

Writing Bible: Robert Alter's *David Story*

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For more than twenty years, Robert Alter has been making a case for the validity and value of reading the Bible as literature. His countless insightful readings have demonstrated the ways in which attention to literary features can enhance our understanding of biblical texts and increase the delight we take in reading them. Now, more than two decades after the publication of the groundbreaking *Art of Biblical Narrative* (1983), the “literary approach” to the Bible has become an integral part of scholarly and lay encounters with the biblical texts.

In *The David Story*, Alter boldly extends his argument regarding the literary nature of the Bible. Up until the publication of this volume, Alter had made his case through the genre of literary criticism. In *The David Story*, he turns to the art of literary composition. He goes beyond arguing that the Bible can be read as literature to create a biblical text that is, first and foremost, literature. As its title suggests, it is not just a translation of a canonical sequence of texts. It is a coherent, character driven narrative—*The David Story*.

For a scholar like myself, who explores the forms in which Jews, especially in antiquity, have encountered and accessed biblical texts, this description of Alter's project is not an accusation, but rather a compliment. In creating *The David Story*, Alter participates in a two millennia-long tradition of texts that reproduce the words of the Hebrew Bible or represent them with a high degree of fidelity, but are nonetheless different from the canonical versions of the Hebrew text. These are Bibles that are not the Hebrew Bible, and biblical texts that are not subsets of it. Translations are the most obvious examples. The Septuagint, the Vulgate, the King James Version, and their many descendants are all products of the creative and interpretive process of translation. None of these translations is identical to the text from which it is translated. However, all of them are certainly Bibles. The phenomenon can also occur without translation; within the Jewish tradition, there are many cases where the Hebrew words of the biblical text are reproduced verbatim, but the resulting text is still different from that of the canonical Hebrew Bible. The texts of the lectionary serve as prime examples. The division of the Pentateuch into weekly portions and the pairing of each pentateuchal portion with a

reading from the Prophets create texts that, though identical in their wording to the canonical biblical texts, often communicate different meanings from the texts in their canonical contexts. One of the best examples of this is the designation of Gen. 12:1 as the beginning of a weekly Torah portion. This lectionary decision severs the connection between God's command to Abraham to travel to "the land that I will show you" (a.k.a. Canaan) in Gen 12:1 from the journey of Abraham's family from Ur to Canaan that began in 11:31. By beginning the Torah portion in 12:1 the creators of the lectionary cycle encourage readers to see Abraham's trip as one that originates with the divine command rather than as a continuation of the familial journey. This view of Abraham conforms more closely to the rabbinic understanding of the character as the epitome of divine obedience than to the more complex and ambiguous characterization that arises from a reading of the biblical text in its canonical order. Translations and lectionary portions are just two examples among many of the creation of new biblical texts. One could also cite the selection and use of verbatim biblical texts as liturgical texts or magic amulets.

In *The David Story*, Alter uses time-honored processes to add a new and strikingly modern variation to this collection of new biblical texts. What, then, is *The David Story*? How is it different from the Hebrew texts of 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2 in their canonical context? In his first words to the reader, Alter states:

The major sequence that runs, according to the conventional book and chapter divisions of later editorial traditions, from I Samuel to I Kings is one of the most astounding pieces of narrative that has come down to us from the ancient world. The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, and the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behavior warped by the pursuit of power. And nowhere is the Bible's astringent narrative economy, its ability to define characters and etch revelatory dialogue in a few telling strokes, more brilliantly deployed.

(Alter 1999, ix)

In this opening salvo, Alter articulates defining characteristics of *The David Story*. It is literature; it is character-focused and driven, and it is "a story." The rest of the introduction elaborates on these claims. To assert the literariness of the work, Alter identifies the "author" as "someone who manifestly delights in the writerly pleasures of his craft... He has an ear for dialogue [and] a keen sense of the thematic sense of analogue between one episode and another"

(Alter 1999, xxii). In his ability to “transcend the limitations of [his] own ideological points of departure,” he resembles “Shakespeare, Stendhal, Balzac, Tolstoy [and] Proust” (Alter 1999, xxii). Alter affirms the narrative coherence of the text sequence that he translates by referring to it as “a narrative” (Alter 1999, xvii), an “elaborately wrought literary vehicle” (Alter 1999, xviii), and, most frequently, “a story.” According to Alter, David’s character is the animating concern of this “story”: David “is, in sum, the first full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince in Western literature” (Alter 1999, xviii).

Having read *The David Story*, I am largely in agreement with Alter’s description of this work. When reading this book, I was carried along in a dramatic and epic story of politics, intrigue, and conflict. I was seduced by the truly amazing character of David, whose larger-than-life complexities manage to astound, seduce, and horrify without ever overstepping the limits of epic believability. The story was indeed reminiscent of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Stendhal.

