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The Tacit Agenda of a Literary Approach to the Bible

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ABSTRACT

Robert Alter's The Art of Biblical Narrative (1981) did not merely aim to elucidate the literary structure of the Bible for a broad audience; it also sought to articulate the moral and theological vision of the Bible. In this respect it parallels the efforts of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, whose essays on biblical translation collected in Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung (1936) claimed the mantle of critical scholarship but, more importantly, strove to guide readers to a meaningful encounter with the biblical text. This article argues that a common theological agenda animates both Alter's and Buber-Rosenzweig's projects and informs the metaliterary significance that the authors ascribe to the literary approach to the Bible.

Literary approaches to the Bible have served an important role in the effort to rescue this once-singular text from the apparently dismantling effects of critical biblical scholarship. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the critique of biblical authorship, the growing understanding of the Near Eastern cultural context in which the Hebrew scriptures emerged, and the problem of textual integrity all challenged the Bible's authority and relevance. In response, twentieth-century adherents of literary methods have combated these multiple assaults on the exceptionality of the text by teaching readers and students that the scriptures could be meaningful not because they are historically accurate or generically unique, but because they are well crafted, beautiful, and thus compelling. But the case for the artistry of the Bible has also lent itself to speculations that go beyond the strictly literary realm. In an age of religious claims that tend toward the dilute or the fundamentalist, the literary scholar's work often serves a theological role.

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* has, perhaps more than any other book, transmitted an appreciation of the literary genius of the biblical text to a wide audience. This achievement would not have been as successful, however, had it not wrestled with the broader questions of the Bible's significance that more than a century of scholarly criticism posed to would-be readers. This article places Alter's struggle to reclaim the Bible not only as a literary but also as a theological and moral masterpiece in the context of an earlier effort that strove toward the same ends. Half a century before the appearance of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig likewise aimed to reach lay readers with a pioneering approach to the Bible. They harbored a particular dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the methods of higher criticism. But their contribution went beyond mere critique; Buber and Rosenzweig, by attending to the artistry of the text, identified a powerful language for articulating the Bible's significance in an age in which secure theological or historical grounds for the text's claims no longer existed. Their essays and working papers on this topic, collected and published as *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*,¹ provide a particularly rich source for investigating the theological temptations of the literary approach at its very inception. His now-classic text sought to address the religious, and not only the literary, status of the text and thus can be illuminated through an investigation of how the assumptions built into Buber and Rosenzweig's project of recuperating the Bible also animate *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

My juxtaposition of the two efforts focuses on three points of contact: first, the authors' characterization of higher criticism and their proposal for how its potentially disruptive implications for religious readings of the Bible can be overcome; second, the identification of the *Leitwort* as a characteristic of Hebrew biblical prose in which the text's metaliterary import was to be found; and third, the authors' invocation of rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegesis to illustrate the literary method. It is not my intent to make an argument for the historical precedence or genealogical influence of Buber and Rosenzweig on later readers of the Bible. Rather, I use the earlier authors' work to uncover the theological considerations that are inseparable from the constitutive elements of what we now recognize as a literary approach to the Bible. I argue that the effort to reveal a coherent, dynamic, and robust religious vision within the text motors Alter's classic study of

the Bible, much as it does Buber and Rosenzweig's essays on biblical style. For all three writers, the text's literary structure, narrowly defined, invites study in large part because it served as a portal to this broader understanding of the text's ongoing moral and theological import.

At first glance, the two projects under consideration bear little resemblance to one another. In *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) attempted to give an account of the work that they were doing in translating the Hebrew Bible into German, a project that began in 1925 and that Buber completed more than three decades after Rosenzweig's death. Rather than striving to present a "method," the authors reflected on topics that piqued their particular theological and hermeneutic interests, explaining as they did so the principles that emerged in the process of producing their remarkable, unusual translation. Neither Buber nor Rosenzweig approached the Bible as scholars of biblical literature, but rather as men with training in philosophy whose commitment to Jewish texts, education, and communal revitalization informed their view of the task. The larger project that they aimed to realize, through their Bible translation, was that of placing modern, historically and critically sensitive readers into a direct "encounter" with the Hebrew Bible. They undertook this work neither as academics nor as popularizers but as *engagé* intellectuals who asked their readers to "confront their lives with the word."²

Robert Alter, though likewise a nonspecialist, came to the Bible via a very different route. With training in modern European literature, Alter's references are more likely to be to Joyce than to Luther. Unlike Buber and Rosenzweig, Alter did not present himself as bringing individuals or communities nearer to scripture; the argument of *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (henceforth *ABN*) centered on the more limited goal of establishing the necessity and suitability of bringing a literary eye and ear to the Bible. Alter made his case in a compact book distinguished by limpid, elegant, and utterly persuasive prose. His project had ample precedents; indeed, one of the successes of *ABN* lay in bringing the "literary approach" to broader audiences than had already been reached by the work of Benno Jacob, Umberto Cassuto, Meir Sternberg, Michael Fishbane, and the many others who, since the time of Buber and Rosenzweig, had labored in similar pursuits within and without academia. His triumph is indisputable: it would be

only a slight exaggeration to say that Alter, something of a maverick among biblical scholars, has become almost a household name among educated lay readers.

