

LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE OLD TESTAMENT: A SURVEY OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

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In the last two decades scholars from various perspectives have been calling for renewed attention to the final form of the text as a literary whole.¹ One can trace the beginnings of a scholarly reaction against the prevailing form- and source-critical approaches (and the preoccupation with historical reconstruction that accompanies these methodologies) in the work of James Muilenburg, who twenty years ago sought to introduce a new approach that he termed "rhetorical criticism."²

Muilenburg was not an opponent of form criticism as such. But despite the demonstrated fruitfulness of form-critical methodology, he saw weaknesses in form criticism that indicated to him that, like source criticism previously, it too was arriving at its limits. He therefore pointed to the need not to reject form criticism but "to venture beyond the confines of form criticism into an inquiry into other literary features which are all too frequently ignored today."³

Muilenburg pointed out a number of shortcomings in form criticism. For example, he noted that there has been a proclivity among form critics in recent years to lay such stress upon the typical and representative that the individual, personal and unique features of a particular pericope are all but lost to view.⁴ Form criticism does not focus enough attention on why, in the *riib* or lawsuit genre, there are so many stylistic and rhetorical differences between exemplars in Hosea and Deuteronomy 32. Exclusive attention to the *Gattung* at the expense of the unique and unrepeatable

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¹ Such scholars include J. Muilenburg (discussed below); B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 69-83, with his emphasis on the final, canonical form of the Biblical text as the context or reference point for exegesis; M. Greenberg, "The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8-11: A Holistic Interpretation," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: KTAV, 1980) 143-164; *Ezekiel 1-20* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 18-27, which attempts holistic interpretations of the prophet Ezekiel; M. Weiss, "Die Methode der 'Total Interpretation,'" VTSup 22 (1971) 88-112, who applies holistic readings to Biblical poetry. Cf. also recent students of Biblical narrative poetics including R. Alter, A. Berlin, H. Brichto and M. Sternberg (discussed below).

² J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1-18; reprinted in *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu* (ed. J. Maier and V. Tollers; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 362-380. The citations below are from the reprinted edition.

³ *Ibid.* 365.

⁴ *Ibid.*

may actually obscure the thought and intention of the writer or speaker since form (and variations thereof) is inextricably related to content.

In addition Muilenburg criticized form critics for lumping together instances where a genre exists in a pure form and where that form is taken and modified, as the early Elohist laws are done by Deuteronomy.⁵ To identify both as the same form or genre and do no more is to obscure the fluidity, versatility, and even artistry of the usage. Rather, one must move beyond a narrow definition of form criticism to other literary considerations. He explains:

What I am interested in, above all, is understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and discerning the many and various devices by which such predictions are formulated and ordered into a unified whole. Such an enterprise I should describe as rhetoric and the methodology as rhetorical criticism.⁶

As for his own approach, he outlines several steps in a rhetorical-critical analysis. One concern⁷ is to define the limits or scope of the literary unit, where it begins and where it ends.

Another concern in Muilenburg's approach⁸ is to determine the structure within the literary unit, the configuration of its component parts, the rhetorical devices utilized in expressing both sequence and movement within the pericope, and shifts and breaks in the writer's thought. Rhetorical devices include parallelism, chiasmus, repetition of certain words or lines, acrostics, stanzas, and the use of particles such as *kî*,⁹ *hinnēh*, *lākēn*, *lāmmā* and *‘attā*. He concludes that painstaking attention to such modes of composition will reveal the consummate skill and artistry with which the Biblical pericopes have been ordered.

A number of works have appeared that have sought to apply Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism to the text,¹⁰ but attempts to apply it have suffered from ill definition. One justified criticism of his essay is that his rhetorical criticism is insufficiently distinct from the form criticism that he claims to go beyond, for the way in which he summarized rhetorical criticism could also be a part of an essay on form-critical methodology.¹¹

⁵ Ibid. 367.

⁶ Ibid. 369.

⁷ Ibid. 369-370.

⁸ Ibid. 370-378.

⁹ J. Muilenburg, "The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle *kî* in the Old Testament," *HUCA* 32 (1961) 135-160.

