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Book reviews, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, by Robert Alter, 1981.



## The Moses Narratives

Daniel Jeremy Silver

In his interesting new book, The Art of Biblical Narrative (Basic Books 1981), Robert Alter makes the point that the prose style of Biblical narrative should not be taken for granted. We are accustomed to histories and biographies presented in prose form, consequently the prose narrative of the Tanakh seems a natural, almost inevitable, form. Alter asks us to rethink this assumption on the grounds that "it is culturally significant that among ancient peoples only Israel should have chosen to cast its sacred traditions in prose" (p. 25). Israel's neighbors set down their myths and sagas in poetry. Rather than natural, the Bible's prose style turns out to be unexpected.

Alter suggests that the Bible's presentation of its narrative in prose is a consequence of the radical transformation of religious outlook which took place in ancient Israel. The shift from paganism to monotheism involved a shift of focus from a world view which emphasized the power of the gods - myth - to a more historic perspective which emphasized the predictability of God and the unpredictable response of human beings to the responsibilities and opportunities God had provided them. The epics of the pagan world presented "enactments of cosmic events" (Shemaryahu Talmon) and were designed to be used as liturgies whose recital praised the gods and encouraged them to manifest again their power for the benefit of the worshipping nation. In short, these myths were shaped to be central elements in a worship form whose effective power is best described as sympathetic magic. Since the focus was on the gods, the human actors portrayed in these myths are presented as actors in a timeless and recurring drama rather than self-determining mortals whose decisions and emotions affected the course of their lives and of the history of their nation. The myths exude a sense of fated recurrence. The Biblical narratives "suggest the unfathomability of life in history under an inscrutable God" (p. 24).



Alter's thesis helps explain one of the glories of Biblical literature: its ability to portray the human being as a complex and ambiguous creature. The heroes, saints, adventurers and sinners of the myths are presented without any underpainting or shading - everything is on the surface. It is the personality and will of the gods which is central. By contrast, the loyal Abraham who leaves his home at God's bidding and offers his only son as proof of his dependability is the same man who drives Hagar out into the wilderness and lists Sarah as his sister in order not to endanger his life. Abraham is presented as a many-faceted man who bears responsibility for his life. God controls history but God has given man significant freedom of action. Abraham might not have decided to leave home. He need not have given in to Sarah's importunings about Hagar. He need not have accepted the test on Mt. Moriah.

By coincidence, Alter's book appeared about the time that a volume of mine, Images of Moses, was accepted by the same publisher, Basic Books, for presentation in the late spring of 1982. In preparing Images I had reviewed carefully those chapters of the Biblical narrative in which Moses plays a role and had come to a conclusion diametrically opposite to Alter's. I was convinced that these specific narratives had been shaped by their liturgical as shrine recitations and that these portions show many similarities to the myths of Israel's neighbors. The Moses narratives are unique in the Bible and the key distinction between them and the patriarchal stories and the Deuteronomic histories to which I believe Alter's thesis does apply lies in the presentation of the central personage. Unlike Abraham or David, Moses is not presented as a self-motivating figure but as an agent God moves about at will. Moses lacks precisely that quality of self-definition which makes most other major Biblical figures seem real.

The story of Abraham is the story of a fallible man who found the strength to covenant his life to God. The story of Moses' public career is not a story about Moses at all but a myth about the redemptive power of Israel's God. Like the



pagan myths these narratives dwell on a long list of divine miracles and present their "hero" as a one-dimensional figure who is deliberately and consistently depicted in a subordinate and submissive role. Convincing novels have been written about the patriarchs and David. None has been written on Moses, though writers of the stature of Sholem Asch, Louis Untermeyer and Howard Fast have tried; and the reason, I believe, is that the Torah provides the novelist with little, if any, insight into Moses' personality. The Moses narratives are set out in prose but that fact should not mask from us their fundamental dissimilarity in presentation and purpose from other Biblical narratives. This is so, I believe, because the specific events which involve Moses represent the key moments in which God had intervened in the nation's history (redemption - election - covenant - land); ~~and would~~ be the events the nation would wish to rehearse at their worship so as to induce God to renew and repeat His earlier displays of redemptive power and concern.