The two approaches toward the biblical text this article examines share more of an agenda than their authors' dissimilar origins would suggest. Both projects emerged out of a dissatisfaction with the intellectual discussions of the Bible around them, none of which, our authors held, was able to account for the enduring religious significance of the Bible. Singled out for special mention were the methods of source criticism and historical criticism, which both Buber-Rosenzweig and Alter regarded as having wrongly assumed the place of arbiter of religious meaning of the Bible. Thus, for instance, while Buber and Rosenzweig did not deny the validity of the critical methods developed in the nineteenth century for handling the biblical text, they believed that criticism founded upon the classical Documentary Hypothesis was unable to account for the artistry of the Bible and its lasting pull on its readers. Buber and Rosenzweig, troubled as much by the anti-Jewish bias they perceived in the scholarly methods as by the methods themselves, presented a selective and radically simplified version of higher criticism in making their case. They hoped to show that the poverty of meaning resulting from a strictly source-critical approach demanded an alternative mode of reading and accounting for the Bible. They found, in quasi-literary methods, a new foundation upon which to base a new account of the Bible's enduring power.

Buber, Rosenzweig, and Alter all regard the gap between the redacted layer of the text and the various composite elements of it as a critical tool for challenging higher criticism's monopoly on the meaning of the biblical text. Rosenzweig distinguished between investigating the Bible "as written"—as a text containing multiple voices and visions—and the Bible "as read," that is, as a text whose polyvocality is ultimately reconciled in its redacted integrity.³ This approach did not deny the claims made by higher criticism, but aimed to limit its significance for communities and readers of faith. Rosenzweig explained his position in a 1927 letter:

Were Higher Criticism right that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are in fact by different writers . . . [i]t would also be the case that what we need to know of creation cannot be learned from one of the two chapters alone but only from their being juxtaposed and read together [*ihrem Zusammenstehn und Zusammenklingen*]. The critical distinction begins precisely when the apparent contradictions ring out together: thus the “cosmological” chapter, which leads up to man, and the contrasting “anthropological” second chapter, which begins from man.⁴

Alter was drawn to the same famous example of biblical inconsistency and redundancy, and his argument echoes Rosenzweig: multiple authorship should not prematurely lay the question of meaning to rest. It is “obvious enough,” he acknowledges, that the two creation stories “are complementary rather than overlapping.” The stories, each begotten of a different author, produce apparent contradictions when they are juxtaposed. But put positively, one may detect within each story a distinctive literary integrity, which for Alter is “not simply a bundle of stylistic predilections but a particular vision of God, man, and the world.”⁵ What interests Alter is the inclusion of both creation narratives into a whole that presents itself as a single text. He ventures to state the meaning of this juxtaposition as follows: “[T]he Genesis author chose to combine these two versions of creation precisely because he understood that his subject [God, human being, world] was essentially contradictory, essentially resistant to consistent linear formulation, and that this was his way of giving it the most adequate literary expression.”⁶ Alter enjoins the reader to view the textual contradictions as fruitful; he offers himself not only as a commentator of literary training but as a reader of existential proclivities. His assessment of the Genesis narrative(s) does not require any particular religious belief, but, as David Norton has pointed out, it certainly accommodates belief.⁷ This balance is surely key to the book’s tremendous appeal. But beyond a carefully maintained agnosticism lies something yet more appealing: Alter’s glosses on the significance of the literary structure of the Bible offer readers a *substitute* for belief. In this subtle transformation of literary reading into religious guide to the Bible, Alter himself becomes a contemporary commentator for a sophisticated audience skeptical of confessional orthodoxies.