¹⁰ E.g. D. Greenwood, "Rhetorical Criticism and *Formgeschichte*: Some Methodological Considerations," *JBL* 89 (1970) 418-426; *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); J. C. Exum, "Literary Patterns in the Samson Saga: An Investigation of Rhetorical Style in Biblical Prose" (dissertation; Columbia University, 1976); *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, *JSOTSup* 19 (ed. D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn and A. J. Hauser; Sheffield: JSOT, 1982); W. Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?," *CBQ* 29 (1987) 448-463.

¹¹ R. Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered," *Int* 27 (1973) 458 n. 91.

Although Muilenburg's formulation of rhetorical criticism was inadequate—one should note that Martin Kessler¹² has gone a long way in correcting this lack of definition—nonetheless Muilenburg's essay has raised in Biblical scholars the consciousness of the need for a new literary criticism and thus prepared the way for more recent proposals.

A more adequate proposal comes from Robert Alter¹³ who, though not primarily a Biblical scholar, is a literary critic of modern literature (including modern Hebrew literature). From that vantage point he proposes a "literary approach" to the study of the Bible that in essence resembles Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism (though he seemed to have been unaware of Muilenburg):

By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.¹⁴

He goes on to expound the types of questions that should be asked of narrative texts:

Why, then, does the narrator ascribe motives to or designate states of feeling in his characters in some instances, while elsewhere he chooses to remain silent on these points? Why are some actions minimally indicated, others elaborated through synonym and detail? What accounts for the drastic shifts in the time-scale of narrated events? Why is actual dialogue introduced at certain junctures, and on what principle of selectivity are specific words assigned to characters? In a text so sparing in epithets and relational designations, why are particular identifications of characters noted by the narrator at specific points in the story? Repetition is a familiar feature of the Bible, but it is in no way an automatic device: when does the literal repetition occur, and what are the significant variations in repeated verbal formulas?¹⁵

It is the posing and answering of such questions that form the basis of the literary approach that Alter contemplates.

¹² M. Kessler, "A Methodological Setting for Rhetorical Criticism," in *Art and Meaning* 1-2. Kessler, following Frye, wishes to define the "rhetoric" of rhetorical criticism in the broadest sense, including the analysis of the smallest literary unit as well as all analysis of literary themes that are incorporated into the Bible as a whole. Such a definition would serve as a corrective against the "ubiquitous fragmentizing tendencies" that have plagued Biblical scholarship (p. 7; cf. n. 41). Furthermore he wants to limit rhetorical criticism to synchronic criticism and limit form criticism to the analysis and history of genres (pp. 13-14). So defined, rhetorical criticism is essentially identical to the literary approach advocated by Alter, Berlin and Sternberg.

¹³ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). This is the outgrowth of a series of articles between 1975 and 1980 in *Commentary*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 12-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 20-21.

According to Alter, the main reason that this has not been done in Biblical scholarship—with some exceptions¹⁶—is that Biblical scholars have assumed that the Bible is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents and have devoted their energies to “excavative” activity, using a variety of analytical tools to uncover the original meanings of Biblical words, the life situations in which specific texts were used, and the sundry sources from which longer texts were assembled.¹⁷ Such activity, while valuable to literary analysis, has resulted in scholarship’s not seeing the literary qualities of the final redaction of the text.¹⁸

When Alter comes to a text like Genesis 38,¹⁹ seen by source critics as a mixture of J and E documents, he does not deny that the text may be composite in origin but argues that it has been brilliantly woven into a complex, artistic whole. He does not deny that there are contradictions, but he is not sure that they would have been perceived as such by an intelligent Hebrew reader of the Iron Age using the conventions and logic of his day. Whereas Speiser’s commentary on Genesis considers the Tamar story (Genesis 38) to be an interpolation with no connection with the story of Joseph’s being sold into slavery (Genesis 37), Alter argues that the same motifs occur: As Joseph is separated from his brothers by “going down” to Egypt, so Judah separates from his brothers by “going down” to marry a Canaanite woman. Jacob is forced to mourn for a supposed death of his son, Judah is forced to mourn for the actual death of two of his sons. Judah and his brothers sought to thwart God’s election of Joseph by selling him into slavery—a ploy that God overturns; Judah tries to thwart the election of Tamar by not giving her his son for a husband—and again is thwarted. Judah is shown to be dishonest and unscrupulous in deceiving Jacob; he likewise is dishonest with Tamar, promising but never giving her his son Shelah for a husband. Judah tricked Jacob, so Tamar (in poetic justice) tricks Judah. Judah’s deceiving Jacob involved having the latter “recognize” Joseph’s blood-stained garment, so Tamar has Judah “recognize” the articles of pledge. Judah used a goat (its blood) in his deception of Jacob, so the promised harlot’s price of a kid plays a role in his own deception. Thus—in contrast to Speiser—whatever the sources used, the final product is an integrated whole, picks up the themes of the previous chapter and artfully develops them.