One of the reasons I have never been able to convince myself that some priest or pious storyteller invented Moses is that so few of the prerogatives and perquisites of power are ascribed to him. Moses is never described as wearing royal robes or seated on a throne. Had Moses been invented by the scribes of any of the successive rulers of Israel - tribal chiefs, kings or theocrats - they would likely have taken pains to attach their patron's life and authority to the noblest figure of their nation's early history. No Israelite or Judean king claimed descent from Moses. If the priests had had the opportunity to invent Moses they would surely have claimed direct descent from him rather than from his brother Aaron who was Moses' subordinate in rank and authority. Moses never straps on a sword, rides out in a war chariot to do battle or devises a battle plan. A king's palace guards swiftly dispatch any who rebel. Moses has no private bodyguard and, when challenged by Dathan and Abiram, can only ask God for help against his rivals (Num. 15:12-15). Emperors dictate to ever present secretaries their nation's laws. Moses is the scribe who copies the laws as God dictates them to him. Great leaders build mas-



sive mausoleums to guarantee their immortality. Moses disappears into the wilderness, his burial place deliberately anonymous.

Kings establish dynasties and plan carefully for the transfer of their power. Moses had no voice in the choice of his successor: "Let the Lord. . . appoint someone over the community. . . so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:15-17). His sons did not share in their father's authority, and Moses apparently did not seek power for them. They were not even considered for the group of spies selected to assay the Promised Land, who would, it was clearly understood, be the future leaders of the people (Num. 13). The Torah reports only the names of Moses' sons, Gershon and Eleazar, and the fact that Moses delayed the youngest's circumcision, for reasons not given. Beyond this they are not in view, except for a single mention in an archaic fragment embedded in the book of Judges, which seems to indicate that descendants of Gershon, "son of Moses," were officiating as minor priests at a local shrine in the territory of Dan (Jud. 19:30). None of Moses' descendants make capital of his name, and there is no indication that Moses sought to make any political arrangements which would have benefited them. The narrative constantly underscores the point that power and authority belong to God and that Moses is simply God's agent.

Though the texts are certainly familiar, I invite you to reread the narratives which deal with Moses with the perspective I have suggested in mind. Pay particular attention to those chapters which describe Moses after he assumes his public role. Begin, say with the third chapter of the book of Exodus, the commissioning scene at the Burning Bush, and read through to the end of the first telling of these events in the last chapters of the book of Numbers. Then ask yourself if you can point to a text which states, or even suggests, that Moses led the Israelites from Egypt. There are none and you will find yourself remembering texts like "that very day the Lord led the Israelites from the land of Egypt troop by troop" (Ex. 12:15). What about any statement that Moses' diplomacy was decisive with Pharaoh? What is written is that "the Lord struck down all the first-born in the



power at will. The man who carries the staff is ish-elohim, God's man, and not his own master (Deut. 31:5).

To see the difference of thrust and form between these narratives and those which fit Alter's thesis, it may be useful to compare this presentation of Moses with the David narratives. Moses married before his public career begins and once he accepts God's commission there are no indications that he has any further sexual interests or even a private life. David's love affairs are amply described and unceasing, and his family problems would provide the story line for a soap opera. Moses is depicted as unwilling or unable to act, except when God gives him specific instructions. David rules by fiat, his every whim becomes law. When faced with a difficult decision, Moses has no alternative but to wait in the Tent of Meeting to receive God's Instructions. David takes advice from a variety of counselors and makes his own decision. Moses plays no part in developing battle plans, and never enters the battlefield as a combatant. David is a master strategist and trained soldier who leads his troops with skill and courage. When Korah rebels Moses prostrates himself before God to ask for help, and is saved only when God orders the earth to swallow up his adversaries. When Absalom rebels against David, the king dispatches mercenaries to put down his son's uprising. Moses' sin is a purely formal one: he fails to follow with absolute fidelity God's Instructions for a specific ritual. When David sins, his are the sins of ambition, cruelty, lust, and power - in short, the sins of a heroic figure.

The Moses narratives are about God - myth. The David narratives are about David - history, or, if you will, sacred history. That most of us have heretofore come away from the Torah text without this impression of Moses' contingent role testifies to our habit of rationalizing saga, to the force of pious tradition, and to our familiarity with the few stories of Moses' life before his commission where the narrative allows him some measure of independence. The conviction we bring to the text that a leader is a particular kind of man - a strong, vigorous and decisive



land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:20). Did you read that Moses led his people in the wilderness? Instead, you read, "The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night. . ." (Ex. 13:20). Does the Torah claim that Moses introduced Israel to the God whom they afterward worshipped? No. You read: "The Lord called to him (Moses) from the mountain saying, 'thus shall you say to the house of Jacob. . .if you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant You shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples'" (Ex. 19:35). Is there any report that Moses led the tribes during the forty years of the wilderness trek? You read, instead, "the Lord continued: 'I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians, and bring them out of the land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the home of the Canaanites. . .'" (Ex. 3:8).