In both treatments of Genesis 1 and 2, our authors acknowledge the apparent repetition (i.e., the fact of the *two* accounts of creation) and contradictions that seem to result from the stories' differences. But for Rosenzweig, and Alter after him, the question of *why* these two accounts coexist is of primary concern. To be sure, many source critics, and especially redaction critics, have noted and investigated the moral and theological significance of the differences between the P and J creation stories.⁸ But both Buber-Rosenzweig's and Alter's points depend upon a skewed characterization of higher criticism as a monolith to be supplanted: for each of them, the literary method stood in clear contradistinction to classical source criticism as a whole, which, they alleged, had missed the point of the admittedly composite text. Whether "R" (the "redactor" of higher criticism) or the biblical writers had bequeathed the text to its later readers, it was an artistic work crafted with great literary skill and existential insight.⁹

LEITWORTE AS THEOLOGICAL CLUES

Buber and Rosenzweig identified the use of recurring etymological roots and words within and across biblical narratives as a signature characteristic of biblical prose, and their translation—heralded by some readers and scorned by others—was driven in part by the desire to make these recurring roots known to the reader. In a 1927 address entitled "The Bible as Storyteller,"¹⁰ Buber described *Leitworte*, or "theme-words," as follows:

By *Leitwort* we mean a word or a word-root that repeats meaningfully within a text, a sequence of texts, or a set of texts: to the one who pursues these repetitions, a meaning of the text is opened up or clarified, or at any rate will be revealed more insistently. As we have said, it need not be the same word, but rather may be the same word-root that recurs in such a way; actually, it is often through the very differences that the dynamic cumulative effect is conveyed. I call it "dynamic" because within the sounds that are related to each other thus, a movement occurs: the one to whom the whole is present feels the waves batter

against one another all around. The measured repetition that corresponds to the inner rhythm of the text, or, better yet, pours out from it, is by all counts the most powerful of means for proclaiming meaning without stating it.¹¹

A defining characteristic of Buber and Rosenzweig's translation is its rigid adherence to the principle of translating the *Leitworte* consistently, making the linguistic connections within the text apparent to the reader. (This approach, used with varying degrees of moderation, has informed a small but important set of English translations that have come in their wake, including Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses* and Robert Alter's own recent translation of the Pentateuch.¹²)

Buber drew on the Pentateuch narratives of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), Korach (Num. 16-17), and the Abraham cycle (Gen. 12-18) to illustrate his concept of *Leitworte*. Buber argues that the Korach story is "controlled" primarily by the *Leitwort yud-ayin-daled* (which yields permutations of "appoint" such as *'edah*, or community, and *mo'ed*, an appointed time or place of meeting).¹³ He explains that the *Leitworte* point to the meaning of the story, where "meaning" went beyond the claims of narrative coherence to that of religious truth. For instance, in the case of the Korach narrative, the recurring words and roots place recurring emphasis on the motif of assembly and the specific problem of appointing legitimate authority for the community.¹⁴ Appreciating the significance of this challenge, Buber argues, depends on understanding Korach's community (*'edah*) as challenging the community (*'edah*) of the people Israel, who encounter God in the "tent of meeting" (*ohel mo'ed*): "This," Buber declares, "is Korach's *'edah*: the false *'edah* within the authentic, the usurped *'edah* within the founded, the *'edah* that speaks of God and holiness within the *'edah* that is once again called upon by God to *become* holy to him just before this event (Num. 15:40)."¹⁵ At stake is a homiletical point that is inextricable from the literary observation: the narrative, in Buber's view, aims to draw attention to the difference between Korach, who declares himself and his community holy, and the community of Israel, led by Moses, who understand that God alone has the power to elect.¹⁶ The *Leitworte* became a critical translational issue for Buber, because only by understanding and properly rendering this type of paronomasia in the

Bible could the translator enable the reader to grasp the theological point of the narratives. Understanding the text is thus defined as understanding not only the text's artistic but also its theological meaning.

Rosenzweig foregrounded the significance of the *Leitworte* to an even greater degree than Buber's original address did.¹⁷ Rosenzweig's 1928 essay, "The Formal Secret of Biblical Narratives," delights in the measure-for-measure effect created by the repeated use of particular words: the repetition of the word "deceit" (Ger., *Trug*; Heb., *mirmah*) emphasizes Jacob's deception of Isaac, repaid by Laban's subsequent deception of Jacob; the phrase "for then" [Ger., *drum daß nun*; Heb., *ki 'atah*] highlights Bilaam's mistreatment of his ass when the phrase is used a second time by the angel in his rebuke of Bilaam.

Buber and Rosenzweig make a number of important moves in their explanation of the *Leitworte*. Both authors identify each *Leitwort* with a single message within the stories. Sometimes the correspondence between the root-word in question and the meaning of the story is indirect, even subversive or ironic, but in each case, a hidden but nonetheless decipherable message can be discerned within the text. The authors imply that this message was planted in the biblical narratives by what we today might dubiously call an Intelligent Designer: the text, Buber and Rosenzweig imply, is simply too brilliant and complex to have come about through ordinary human processes. Both authors endowed the *Leitworte* with the power of authorial intent, but they never directly addressed the matter of how the text came to possess this remarkable feature. Certainly Buber and Rosenzweig make no mention of the biblical author or authors, nor even (in this context) of the redactor as an active agent in bringing a skillful eye and hand to pieces of text.