Alter’s description of *The David Story*, however, does not as aptly describe the sequence of Hebrew texts that comprises 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2. In his characterization of *The David Story*, Alter intertwines claims of literary artistry with those of narrative coherence. However, these two characteristics are quite distinct. It is certainly possible for a work to be literary and yet lack narrative coherence. A collection of short stories or a post-modern novel can be structured around shifting perspectives rather than around narrative coherence. Even the Qur’an would be another case in point. Similarly, there are certainly narratively coherent stories that are not marked by literary artistry. Within the field of biblical scholarship, Alter’s claim of narrative coherence is far more controversial than his claim of literary artistry. While the narratives in the books of Samuel are recognized by even the most orthodox source critics as being among the best examples of the Bible’s literary art, there is no consensus regarding the coherence of the textual sequence. As Alter acknowledges in his introduction, most biblical scholars (Alter included) understand this text sequence to be made up of pre-existent traditions. However, scholars differ over the nature of the final form of the text. Where Alter sees a thorough reworking of these pre-existing traditions into a coherent narrative, others see a “stringing together of virtually independent sources” (Alter 1999, x). Indeed, the canonical sequence provides ample evidence for both sides. There are numerous moments in the text where the disjunction between units is paramount, and numerous others in which the artful weaving together of episodes dominates the text. In creating *The David Story*, Alter uses strategies of format, translation, and selection to underscore and aug-

ment unifying features present in 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2. In so doing, he transforms the canonical sequence of texts into a work that can aptly be called *The David Story*.

Before the reader even opens the book, its format alerts her to its essentially literary character. To my knowledge, *The David Story* is the first time that a translation of a unit of biblical text that is not identical to a traditional canonical division has been given a new, non-canonical title and has been packaged and marketed as literature. Unlike Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* and *The Book of Psalms*, which are categorized by their publisher, W.W. Norton, as "religion," *The David Story* is categorized as "religion/literature." While the other two volumes conform materially to the conventions of scripture publishing—*The Five Books of Moses* is a large, boxed volume; *The Book of Psalms* has an iconic lyre on the cover—*The David Story* conforms to the printing conventions of contemporary fiction. Its trim size, cover design, and paper stock make it look and feel like a novel. While the physical appearance of the book is certainly superficial, the material form of scriptural texts has always shaped audiences' expectations. Just as the monumental size and rich adornment of Bibles designed for liturgical use shape expectations of authority and gravitas, the format of the *David Story* encourages the reader to expect a work of literary fiction and to read it accordingly. The front matter reinforces these expectations. While Alter's other translations open with an "Introduction," this volume opens with a section entitled "To the Reader," a rubric which playfully invokes eighteenth century novelistic conventions rather than those of the academy or scriptural tradition.

While the packaging and framing of *The David Story* signal its literariness, the format, parameters, and translation strategies augment its narrative coherence. Many biblical translations use layout to help readers to navigate the biblical text. For example, the *Oxford Annotated Bible* prints the text of each biblical book continuously; chapter divisions are not marked by corresponding page breaks. At the same time, there are subtitles printed in the headers of each page that identify the topic of the unit of text printed on the page. These topic headings are supplemented by headings in the notes that identify discrete episodes or topics within the text. The continuous layout suggests that the chapter headings are not useful guides to text divisions, while the subtitles in the header and notes suggest that the text is, in terms of meaning, a composite made up of smaller discrete episodes or topics. In contrast, *The David Story* is formatted according to the conventions of contemporary fiction. By laying out the text according to the traditional chapter breaks, which are often formal markers rather than indicators of content

breaks within the text, and by refraining from identifying sub-sections within the text, Alter downplays the literary disjunctions within the text. While the notes identify the literary sign-posts that strongly mark the beginnings and ends of discrete episodes, the layout of the text downplays these divisions.

Alter's signature translation strategies also lend a high degree of lexical coherence and a strong forward movement to the text itself. Alter's decision to translate repeated Hebrew words by a single English equivalent wherever possible creates a sense of lexical unity and coherence that these repetitions do not necessarily effect in the Hebrew. Readers of the Hebrew text of the Bible are accustomed to its relatively small vocabulary and do not necessarily experience the repetition of words as signs of literary coherence. Readers of English literature, however, are accustomed to greater lexical variety. For these readers, the reproduction of the Bible's small vocabulary creates an unusual sense of lexical coherence that encourages an impression of narrative and compositional coherence as well. Alter's decision to translate the particle *vav* as "and" wherever possible is one of his most powerful strategies for augmenting the text's sense of narrative coherence. As any reader of the Hebrew Bible knows, *vav* is ubiquitous in Hebrew narrative. However, most readers and translators ascribe to it a variety of lexical and semantic functions. Sometimes it functions as "and," sometimes it functions as "but," and sometimes it is best understood as functioning as punctuation that establishes a relationship between clauses or sentence elements. By translating most *vav*'s as "and," Alter creates a strong narrative engine that pulls the reader along the sequence of "and's" from one clause or action to the next. These editorial and translational strategies underscore the elements of coherence and downplay the elements of disjunction experienced by a reader of the Hebrew text.