The narrative consistently affirms that God, not Moses, made the Exodus possible, established the terms of the covenant, and enabled the tribes to make a successful passage through the wilderness. Moses is depicted not as a self-reliant leader but as a faithful courtier whose virtue consists in faithfully and humbly carrying out the royal will. Moses makes no move to return to Egypt until God orders him to go. Once he returns, Moses does not develop a strategy for the slaves' escape. He simply awaits God's Instructions and follows them to the letter (Ex. 6:13). Moses' activity in Egypt is to relay God's messages to the Hebrews and to announce God's miracles to Pharaoh. He does not act on his own. It is not, after all, Moses' skill as a diplomat, his nimble or his slow tongue, but the irrefutable logic of the plagues that finally persuades Pharaoh. Indeed, so consistent is the image of Moses as a man without independent authority that it extends to costume as well as to characterization; from the time he enters public life Moses keeps by him the staff which signaled his role as God's ambassador. It's a magical staff, but the power is not Moses' to control. When God wishes to display His might He orders Moses to lift the rod and the skies darken or the Nile runs red. When, on God's command, Moses holds the rod above the rock, water gushes forth. Moses cannot summon the rod's



man - influences our reading and defines what we take away from it. But what is really there is a depiction of Moses as ish elohim, God's ever-obedient servant, at times, indeed, one could almost describe Moses as a puppet manipulated from above.

The Moses narratives breathe the same spirit as the patriarchal ones until the moment of his commissioning. Moses' birth story is a conventional miracle story. Moses' youth is passed over in silence. The narrative which details the crises which leads to his exile uses active verbs to describe the incident: "When Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and witnessed their toil. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that, and seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Ex. 2:11-12). Moses acts on his own when he kills the overseer and again the next day when he interferes in a quarrel between two Hebrew slaves (Ex. 2:13-14). He makes the decision to flee Egypt. He acts on his own when he protects Jethro's daughters from local bullies bothering them at the village well (Ex. 2:16-21), when he marries one of Jethro's daughters, and when he agrees to work for his father-in-law (Ex. 3:1). These domestic scenes probably were omitted in the shrine recitals, even as they do not appear in our later day version of these recitals - the Passover Haggadah, and so were not shaped by the needs of the liturgy.

But once Moses is commissioned at the Burning Bush, once he exchanges private for public life, the text routinely and with obvious deliberation subordinates Moses' actions and authority to the expressed will of God. "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh" (Ex. 3:10); "and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up" (Ex. 19:20); "The Lord said to Moses: 'Carve two tablets of stone like the first'" (Ex. 14:4). Throughout his public life Moses appears fully aware that his is an ambassador's rather than a principal's role. When he is challenged by various factions with the sin of nepotism, of favoring his brother over more senior Levites, he responds simply: "The Lord sent me to do all these things. They are not of my own devising" (Num. 16:28).



My impression is that even in these pre-commissioning scenes there is a tendency to diminish the man in the mind of an audience, probably out of a desire to sharpen the sense of God's power. Mighty, indeed, is a God who can take an essentially unheroic figure and transform him into a man who can undo Pharoah. The description of Moses' attack on the slavemaster is a case in point: "He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Ex. 2:11-12). When he discovers the next day that the matter is known "Moses was frightened" and he flees to Midian (Ex. 2:14-15). Heroes do not strike down unsuspecting victims, surreptitiously hide all traces of their act, and flee into the night. A hero may retire for reasons of prudence but he does not flee in panic. If he retires he plans to return to fight another day, as David did after he had fled from before Saul. Another example: Moses' long pastorate in Midian is set against the background of the Hebrews' continuing enslavement in Egypt, but the text reports no act, or even plan, by Moses to return to help them. Indeed, until God orders him to go the thought that he had some responsibility to the slaves seems not to have crossed his mind. When God finally orders him to Egypt the text depicts a man trying every way he can to get out of an unwelcome assignment: "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent" (Ex. 4:13).

The question then is why is Moses handled in this unexpected fashion? An unlikely explanation is that the Torah somehow reflects an attempt to discredit a leader whose policies are out of favor, as Khrushchev encouraged revisionist biographies of Stalin. There is no indication of such a purpose in the text. Quite the contrary. Every line of the literature points to growing veneration for the Instructions which Moses had mediated.

A more likely explanation is that the shape of these narratives reflects the original liturgical use to which these stories were put. Those narratives deal with the crucial initial events of the nation's history: redemption, election,



covenant, land. In their oral stage they were shaped as recitations during which God's original display of power was rehearsed in the hope of encouraging God's continuing concern for the nation's well-being. We lack any description of shrine worship in ancient Israel, but there is enough evidence in the texts to be confident that the Israelites recited such litanies at their shrines and did so in the expectation that rehearsing God's role in the nation's past would awaken His interest in the nation's present need and hasten this decision to bring about the ultimate redemption, the Day of God.