Their reticence in clarifying this point is compounded by the murky terms with which the reader and his or her role in detecting the *Leitworte* are described. Recall that in explaining the *Leitwort* phenomenon, Buber wrote that "to the one who pursues these repetitions, a meaning of the text is opened up or clarified, or at any rate will be revealed more insistently." This elegant but cagey claim leaves open the question of whether the meaning is sniffed out by the intrepid and attentive reader or is unveiled in the manner of a revelation, that is, whether the meaning exists objectively in the text or is constructed by the reader. Likewise it is unclear whether "the measured repetition" created by the *Leitworte* "corre-

sponds to the inner rhythm of the text, or, better yet, pours out from it.” Buber equivocates in each case.

This strategy depends on a pervasive refusal to resolve, or even confront, the problem of the authorial agency of the biblical writers. Buber and Rosenzweig consistently downplay the problem of the origin of the text and concentrate solely upon its impact on the reader. *Leitworte* provided Buber and Rosenzweig with the key to asserting that the Bible is a subtle, self-referential text. By focusing on this stylistic feature, they aimed to rescue biblical prose from misclassification by identifying it as a genre with its own literary priorities. The text was to be regarded as a work with literary sophistication—even a sophistication sometimes revealed, for them, in the text’s apparently clumsy repetitions of phrases and words.¹⁸ For Buber and Rosenzweig, this regard was to increase the reader’s appreciation of it as a work that makes substantial, if implicit, theological and moral claims.

Alter, who credits Buber and Rosenzweig as “the first to recognize that this kind of purposeful repetition of words constitutes a distinctive convention of biblical prose,”¹⁹ follows them into the intentionally blurred terrain between literary and religious analysis. Not only Buber and Rosenzweig’s philological “discovery” but also the particular significance they attach to it reverberate throughout *ABN*. Following Buber and Rosenzweig, Alter begins his introduction of *Leitworte* by setting out to correct what he anticipates to be the contemporary reader’s poor estimation of biblical style. Repetition, he acknowledges, is “the feature of biblical prose that looks most ‘primitive’ to the casual modern eye.”²⁰ To correct this misimpression—and thus to create attentive readers instead of merely casual ones—Alter details the mechanics of repetition, particularly the repetition of etymological roots, within the biblical text. (Alter expands upon Buber and Rosenzweig’s concept of the *Leitwort* by classifying it as one among several “techniques of repetition,” including the repetition of motifs, themes, sequences of action, and type-scenes.) He hints, but does not explicitly claim, that these techniques are not merely significant, but also purposeful. Likewise, Alter does not make any claims of “absolute distinctiveness” for this device, but he does regard its “formaliz[ation] into a prominent convention”²¹ of biblical prose as noteworthy. He regards the kinds of repetition found in the Bible as revealing, first, an “underlying assumption of biblical narrative” that language is “an integrated and

dynamic component—an insistent dimension—of what is being narrated,” reflected in God’s creation of and revelation to the world through language. Repetition is used, moreover, to transmit a palpable sense of the “inescapable tension between human freedom and divine historical plan that is brought forth so luminously through the pervasive repetitions of the Bible’s narrative art.”²²

Both of these conclusions center not merely on the fact of the *Leitworte* but on their significance, which is construed as distinctly metaliterary. And indeed, Alter’s self-defined task in *ABN* is to show that the religious and the literary cannot be separated without great loss of understanding: “Rather than viewing the literary character of the Bible as one of several ‘purposes’ or ‘tendencies’ . . . , I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historical vision, the fullest perception of the latter dependent on the fullest grasp of the former.”²³ This statement all but reiterates Rosenzweig’s insistent claim that “the line of division between the ‘religious’ aspects of the text and the ‘aesthetic’ aspects has to be drawn otherwise than at first it seemed. Or rather: drawing the line of division is itself a mistake in the first place.”²⁴ For each of our authors, the statement of just what this religious vision is constitutes the moment in which the real power of a “literary approach” to the Bible is visible: not simply in showing the inextricability of religious vision and literary art, but in offering to the reader a way of finding meaning in the biblical vision of God, human beings, and their place in the world. This rhapsodic version of the Bible’s “cosmology” can then be readily appreciated, perhaps even appropriated, by the contemporary reader. The literary scholar becomes not only a commentator on the text but also the illuminator of its hidden religious vision; readers of *ABN* are invited to enter into the Bible’s moral and aesthetic cosmology with Alter as their guide.

