of the human and natural landscape would not get very far with the sonnet form, would need a kind of poetry vehicle that was more expansive, allow for free-flowing catalogues and effects of asymmetry and improvisation – would need, in short, something like Whitmanesque free verse.” P. 62

“... poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse. To be sure, in any given text, some of the proposed linkages may turn out to be a product of the interpreter’s ingenuity, and a poem may exhibit real disjunctures or inconsistencies where we look for intricate unities.” P. 113

“The Bible ... knows nothing of the personal lyric the anonymity of all but the prophetic poetry in the Bible is an authentic reflection of its fundamentally collective nature. ...The finished composition was meant to address the needs and concerns of the group, and was most commonly fashioned out of traditional materials and according to familiar conventional patterns that made it readily usable by the group for liturgical or celebratory or educational purposes.” P. 207

“Now, this collective traditionalist impulse of biblical poetry accorded nicely with a predisposition of Western poets until the Romantic revolution to conceive of their activity as a transmissible craft, the poet aspiring to be a master artisan rather than a daring explorer of the unique experience of the self.... From the late-twentieth-century perspective, this very notion of the dialect of an ideal community may seem rather alien because so many trends of poetry since the early Moderns, and since Rimbaud and Mallarme in France before them, have moved in the opposite direction of transforming poetry into a congeries of idiolects. For a long time, however, in many places and languages, poetry was practiced as such a dialect, and the ideal community, which for Western poets in clued in the first instance the major writers of classical Greece and Rome, was also often extended to the biblical poets, while for those writing in Hebrew the biblical poets were the very founders of that ideal community.” P. 207-8

B. Hawk says

Following on his work in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter turns his criticism to Hebrew poetry, using the same techniques of "literary" scholarship for analysis. In my mind, this book, unfortunately, is less successful than its predecessor. There are, of course, moments where the book is helpful. These come out most in the analyses of specific passages, when Alter is able to hone his generalities into particular literary exegesis. For students seeking to work on biblical poetry, these moments provide helpful base-lines from which to work; they are a type of starting-point to open further ways of reading. In this, the book is a helpful introduction at its most basic level.

Beginning with the familiar negative critiques of previous historical-critical biblical scholarship, Alter immediately sets his work as an innovation in understanding Hebrew literature--but it ultimately fails to demonstrate anything particularly illuminating about biblical poetry. Many of my disappointments, in fact, may be found in James Kugel's review (*Journal of Religion* 67 (1987), 66-79). As I suspected while I read this book (and as Kugel's review claims), there is little new proposed in Alter's basic literary approach to biblical poetry: he does, in fact, crib much of his own thinking from previous authors. Most notably and prominently, his thinking comes from a constellation of ideas expounded by Robert Lowth (1753), Benjamin Hrushovski (1971), and James Kugel himself (1981)--all of whom had discussed parallelism in biblical poetry before. The difference, for Alter, is that he sets all of these concepts within a (formalist) "literary" way of reading, in stark opposition to the "excavative" critics he insists on attacking.

For an introduction to the subject, Alter's book is worth a look--especially for its place in the rise of "literary" criticism on the Bible; in the end, however, Alter's work doesn't quite live up to expectations.

Travis Johnston says

Good book for an intro to Biblical poetry. A bit reductionistic in places, but at least he is willing to admit it.

Timothy Decker says

So many insightful comments and helpful ways of approaching biblical poetry... but ironically speaking of Hebrew verse with flowery prose made this book 100 pages too long and read extra slowly!

Nelson says

Oh man! I feel like such a cultured person now. I enjoyed this even more than Alter's acclaimed *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. He takes analysis of Biblical parallelisms beyond just synonymous phrases we talked about in David Rolph Seely's Old Testament class. The second parallel line "focuses" on the first one (more on this later).

Alter begins with three chapters on the poetic structures of the Bible: parallelisms, intensification, and poetry embedded into narrative.

Then he devotes chapters to examples of Biblical poetry: Psalms, statements of faith from man to God; prophetic poetry (mostly Isaiah), where the prophet raises current events into cosmic ones; Proverbs, which is improv!; Songs of Solomon, which is love poetry between a woman stalking her lover at night, and the man describing how perfectly carved the woman's curves are; and Job, where Yahweh uses poetry of a quality superior to Job's. Job talks about wishing he experienced still birth where everything becomes dark and the scope of his vision shrinking, until all one sees is the mother's womb. Yahweh's response in Job 38 is a grand description of the vast expanse of his creation contrasted with Job's myopia.