Among the indications of the use of such recitals is the use in the priestly histories of the common verb for prophecy, navah, to describe the chanting of the Temple singers, a clear suggestion that their songs praising God's power, just like prophetic speech, was credited with the power to call forth future events. Then, too, there is the interesting succession of verb tenses in the song Moses chants once Israel is safely on the far side of the Reed Sea: "I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously. . . He is become my salvation. . . In Your strength you guide (Your people) to Your Holy abode. . . You will bring them and plant them in Your holy mountain" (Ex. 15). In another early song Deborah reviews victories the tribes had achieved through God's help and then shifts to the purpose of her "song:" "So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord, but may His friends be as the sun rising in might" (Judges 5:31). Lest anyone doubt the efficacy of such a litany a later editor appended a postscript assuring the reader that "the land was tranquil forty years" (Jud. 5:31).

There are a number of fragments of early recitations embedded in the received text. Moses is not mentioned in any of them. Deuteronomy contains this early Passover formula:

When, in time to come, your son asks you, "What means the exhortation, laws, and rules which the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?" you shall say to your son, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the



Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharoah and all his household; and us He freed from there that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the Lord commanded for us to observe all these laws, to revere the Lord our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is not the case. It will be, therefore, to our merit before the Lord our God to observe faithfully this whole instruction, as He has commanded us" (Deut. 6:20-25).

and an archaic formula once recited by farmers at harvest time when they brought the first fruits of their field to a shrine:

My father was a fugitive Aramean. . . The Egyptians dealt harshly with us. . . We called unto the Lord . . . and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight. . . The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place, and gave us this land. . . wherefore I now bring its first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me (Deut. 26:5-10).

Nor is Moses mentioned in Psalm 135, a pre-exilic cult hymn where the relationship between the list of God's saving acts and the people's national expectations is clearly stated.

I know that the Lord is great. . .  
He struck down all the first-born in Egypt,  
both man and beast.  
In Egypt He sent signs and portents  
against Pharoah and all his subjects.  
He struck down mighty nations  
and slew great kings,  
Sihon king of the Amorites, Og the king of  
Bashan, and all the princes of Canaan,  
and gave their land to Israel,  
to Israel His people as their patrimony.  
O Lord, Thy name endures forever;  
Thy renown, O Lord, shall last for all generations.  
The Lord will give His people justice  
and have compassion on His servants (Ps. 135, 5, 8-14).

As the recitations grew to be more extended they could not avoid providing some historic detail, it was inevitable that Moses appear; but Moses' role was carefully limited and the emphasis on God's redemptive power retained.

So far we have examined the narratives of Exodus-Numbers. When we turn to the



book of Deuteronomy we recognize immediately that these narratives derive from a tradition which was not as closely tied to liturgy as Exodus-Numbers. In Deuteronomy a more recognizable man begins to appear. Deuteronomy claims to record Moses' valedictory speeches, a conception which suggests, at the least, that he was an orator of considerable skill. Moreover, in the course of his talks, Moses asserts that he, on his own initiative, determined the division of land among the tribes, selected appropriate cities of refuge, organized the judicial system, and nominated the spies who were sent into Canaan. The picture of a leader of stature and skill - and self-confidence - begins to emerge.

Even so, the list of Moses' accomplishments remains modest. God determines the time and line of march. God "scouts the place where you are to camp" (Deut. 1:32). "The Lord our God spoke to us in Horeb, saying: 'you have stayed long enough at this mountain. Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites. . .'" (Deut. 1:6-7). Victory on the battlefield is God's achievement (2:32). God determines which kings should be fought and which conciliated (Deut. 2:34). God, not Moses, determines that the generation who were slaves shall not enter the Promised Land because they defied His order at Kadesh Barnea to begin the conquest (Deut. 1:34). Throughout, Moses reports God's Instructions without change or addition. In Deuteronomy, as in the other three books, it is taken for granted that God, not Moses, made the Exodus possible, offered the covenant to Israel, and guided the tribes in the wilderness.