As the parallel treatments of Genesis 1–2 demonstrate, Alter, like Buber and Rosenzweig, grants supra-aesthetic meaning to the literary techniques he identifies in biblical narrative. He argues that “an essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology.”²⁵ For Alter, the contradictions and dialectics that permeate biblical narrative—the tension between divine providence and human freedom;²⁶ the paradox of human beings’ embodiment of “the zenith and the nadir of the

created world;²⁷ the complex relationship between the arts and conventions of fiction and the need to break from these to transmit, and even experience, something altogether new²⁸—constitute precisely the philosophical-religious import of the text. Where Buber and Rosenzweig identified singular meanings, Alter finds oblique complexity. But both understandings of the religious vision within the Bible are equally vibrant, and in each case the writer finds within the biblical narrative, *as literarily constructed narrative*, a text that will compel the contemporary reader by the sheer beauty and skill of its style. Where higher-critical methods are portrayed as historicizing the meaning of the text into irrelevance, our authors offer a way of recovering the Bible's significance for matters of theological concern via the literary lens, which has been elevated by its association with the aesthetic.²⁹

MIDRASH AND LITERATURE

For Buber and Rosenzweig, the *Leitworte* (and other forms of repetition) reveal “secret” meaning or meanings that animate a subterranean stratum of the text. These meanings complicated the apparent sense of the narratives that, they charged, higher criticism had accepted at face value. But Buber and Rosenzweig hinted at a claim that was more radical, and polemical, than the idea of the *Leitworte* would immediately suggest: they intimated that this hidden stratum of the text had in fact been available to an altogether different hermeneutic tradition for centuries. Buber no doubt chose his words carefully when he spoke, in regard to the story of Korach, of his discovery of the *Leitworte*:

Investigating such a narrative can make us feel that we have discovered a *hidden, primordial midrash* [*versteckten Urmidrasch entdeckte*] in the biblical text itself; and we may then be dubious. But the correspondences are so exact, and fit so perfectly into the situation as a whole, that we have to accept the idea: the roots of the ‘secret meaning’ reach deep into the earlier layers of the tradition.³⁰

The language of “midrash” here is not incidental. It anticipates Buber and Rosenzweig’s careful insertion of references to rabbinic exegesis into their essays and suggests that they viewed classical Jewish sources as consonant with the mode of reading they hoped to promote.

It is clear from their working papers that Buber and Rosenzweig consulted a wide range of traditional Jewish commentaries—from ancient rabbinic midrash to medieval Jewish exegetes including Rashi, ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak—in preparing their translation.³¹ In their published writings, Buber and Rosenzweig refer to these sources strategically and carefully, often glossing commentaries according to their own needs. Consider Rosenzweig’s discussion of the unnamed “man” with whom Jacob wrestles in Genesis 32. Rosenzweig writes, “Jacob’s nocturnal wrestling with his unknown, unnamed antagonist is understood by the ancient Jewish interpreters, reasonably yet also profoundly, as the decisive encounter between Jacob and the divine advocate of Esau.”³² This interpretation is that of Rashi quoting *Beresbit Rabba*, which Rosenzweig presents as *the* reading of “the ancient Jewish interpreters.”³³ (In fact, Sforno, Hizkuni, Radak, and Rashbam state only that it was an angel and do not make any exegetical connection to Esau.) Rosenzweig then continues, “This reading is the only reading that makes sense of the struggle in the place where it is recounted, i.e., between Jacob’s apprehension over the ensuing encounter with the brother he once so maliciously betrayed and the auspicious outcome of that encounter.”³⁴ The rhetorical force of this statement comes from the unspoken, but implicit, contrast between Rashi’s (and Rosenzweig’s) reading of this passage and explanations offered by anthropological or philological interpretations.

For Rosenzweig, the reading of the “ancient Jewish interpreters” may have required a translation into modern idiom, but it nonetheless achieved a depth not attained—perhaps not attainable—by modern scholarship. To prove the utility and sophistication of the midrashic explanation of this passage, Rosenzweig disarms the wary reader by first appealing to his or her skepticism: “We may feel, of course, that the ancient interpretation reads something into the text that is not there, perhaps as a rationalization.” He then immediately defends the exegetical reading by making it comprehensible through an exaggeratedly literal translation (in which, once again, *Leitworte* have a leading role): “But this can be shown not

to be the case, precisely from the linking of the nocturnal struggle both to the apprehension that precedes and the solution that follows it,” and therewith provides the reader with a proof that hinges on the repeated use of forms of the word *face* (*panim*, *p’nei*, *lifnei*, etc.).³⁵ In the attempt to create a new method of reading the Bible, compatible with the constraints facing the modern reader of scripture, Rosenzweig carefully employs a sanitized, “demythologized” version of midrash to provide a genealogy for his own method.³⁶