Alter tries to answer two objections that might be brought against his approach to the Bible. The first is that a literary analysis such as is

¹⁶ Ibid. 14 cites as exceptions the literary commentaries of U. Cassuto and the writings of L. Alonso-Schökel but notes that these works were generally deemed peripheral by other scholars to the discipline of OT research. He also appreciates the attempts of E. M. Good’s *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) to make a sustained effort at using a literary perspective (p. 16). In addition M. Fishbane, J. P. Fokkeman, S. Bar-Efrat, M. Perry and M. Sternberg are recent scholars whose works are cited as moving in the direction of a literary approach to the Bible.

¹⁷ Ibid. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid. 3–10, 20.

customary for prose fiction is not appropriate to historical accounts, as much as the Bible seems to be. Alter responds that Biblical narrative is not "history" in the modern sense but historicized fiction not unlike Shakespeare's portrayals of English history, which is to say that the author may have been bound to keep an essential historical framework but was free nonetheless to invent the details at will, filling in the gaps with his imagination and for his own purposes.²⁰ Thus, according to Alter, methods appropriate to prose fiction are also suitable for the Hebrew Bible.

Another objection relates to using this method on material with religious rather than artistic intentions. Alter agrees that there were certainly theological and didactic aims in the minds of the Biblical authors, and yet the operation of the literary imagination develops a momentum of its own, even for authors as theologically oriented as these. Consequently without abandoning their goal of revealing the truth of God's work in history and of Israel's hopes and failings the Biblical authors could also indulge in literary play peripheral to their didactic aims for the sheer pleasure of it. Such play actually enhances and enlarges the text's meaning by the amusing or arresting or gratifying style of its presentation.²¹

Reactions to Alter have varied. He is said to have too readily dismissed the work of the source critics' attempts to discover stages by which the Pentateuch reached its present form.²² He is said to have underestimated the historiographic thrust of Samuel and Kings and to have inadequately addressed the question why its author, an otherwise remarkable historian known for careful observation, should have used fictional portrayals in his historical presentation.²³

D. Jobling criticizes Alter for his rejection of the methodology of structuralism²⁴ and its attempt to apply the fruits of linguistic science to

²⁰ Ibid. 23-24, 32-36.

²¹ Ibid. 46. Cf. L. Alonso-Schökel, "Hermeneutical Problems of a Literary Study of the Bible," VTSup 28 (1974) 1-15. Alonso-Schökel notes that Biblical scholars are reluctant to think in terms of literary approaches because they are interested in theological content rather than artistic form. Unfortunately this overlooks the fact that form is related to and is an expression of content, so that a true perception of content cannot neglect the literary form in which it is presented.

²² R. N. Whybray, "On Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*," JSOT 27 (1983) 99.

²³ A. Cook, "Fiction and History in Samuel and Kings," JSOT 36 (1986) 27. Cf. B. O. Long, "Historical Narrative and the Fictionalizing Imagination," VT 35 (1985) 405-416, who agrees with Alter "that the historians of ancient Israel freely used the tools of literary fiction in their telling of the past" (p. 416), thus undermining the use of such narratives as sources for the modern Biblical historian.

