

Chapter 1 : The Literary Guide to the Bible by Robert Alter

Professor Alter is one of our foremost lay readers and expositors of the poetic and narrative genius of the Bible. He brings to his commentaries a knowledge of Hebrew and of Judaism together with an exceptionally wide literary awareness and authority of judgment.

That the collection has forty contributions only makes the harmony more complete forty being an important symbolic number in the Bible. The scholars are a diverse group, yet with much in common. The vast majority are either literary critics or biblical specialists with a literary bent, yet a medievalist Bernard McGinn and an anthropologist Edmund Leach are to be found here, too. Many have a Jewish background, and it would be fair to say that even many of those who do not have such a background show an appreciation of the rabbinical tradition of biblical interpretation. It is only natural that this should be so, since the literary approach taken in this volume is much more sympathetic in general to the richness of readings the Bible has produced within postbiblical communities than has been traditional biblical scholarship. This guide is organized into three sections: Because of the nature of the work, it is not necessary to begin at the beginning, with the exception of the general introduction and the introductions to the Old and New Testament sections. Most readers will find that they want to begin a tome of this size and scope by reading in the book here and there, rather than reading it straight through. The recent crosscurrents between modern literary criticism and biblical criticism on the one hand, and between traditional midrashic methods of interpretation and avant-garde trends in the interpretation of texts in general have made a book such as this one not only possible but inevitable. Many similar approaches and insights to those found in this book had begun to surface within traditional biblical criticism itself in the last few years. This has been largely a result of the rise of redaction criticism, canonical criticism, a renewed interest in the history of interpretation of the biblical texts within believing communities, and the aforementioned influence of developments in the literary field on biblical studies. Even many form critics, the group most often maligned though not by name in this volume, have more recently swung away from a concentration on the earliest forms of the text and have been on the forefront of responsible structural analysis of the text as we have it. Furthermore, much of what is being put forth in this book has been presupposed by biblical scholarship at one time or another, either as a starting point or as one of the many methods one must bring to bear on a text in order to understand both it and its historical contexts fully. Hermann Gunkel, for example, understood the literary he would have said literary-critical issues raised in this book well, as did Julius Wellhausen before him though he took a different point of view with regard to the evidence than do most of these contributors. Martin Noth, Gerhard von Rad, and other more recent biblical critics have continued to note both unity and diversity in the Bible, depending on whether they are talking about the structure or theme of a given text or its lives in the communities which produced and preserved it. Ironically, the legacy of these scholars was nevertheless destined to drive biblical scholarship in a direction which has made the writing of a book such as this one both necessary and timely. The Old Testament section is both the longest section of the book and the one which hangs together best. Rosenberg sees Samuel both books as a complex unity. He believes the text has been continuously edited until a late date, yet contains very early traditions. The entire section is 1, words.

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