Alter, by contrast, is forthright in addressing the relationship between midrash and literature. In his introduction, he identifies some of the methodological complications involved in literary scholars’ reliance on midrash as an aide in their work.³⁷ He offers, as an example, the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38), revealing how specific literary devices forge links between this chapter and the story of Joseph that precedes and follows it. He acknowledges that some of the exact features of the text critical to his argument “were duly noted more than 1500 years ago in the Midrash.” Alter is candid in addressing the relationship between the ancient body of interpretive literature and his own approach: he acknowledges that midrashists, like literary critics, were “exquisitely attuned to small verbal signs of continuity and to significant lexical nuances.” But, Alter cautions, the midrashists had a different project from that of the literary scholar. The ancient sources did not recognize the literary integrity of biblical narrative; instead, they dipped in and out of biblical narratives in search of fodder for their homiletical project.³⁸

This caveat aside, midrash is often Alter’s companion in *ABN*, accompanying his readings and often appearing as a kind of prescient literary-critical voice. Alter frequently refers to midrashic readings and glosses on the texts (which he, unlike Rosenzweig, cites with precision), turning to them as evocative or whimsical expressions of expert readers. For instance, Alter describes the strategy of narrative exposition in Genesis 2 by noting the midrash that envisions Adam witnessing the companionate status of all the animals and thereby realizing his creaturely solitude (*ad loc.* Gen. 2:19-20).³⁹ Alter writes, “One could plausibly argue, then, that the Midrash was not merely indulging in a flight of fancy when it imagined Adam making that confession of loneliness as he named the creatures passing before him.”⁴⁰ Or in speaking of the role of clothing in the incident between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 39, Alter comments parentheti-

cally, “The Midrash *Bereshit Rabba* 87:10 makes the brilliant if somewhat fanciful observation on the narrative specification of this laying-by of the garment that she [Potiphar’s wife] spent the time kissing and caressing it.”⁴¹ Alter simultaneously invites the reader into the imaginative hermeneutic world of midrash and distances himself from a full endorsement of it (“the Midrash was not merely indulging in a flight of fancy”; “brilliant if somewhat fanciful”). The ancient midrashists, we are to understand, were unsystematic but highly intuitive readers of the biblical text. Alter thus downplays the assumption of the divinity and uniqueness of the biblical text held by the midrashic readers of yore—an assumption that framed the commentaries they produced—and suggests that the contemporary literary scholar simply gives methodological sophistication to the same raw instincts that drove the midrashists in their work.

As we have seen, both approaches I am considering present their contributions as, in part, corrections of the oversights and blind spots of the critical-historical and narrowly philological perspectives that dominate the analysis of biblical literature. Yet one can detect the faint odor of polemic here as well. The congeniality of traditional Jewish hermeneutic vis-à-vis the literary approach hints at an alliance between the two over and against the higher-critical schools of thought. Midrashic and literary approaches are cast as preserving an intimate relationship between content and form, while higher criticism is associated with the reductive quest for the “essential content” of the scriptures.

In Rosenzweig’s writings on the Bible, this association is not merely accidental, nor was it incidental to his overall project. His use of the “ancient Jewish interpreters” had an important polemical function. Rosenzweig’s invocation of the rabbinic sages in his essay suggests that the Jewish hermeneutic tradition had long understood the deeper, literary meaning of the text. The implication is twofold: first, Rosenzweig hints at the legitimacy of the Jewish claim upon the Hebrew Bible; second, he suggests that Jewish modes of reading the Bible were insulated from the attacks of higher criticism. Toward the end of his life, Rosenzweig made his position explicit: Jews had become accustomed to viewing the Bible only through the lens of what he called “Protestant *Wissenschaft*.” This method, which had attained the façade of neutrality, was in fact “almost solely concerned, in a natural continuation of the old Christological effort to make

everything Jewish merely a pre-history, . . . with the preliminary questions regarding the history of the origin of our text."⁴² It was nothing other than the old wolf of Christian supersessionism dressed in the sheep's clothing of academic objectivity. In light of this, Rosenzweig called for the creation of a *jüdische Bibelwissenschaft*, which would

ask about the intention of the texts that lie before us. For the text as it is before us has an intention; it is not merely—as Protestant scholarship would be concerned with—written; it also wants to be *read* and *understood*. Understood in the sense of the final redaction, not in the sense of individual bits which are to be peeled from the sources. This new [Jewish] Bible-scholarship does not turn its eyes away from any problem raised by critical modernity, but rather presents all problems that were already raised in the past as well as the ones that are only visible to the new Bible scholarship from the perspective of the last redactor (or, said otherwise, the first reader).⁴³

This passage not only contains the most explicit programmatic statement Rosenzweig ever made about his proposed method, but it also makes clear the polemical, social-cultural force behind his endeavor.