Editorial efforts to underscore Moses' limited role are still visible. One example: on the day that the tribes suffered a costly defeat at a place called Hormah, Moses is described as staying in the camp; and lest anyone ascribe this defeat to Moses' absence from the battle, the text makes a point of declaring that the army had been defeated because God had not gone out with the host (Deut. 1:44). Another: in summing up his career and the national experience to date, Moses reminds the people that their survival is not his doing, saying that God had "carried the tribes as a father carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you come



to this place" (Deut. 1:31). Eulogies, then as now, are expected to enlarge a man's accomplishment; Moses' eulogy pointedly limits his role to God's most obedient servant, the prophet agent "whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharoah and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that God displayed before all Israel (Deut. 34:10-11).

Moses makes his way through these narratives not as a self-determining liberator, lawgiver or leader but as God's faithful ambassador, identified always by his staff of office. He comes to the battlefield not as strategist or general but as a shaman who brings with him the symbol of God's power". "Whenever Moses held up his hand (with the rod of God in it) Israel prevailed, but whenever he let down his hand Amalek prevailed" (Ex. 17:11). As was the familiar custom of holy men, Moses lived apart. His tent was set up". . .at some distance from the camp" (Ex. 33:7-8). His tent was taboo. When God visited the holy man there, the tribal leaders would prostrate themselves wherever they happened to be in the encampment (Ex. 33:10). After he had been with God, Moses veiled his face as was the custom among shamans and holy men (Ex. 34:29).

A word should be said about the courage required of holy men and prophets. Popular understanding linked, in a cause and effect relationship, the messenger with his message. When the holy man spoke an oracle, he activated the event and so was, in a sense, responsible for it. If a holy man prophesied defeat or national disaster, he was seen as responsible for any tragedy that might follow on his speech; had he not spoken the disaster would not have happened. Holy man and prophets often acted in ways contrary to the king's or the community's perception of the national interest. One ish-elohim announced the end of Eli's priestly dynasty (I Sam. 27:36). Another denounced King Jereboam for setting up an altar at Bethel (I Kings 13), and a third warned King Amaziah against a military campaign he was contemplating (2 Ch. 25:7). The holy man was protected by the credulities of his



society, these holy men carried neither weapons nor shield, but as Jeremiah's fate makes clear, these protective taboos could break down. Moses, of course, never brought words which threatened national extinction, ~~in fact, he was not~~  
~~interested to protect the nation from~~ but the oracles he delivered were not always cheerfully received. After the apostasy of the Golden Calf, Moses delivered God's death sentence against many of the most powerful men in the camp. When the camp vetoed God's command to move out immediately and begin the conquest of Canaan, Moses spoke the words which condemned the Exodus generation to die in the wilderness.

The holy man in West Asian society proved the power of his god and the authenticity of his closeness to his god by living without the familiar protection of bodyguards. Moses, therefore, has no bodyguard. Moses' lack of formal protection, despite his vulnerability and repeated threats to his life, allowed the editors to display dramatically and repeatedly God's saving power. Moses' frequent escapes from danger proved that God protected His servants.

In West Asia during the second millenium BCE, historical writing tended to be limited to formal texts: brief reports of imperial victories, lists of tribute paid by vassals, king lists and documents which supported a shrine's claim as the home of a national god. The Biblical narratives, as Alter makes clear, present artfully constructed stories which represent a new order of history. The dry lists become lively incidents which are shaped to fit into a covenantal scheme which proves God's dependability and beneficent control of history, and details the response of individual men and nations to the duties and freedom which God has given them.

The Moses narratives are closer to liturgy than to chronicle - shrine talk, not sermon talk or story talk. The covenant, of course, came to be embedded in these narratives and in Deuteronomy, particularly some of the implications of covenant theology are exposed; but these narratives were not designed as sacred



history or proof of God's hesed, but as myth, literature which would hasten geulah, redemption. Their purpose was mythic, not sermonic.

Our Passover faithfully continues this original mythic-redemptive purpose. The Haggadah is not history, but liturgy: specifically, a liturgy designed to evoke the redemptive power of God and so hasten redemption. Passover is not an historic commemoration but an anticipation of the messianic deliverance. Seder night is the long awaited "night of watching" when, according to tradition, the Messiah or his forerunner, Elijah, will appear. It is appropriate and consistent that Moses was not mentioned in any of the early versions of the Haggadah. What had Moses to do with Eschaton?

How it came about that these narratives were set in prose rather than in the poetic style of most liturgies cannot now be explained. We know too little about the actual practice at places like Beth-el and Schechem. The idea suggests itself that the oral narrative was already phrased in this way while the tribes were ~~still~~ semi-nomadic and not yet aware of the shrine practices of the Canaanite city states. Whatever the reason, the Moses narratives are unique in Scripture and represent recitations which describe God's power so as to encourage God to use these powers. They center on the promise of redemption and were designed as a mechanism to hasten redemption.