²⁴ D. Jobling, "Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*," JSOT 27 (1983) 87-99. On the application of structuralist principles to Biblical texts see D. Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis* (ed. A. M. Johnson; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976); R. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); D. and A. Patte, *Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); D. Patte, "Charting the Way of the Helmsman on the High Seas: Structuralism and Biblical Studies," in *Divine Helmsman* 165-190. The journal *Semeia* is devoted to Biblical structuralism. For an analysis and critique of structuralism and its application to the Bible see

the study of literature. But in my judgment Alter's response to Jobling,²⁵ saying that the attempts of structuralists to analyze literature over the last twenty years have yielded very little encouraging results, is essentially correct. It is not without reason that structuralism seems to be a dying movement.²⁶

The impact of Alter's work on contemporary Biblical studies has been significant. His book has been widely reviewed, is frequently cited in other articles, and was the object of special attention in the 1983 issue of *JSOT*. Furthermore he has stimulated other scholars to attempt literary readings of Biblical texts along the lines that he suggests.

Influenced by Alter, Adele Berlin²⁷ has expanded on his popularly described literary approach and attempted to describe more systematically and technically a "poetics" of Biblical narrative with the needs of the Biblical scholar in mind. Her discussion emphasizes the techniques of characterization in the Bible and the importance of how the narrator portrays various points of view in the telling of his stories.

D. C. Greenwood, *Structuralism and the Biblical Text* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985); T. J. Keegen, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 40-72; J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 104-139, 185-194.

²⁵ R. Alter, "A Response to Critics," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 113-117.

²⁶ The weaknesses in structuralism have become increasingly obvious to many, so much so that the mid-80s were often being called a "post-structuralist" age (Greenwood, *Structuralism* vii). It is ironic that Biblical structuralism was becoming popular at the very time that structuralist theorists were growing increasingly doubtful about it and beginning to think of structuralism as passé. Lévi-Strauss used structuralist methods with less and less frequency in his later years, and his posthumously published papers entitled *Le Regard Éloigné* gives the impression that he viewed structuralism with flagging enthusiasm (ibid. 38). Another structuralist theorist, R. Barthes, abandoned structuralism toward the end of his life, concluding that the attempt to develop a satisfactory structuralist methodology for literature was useless (ibid. 41). Scholars with an interest in literary approaches have not been very sympathetic to structuralism. Greenwood says that structuralism is inadequate as a total methodology for the interpretation of texts but might supplement redaction and rhetorical criticism by bringing new light to bear on semiotic aspects of the text and by helping the critic to become a more active participant in the text he reads. Others have been less generous. A. Berlin calls structuralism "so abstract and theoretical that it is difficult to imagine what text it could have come from or to what texts it could be applied. It is not meaningful in most cases, because it does not lead to interpretation—it does not help us to read the Bible" (*Poetics* 19). In a similar vein J. Stek says, "The method and goal of structuralism is here rejected as philosophically wrong-headed and methodologically so abstract as to frustrate rather than promote good interpretation" ("The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer* [ed. W. C. Kaiser and R. F. Youngblood; Chicago: Moody, 1986] 79). Note also the negative evaluation of structuralism by M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985) 129, who compares structuralist fragmenting of the text into bits of discourse and seeking to assign each to its appropriate "originator" (defined as an internal rather than as an historical source) with the atomism of source criticism—except that structuralism is even more ill-considered. For criticism of structuralism as such see P. Pettit, *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977).

²⁷ A. Berlin, "Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative," *Bible and Literature Series* 9 (ed. D. M. Gunn; Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

As is the case with Alter, Berlin's poetics are synchronic rather than diachronic. She is doubtful that a diachronic poetics can be written since there are insufficient data for reconstructing what the Bible looked like at an earlier stage.²⁸ She is thus at odds with source criticism (with its JEDP documentary hypothesis, for example) and form criticism. Moreover she accuses form and source critics of mistaken analysis of common poetic features in Biblical narrative. For example, repetition is often used in the Biblical narratives to indicate simultaneity, but form and source critics regularly misconstrue such phenomena as evidence for sources.²⁹ Thus in her view synchronic poetics not only provides a different way of looking at a text in contrast to diachronic approaches but actually undermines standard source criticism by interpreting the very phenomena used by source critics to reconstruct the hypothetical original sources in ways not requiring such sources.³⁰ Therefore both Berlin and Alter, unlike Muilenburg, can be regarded as offering approaches to Biblical narrative that are in opposition to and corrective of the approaches of Wellhausen and Gunkel.