The citation of midrash functions as part of this polemic. Midrash illustrates a privileged practice of reading that both Buber and Rosenzweig, each in his own way, sought to recover for the development of a modern hermeneutic. For Buber, midrash was the organic creation of the biblical text itself; Rosenzweig's complementary understanding viewed it as a component of a specifically Jewish approach to the Bible that would break the monopoly on the study of the Bible held by "Protestant scholarship." Their approach, while intrinsically "Jewish," would speak to all readers, thus proving the power of the Jewish approach to be "particular" and "universal" at once.

The Art of Biblical Narrative, written in time and place far removed from the Jewish cultural politics of Weimar Germany, did not explicitly enter into these debates. Critical biblical scholarship has lost much of its polemical edge and the tenor of debate has softened. But Alter's invocation of midrash may suggest that the

turf wars over the Hebrew scriptures have been muted but not silenced. Furthermore, the act of placing the voices of the ancient rabbis alongside those of contemporary scholars and the great writers of modern Europe asserts the legitimacy of a literary tradition that has only recently been understood as worthy of secular attention.

Alter's use of midrash in *ABN* is better understood, however, as revealing both a hope for and the expression of the success of Jewish intellectuals in late twentieth-century America. Nearly twenty-five years after his classic work on biblical narrative appeared, Alter's own acclaimed translation of the Pentateuch has become widely recognized as a scholarly yet accessible guide for anyone interested in the Hebrew Bible: Jewish, Christian, or secular; believing or critical. That Alter's work could attain such success as it interwove the archaic and the Aramaic into a text for lay readers, students, and scholars beyond the Jewish world testifies to a historical *novum*. The "Jewish," long maligned as merely "particular," now might hold the promise of representing the "universal."

The struggle for Jews and Jewish ideas to be able to speak the language of the majority, and even to shift that language, was the same struggle in which Buber and Rosenzweig labored. The two Weimar friends and collaborators aimed to create, through their translation, a Bible that could carve out a sphere in which the questions of mainstream Bible criticism did not have the final say over its religious meaning. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, and ultimately Alter's own recent translation of the Pentateuch into English, participates in the same effort, and is characterized by the same tensions. In spite of the significant cultural and historical gap that separates these endeavors, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* can and should be read as part of the same project in which Buber and Rosenzweig engaged in Weimar Germany. Alter's book, like Buber and Rosenzweig's essays on biblical translation, is a part of the trajectory of modern Jewish thought and its dominant themes: the complex relationship between Jewish thinkers and the scholarly environment; the effort to translate scriptural and rabbinic thought into categories understood and accepted by the broader intellectual community; and the effort to identify a new contribution to modern thought informed by a careful consideration of the Jewish tradition.

But to what extent can a literary approach to the Bible answer questions of

the ultimate value of the text and, more to the point, questions of its religious authority? Does the Bible command our attention because it is beautiful and well crafted? Can it regain its status as The Book if its authors had a religious vision, or must this religious vision address us and call upon us to respond to it; must we, perhaps, even share the ancient vision to plumb this book's meaning? Buber and Rosenzweig and Alter confronted these questions as they crafted what we now have come to call the literary approach to the Bible. Whether their answers can sustain religious communities, still responding to the vacuum of authority that is the legacy of the modern period, is yet to be seen.

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NOTES

- The author wishes to thank the following readers and conversation partners: Arnold Eisen, Catherine Madsen, Noam Pianko, Adriane Levine, Benjamin Sommer, David Lambert, Deena Aranoff, Miryam Kabakov, and the anonymous reader for *Prooftexts*. Special thanks to Steven Weitzman for encouraging me to produce this article for the present volume.
- 1 Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936); Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (1936; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). The word for *translation* that the authors used, *Verdeutschung*, literally means “Germanization” or “German rendering.”
 - 2 Martin Buber, *Werke* ([München]: Kösel-Verlag, 1962), 852; Martin Buber, “People Today and the Jewish Bible,” in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 7. In general, I have followed Rosenwald and Fox’s translations for the essays, noting where my translation differs from theirs.
 - 3 Franz Rosenzweig, “Zur Encyclopaedia Judaica,” in *Gesammelte Schriften III: Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken* (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1984), 734.
 - 4 Letter 1138 (Apr. 21, 1927), An Jakob Rosenheim, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften I: Briefe und Tagebücher*, 2 vols. (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 2: 1135;