Alter's choice of parameters is one of the strongest strategies for creating a coherent *David Story*. As Alter notes in his preface, scholars have hypothesized numerous sub-divisions of 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2. At the same time, this material is situated canonically in a Russian-doll structure of narratives. The parameters of each of these concentric units of text define the themes and narrative center of gravity of the resulting unit. In their entirety, the books of Samuel and Kings narrate a fictional history of the monarchies of Israel and Judah. The entire canonical unit of the former prophets, which begins in Joshua and stretches through 2 Kings, narrates the fictional history of Israel from its entrance into the land of Canaan. The concatenation of this narrative sequence with the Torah situates it in a history extending back to creation itself. Each of these canonical units—1 Samuel to 2 Kings; Joshua to 2 Kings; Genesis to 2 Kings—circumscribes a different "story" with a unique narrative

arc and its own set of themes, concerns, and intertextual echoes.

Alter begins *The David Story* in 1 Samuel 1, fifteen chapters before the appearance of David himself. Alter provides insight into the decision by noting that “[t]he story of David...cannot be separated from the story of the man he displaces, Saul” (Alter 1999, xix). While one can argue that this is true, one could make the same claim regarding the relationship between the stories of David and Solomon. Solomon’s building of the Temple marks the complete fulfillment of the dynastic oracle in 2 Samuel 7, and the secession of the Northern kingdom after Solomon’s death is the logical climax of the tenuous attachment of the Northern tribes to the Davidic dynasty narrated in the books of Samuel. Despite the strong narrative and thematic continuities that run through 1 Samuel 15 to 1 Kings 11, Alter begins his story in 1 Samuel 1 and ends it in 1 Kings 2 with Solomon’s first consolidation of power and authority. Why begin and end here? How do these decisions contribute to the construction of *The David Story*? What are their consequences? By including the story of Saul in *The David Story*, Alter re-codifies the canonical position that understands Saul’s reign as the necessary unsuccessful prequel to David’s. As Alter himself notes, this view is transparently partisan. It is more than likely that a resident of the non-Davidic kingdom of Israel that flourished for more than a century before being conquered by the Assyrians would have had a different view of the matter. For this northerner, the sequence of episodes that comprise Saul’s rise and fall might have been *the* story which ended with the Davidic usurpation of the throne from Saul’s heirs. Alter, however, reproduces the political position of the Davidic redactors and uses the Saul story to buttress the validity of David’s kingship, despite his weaknesses and failings. At the same time, the choice to begin with 1 Samuel 1 helps make the David story conform to the genre of epic stories about the rise and fall of powerful men. A mainstay of many of these stories is the agonistic and oedipal relationship between fathers and sons, predecessors and successors. The choice to begin with 1 Samuel 1 insures that *The David Story* will deliver the familiar readerly pleasures that such relationships provide. While Saul’s story functions as a prequel, Solomon’s story is merely an afterword. By ending in 1 Kings 2 with Solomon’s consolidation of power, Alter creates a biblical *Bildungsroman* in which the central concern is the life of its protagonist rather than the larger national history of which David’s reign is a part.

As I said above, I found Alter’s project to be largely successful. Through the strategies discussed above, he creates a *David Story* that offers up many of the pleasures that its title suggest. At the same time, though, elements of

the text complicate and resist Alter's character-driven narrative shaping. As he notes, many of the individual episodes in the text are incredibly artful literary gems. Many of these stories (e.g., David and Goliath, David and Bathsheba) have had long lives as independent stories in folk, literary, and artistic traditions, and are often marked off as discrete stories in the narrative sequence itself. The density and coherence of these episodes encourage the reader to stop and savor them. Literary codas like that which concludes David's anointing in 1 Samuel 16 ("And the spirit of the lord gripped David from that day onward. And Samuel rose and went to Ramah") are the opposite of cliffhangers. They signal closure to the reader rather than urging her onward. The "doublets" in the story (e.g., the different versions of David's introduction into the court, the two stories of the defeat of Goliath) also challenge the impression of coherence and narrative teleology. Alter encourages the reader to approach these episodes as complementary to one another; the different stories of David's introduction provide double validation for his accession to the throne. However, they can also be read contrastively: one can ask how these doublets critique, revise, or problematize one another. Such a reading might enhance the portrait of David, but would disrupt the narrative coherence of the text. Finally and paradoxically, Alter's insightful and conscientious commentary introduces a dynamic of atomization into the experience of reading the text. The detailed notes that alert the reader to differences in ancient versions, intertextual allusions, insights from other scholars, and Alter's own observations about the text lead the reader into the sort of atomizing encounter with the text that is the hallmark of midrashic and scholarly reading and lead her away from the coherent novelistic encounter that Alter seems to want to foster.

This co-existence of unifying and disjunctive literary features is one of the signature features of the Hebrew Bible in its canonical form. The debate that Alter invokes over the literary coherence of the books of Samuel plays itself out in nearly every book of the canon. In this volume, Alter underscores and augments the elements of coherence and creates a text that he can aptly describe as a "full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince" (Alter 1999, xviii). This project made me wonder what would happen if a translator/editor as talented as Alter set his mind to carving out a different work of literature, one that foregrounded and augmented the disjunctive, perspectival, and episodic elements, from this same unit of text. Such a cubist portrait would be equally literary but dramatically different from the full-length portrait that Alter has created.

References

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