The last scholar to be considered is Meir Sternberg, who actually preceded Alter in publishing on Biblical narrative. His early articles, some co-authored with M. Perry, were cited by Alter as representing the kind of approach that Alter himself was attempting.³¹ Berlin has also been influenced by Sternberg's articles, frequently citing his works. More recently Sternberg has written at length in explanation of his approach to narrative.³²

²⁸ Ibid. 112.

²⁹ Ibid. 128. The same argument occurs independently in H. C. Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf: A Literary Analysis of a Fable on Idolatry," *HUCA* 54 (1983) 1-44.

³⁰ Ibid. 111-134. A similar argument against the documentary hypothesis has been advanced by I. M. Kikawada and A. Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). Neither Berlin nor Kikawada and Quinn deny that there may have been sources from which Biblical authors drew, the latter pair daring even to identify one "source," the Atrahasis epic, which they believe the writer of Genesis 1-11 was consciously contradicting. What both books deny is that redaction of the sources was of the scissors-and-paste variety that can be easily dissected from the present form of the text. Rather, whatever the raw materials the author utilized—whether earlier themes, plots, motifs, or stories—he has revised, reworded and recast that material into a unified new creation and has thus rendered futile all attempts at reconstructing the "original" sources solely from the present text.

³¹ M. Perry and M. Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: The Narrator's Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba and Two Excurses on the Theory of the Narrative Text," *Hasifrut* 1 (1968) 262-291; "Caution: A Literary Text," *Hasifrut* 2 (1970) 608-663; M. Sternberg, "Delicate Balance in the Story of the Rape of Dinah: Biblical Narrative and the Rhetoric of the Narrative," *Hasifrut* 4 (1973) 193-231; "Repetition Structure in Biblical Narrative: Strategies of Informational Redundancy," *Hasifrut* 25 (1977) 109-150. One might also consider his subsequent articles: "Between the Truth and the Whole Truth in Biblical Narrative: The Rendering of Inner Life by Telescoped Inside View and Interior Monologue," *Hasifrut* 29 (1979) 110-146; "Language, World, and Perspective in Biblical Art: Free Indirect Discourse and Modes of Covert Penetration," *Hasifrut* 32 (1983) 88-131; "The Bible's Art of Persuasion: Ideology, Rhetoric, and Poetics in Saul's Fall," *HUCA* 54 (1983) 45-82.

³² Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.

Although Sternberg has a reputation for advocating (or even inventing) the literary approach to the Bible, he is not happy when this label is applied to him.³³ Sternberg is in fact critical of many advocates of literary approaches. Some—and he seems to have Muilenburg-style rhetorical critics in mind—tend to miss the intention of the Biblical authors particularly in that they allow the analysis of literary forms and devices to get in the way of a holistic reading of the text, a kind of losing the forest for the trees.³⁴

A second criticism concerns the name “the literary approach,” which he considers to be misleading in its monolithic ring.³⁵ There are in fact many literary approaches, not all of equal value.³⁶ He is especially concerned about the influence of “new criticism”³⁷ on adherents of literary approaches to the Bible.

Sternberg, referring to an essay by Kenneth Gros Louis,³⁸ believes that the ideology of new criticism is greatly influencing the proponents of literary approaches to the Bible.³⁹ New criticism is an approach to literature traceable to the 1920s. I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt, John Crowe Ransom and William Empson are among the names associated with this approach. A reaction against the historicism of nineteenth-century literary criticism, new criticism centers on the text

³³ Ibid. 2-3.

³⁴ Ibid. 1-2. This criticism might justifiably be applied to some interpreters who have become obsessed with the discovery of chiasm in Biblical texts.

³⁵ Ibid. 3.

³⁶ The same point was made by S. A. Geller, “Through Windows and Mirrors into the Bible: History, Literature, and Language in the Study of the Text,” in *A Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982) 6; T. Longman III, “The Literary Approach to the Study of the Old Testament: Promise and Pitfalls,” *JETS* 28 (1985) 387-388. Cf. also Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 47-49.