- translated in Franz Rosenzweig, "The Unity of the Bible: A Position Paper Vis-à-Vis Orthodoxy and Liberalism," in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 23.
- 5 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 143.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 145.
 - 7 David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature, vol. II: From 1700 to the Present Day* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 385. Alter himself reflected on this very point in a later essay, stating, "Literary appreciation does not automatically contradict belief in the inspired character of the text, but it can manage quite comfortably without reference to such belief" (Robert Alter, "Scripture and Culture," in *The World of Biblical Literature* [New York: Basic Books, 1992], 194).
 - 8 See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John Marks, rev. ed. (1949; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 47ff, 73ff; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes*, 11th ed. (1904; London: Methuen, 1920), 35-36, 51ff; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 1-2, 51ff.
 - 9 Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature*, 389.
 - 10 A revised version of Buber's 1927 address was published as Martin Buber, "Leitwortstil in der Erzählung des Pentateuchs," in *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, ed. Martin Buber (Berlin: Schocken, 1927). The essay appears in English as Martin Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
 - 11 Buber, *Werke*, 1131; Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 92-93. Buber uses the plural *Leitworte* rather than *Leitwörter*.
 - 12 Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).
 - 13 F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1906), 416-18.
 - 14 Buber, "Leitwortstil in der Erzählung des Pentateuchs," 217-18; Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," 118.
 - 15 Buber, *Werke*, 1135-36; Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," 118.

- 16 Buber, *Werke*, 1138; Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," 120; Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 135ff.
- 17 While Buber and Rosenzweig worked as a team on the translation, their work was unevenly divided. The identification of the *Leitwort* as a key feature of the biblical text must be attributed to Buber, whose greater linguistic facility permitted him to appreciate this feature of biblical prose and develop a theory for it. Rosenzweig adopted and endorsed this theory wholeheartedly and it may be said to have formed a cornerstone of their collaborative approach; see his comments at the beginning of "The Formal Secret of Biblical Narratives" (p. 131) to this effect. (For greater detail on the division of labor, see Maren Ruth Niehoff, "The Buber-Rosenzweig Translation of the Bible within Jewish-German Tradition," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44, no. 2 (1993).)
- 18 The aesthetics of the B-R translation provoked ample discussion at the time of publication and in recent scholarship as well. See especially Siegfried Kracauer, "The Bible in German," in *The Mass Ornament*, ed. Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Martin Jay, "Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 21 (1976); Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Thought of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 19 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 92.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 112-13.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 24 Franz Rosenzweig, "The Secret of Biblical Narrative Form," in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 130.
- 25 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 12.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 115.

- 28 Ibid., 62.
- 29 For a later, more sympathetic characterization of the aims of classical critical Bible scholarship, see Alter, "Scripture and Culture." See especially his remarks on 194ff.: "[T]he historical criticism of the Bible, though it is often thought of as a secularization of Scripture, might be better described as an attempt to recover the religious truth of the Bible through a means of investigation compatible with secular categories."
- 30 Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," 120. Emphasis mine. Extensive investigations of the nature, scope, and function of biblical intertextuality include Isaac Leo Seeligman, "Voraussetzung der Midrasch-Exegese," *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 1 (1953); Nahum Sarna, "Psalm 89: A Study in Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). *The Art of Biblical Narrative* does not aim to analyze the phenomenon of inner-biblical exegesis as extensively as the abovementioned studies and others. For further discussion of midrashic and literary approaches to the Bible, see Sarah Kamin, "Comparing Literary and Midrashic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *Bet Mikra* 21 (1976); Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).
- 31 Franz Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften IV, 2. Band. Sprachdenken im Übersetzung. Arbeitspapiere zur Verdeutschung der Schrift* (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1984). See also Letter 953 (Aug. 27, 1924), An die Mutter, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, 2: 987.
- 32 Rosenzweig, "Formal Secret," 137.
- 33 On Genesis 32:25: "R. Hama bar R. Hanina said: It was the guardian prince [angel] of Esau. To this Jacob alluded when he said to him [Esau]: 'Forasmuch as I have seen your face, as one sees the face of God, and you were pleased with me' [Gen. 33:10]" (*Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, LXXVII:3); Rashi, *ad loc.*: "And our rabbis of blessed memory explained that he was the prince of Esau."
- 34 Rosenzweig, "Formal Secret," 137.
- 35 Ibid., 137–38.
- 36 On "demythologization," compare Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

- 37 Many other biblical scholars have done considerable theoretical and practical work on how midrash should be viewed within biblical studies; see especially the work of Nahum Sarna, Michael Fishbane, and others. Note as well the debate about reading midrash as literature between David Stern and Susan Handelman (David Stern, "Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 4, no. 2 (1984): 193-204; Susan Handelman, "Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts: A Response to David Stern," *Prooftexts* 5, no. 1 (1985), 75-103; David Stern, "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies? Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash," *Prooftexts* 5, no. 1 (1985): 96-103. See also Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
- 38 Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 12.
- 39 *Bereshit Rabba* 17:5, as cited in *ibid.*, 30.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 42 Franz Rosenzweig, "Zur Encyclopaedia Judaica," in *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken (Gesammelte Schriften III)* (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1928), 732. This argument recalls Solomon Schechter, "Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism," in *Seminary Addresses & Other Papers* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).
- 43 Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland*, 734.