Alter's classification of parallelisms:

1. A movement from an ordinary term in the first line to a literary one in the second.

Isa. 59:9 we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness;
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

light-->brightness
darkness-->gloom

2. A movement from a common noun in the first line to an explanatory epithet in the second:

Isa 59:10 We grope like the blind along a wall,
groping like those who have no eyes;

The second line explains that a blind person is one with no eyes.

3. Movement from a literal statement to a metaphorical elaboration:

Jer 48:11 Moab has been at ease from his youth,
settled like wine on its dregs;
he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel,
nor has he gone into exile;

Unscuffled security --> settled wine

Alter's analysis of Prophetic poetry

What distinguishes prophetic poetry from other types of Biblical poetry?

"Powerfully vocative [direct address] character."

Direct address to historically real audience, from God to man. Compared with:

Songs of Solomon: Direct address between two idealized lovers

Proverbs: Direct address between sage and student

Psalms: Direct address from man to God.

Why poetry?

Poetry = richest form of human communication. Divine speech should reflect that.

Solemn, Weighty, forceful.

Densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, implications.

Subject is concrete historical audience, but form of speech has historical indeterminacy: can touch the lives of millions removed in time and space from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, etc.

"The outer limit of archetype is myth, and, for all that has been written about the demythologizing impulse of the Hebrew Bible, prophetic poetry exhibits a certain predilection to mythologize its historical subjects, setting the here and now in cosmic perspectives."

Nebuchadnezzar read into Lucifer, fallen Son of Dawn (Isa 14).

Suffering servant (King Hezekiah?) into Jesus, or collective Israel in Holocaust (Isa 53).

Main purpose of prophetic books: Reproof.

Secondary purposes of prophetic poetry:

Conjure up visions of radiant restoration (e.g. Amos 9:13-16).

"The monitory poems of the prophets are dominated by images of wasteland, uprooting and burning, darkness, enslavement and humiliation, stripping of garments, divorce and sexual abandoning, earthquake and storm. The poems of consolation are dominated by images of flourishing vineyards and fields, planting and building, shining light, liberation and real dignity, splendid garb, marital reconciliation and sexual union, firm foundations and calm."

Wrestle with weight of prophet's own vocation (e.g. Jer. 20:7-13).

Principal modes of prophetic poetry.

Direct accusation. Directly calling listeners the names they earned, reminder of all they perpetrated, which shades into

Satire. Sarcasm and irony for depiction of practices, institutions, and paraphernalia, the punitive

Impending disaster. Special momentum of narrativity in Biblical verse used in castigation for moral depravity or cultic disloyalty.

Prophecy raises current people and events to cosmic level.

Gina says

This is an enjoyable introduction to Biblical poetry, particularly Job, Proverbs, Palms, Song of Songs and passages from the Prophets. The focus is on the poetic device "semantic parrallelism" (identified by Robert Lowth in 1753), which is not thoroughly/explicitly defined but adequately exhibited. What I find most pleasing is that Robert Alter writes not only to convey what he understands or knows but also what he feels for (and believes about) the poetic texts and, indeed, for the poetic language of the Hebrew Bible. I get a sense that what he really wants to get at - beyond "a firmer grasp of biblical poetics" - is the importance of plunging into Biblical poetry, experiencing it or getting to know it. He writes: "...poetry is quintessentially the mode of expression in which the surface is the depth, so that through careful scrutiny of the configurations of the surface... we come to apprehend more fully the depth of the poem's meaning" (p 256). For poets, there is the promise of apprehending "the essential music" but for others prosaic and careful analysis will suffice (p 267).

Daniel says

A useful guide to the essentials of biblical poetic structure and form, laying out the general principles of parallelism and intensification and looking at the specific structures of the different poetic books. However, although supposedly intended for a general readership (and hence not featuring the Hebrew originals alongside the translations, which I found frustrating), there was considerable use of technical literary-analytical terms which I found confusing, as if this were intended more for the general student of literature rather than the general reader.

CJ Bowen says

Alter is tremendously helpful, and has an excellent poetic ear and metaphorical imagination. His treatments of the major works of Hebrew poetry found in the OT provide stimulating and original commentary on these difficult works.

No poet myself, I stare at Alter's work with the same expression on my face as when I watch an auto mechanic, but at the end, I have a better grasp of how biblical poetry works, centered around the intensified imagery of semantic parallelism. Alter's closing words on how biblical poetry can be rightly appropriated only as poems represents a challenge to my interpretive habits, and a call to dig deeper.