³⁷ Discussions of new criticism (also called formalist criticism) and its relationship to literary approaches can be found in Sternberg, *Poetics* passim; *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu* (ed. Maier and Tollers) 4-5, 330-331; Kessler, “Methodological Setting,” in *Art and Meaning* 4, 16 n. 22; J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 140-179; T. J. Keegen, *Interpreting the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 75-77. Some basic proponents or discussions of new criticism include J. C. Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1941); W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946), reprinted in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1954) 3-18; S. E. Hyman, *The Armed Vision* (New York: Vintage, 1955) 278 ff.; W. S. Scott, *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* (New York: Collier, 1962) 179-184. For critical assessments cf. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976); M. C. Beardsley, “Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revived,” in *The Aesthetic Point of View* (ed. M. J. Wreen and D. M. Callen; Ithaca: Cornell University, 1982).

³⁸ K. R. R. Gros Louis, “Some Methodological Considerations,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative II* (ed. K. R. R. Gros Louis and J. S. Ackerman; Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 14-17.

³⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics* 7 ff. Likewise *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu* 4, 331 notes the similarity between new criticism and Muilenburg’s rhetorical criticism, while Barton, *Reading* 153 ff., 159 ff., sees strong parallels between new criticism and the canonical criticism of B. Childs.

itself with an eye to its inner coherence rather than with reference to its historical development or production. Indeed, biographical or historical background is regarded by this school as largely irrelevant to the task of criticism. In keeping with that, new criticism seeks the text's meaning not in the author's subjective intentions derived historically from such phenomena as the author's remarks and writings external to the text at hand and perhaps even from details of his biography but in the critic's own "close reading" of the text using vigorous and objective methods. A correlate of this approach is the ascription to the new critics (an ascription not always rejected by them) of the view that, once written, a literary work is no longer the property of the author but of the reader. To pose the question of the author's intention is to commit the "intentional fallacy" because (1) the author's intent may not correspond with the actual effect of the creation and (2) even if the author were available to be asked what he meant, over time he may have forgotten his original intent. Biographical considerations of the author are also considered illegitimate, for the situation of the author's life when he wrote might affect his literary creation no more than the personal affairs of a carpenter affects the way he makes a chair. Only the text itself, not the author's supposed psychology when he wrote, is determinative. Furthermore, subjective considerations such as what feelings are evoked by the text in one or another reader (another focus of nineteenth-century criticism) are excluded testimony as far as legitimate criticism is concerned. One cannot simply say, "I like it." One must say specifically and precisely what phenomena in the text he likes and how it is that these phenomena are pleasing. This last feature has been viewed by opponents of new criticism as making it a dry enterprise, distant from existential questions.

New critics, according to Sternberg, did literary criticism a favor by reacting against the "mishmash of philology, biography, moral admonition, textual exegesis, social history, and sheer burbling" of which academic literary criticism at the beginning of the century consisted by drawing the attention of scholars back to the text, but it fell short of being an adequate counter-theory. New criticism is a movement of reaction that errs in its total repudiation of the contributions of literary history to interpretation. This battle has largely been resolved among English literary critics where new criticism has waned as a separate movement. But now history is repeating itself in the area of Biblical studies.

It is only natural that it should. According to Sternberg, the mishmash of early-twentieth-century English literary criticism was paralleled, if not exceeded, by the still widely-practiced historical criticism of Biblical studies that developed from the same milieu. His censures of source criticism (which he terms "geneticism") are sharp:

Rarely has there been such a futile expense of spirit in a noble cause; rarely have so many worked so long and so hard with so little to show for their trouble. Not even the widely accepted constructs of geneticism, like the Deuteronomist, lead an existence other than speculative. Small wonder,

then, that literary approaches react against this atomism by going to the opposite extreme of holism.⁴⁰

Yet Sternberg, unlike those influenced by new criticism, nonetheless thinks that the questions of historical-critical scholarship are valid questions, even if their answers have been too speculative. What is needed is to define properly in principle the relationship between this newer methodology and genetic approaches. To facilitate this, Sternberg wishes to distinguish between two different approaches to the text: (1) source-oriented inquiry and (2) discourse-oriented inquiry.

Source-oriented inquiry corresponds with the center of interest of mainline historical-critical methodologies. Source-oriented inquiry addresses itself to the Biblical world as it really was, usually to a specific dimension thereof. The historian wants to know what happened in Israelite history, the linguist what the language system (phonology, grammar, semantics) underlying the Bible was like. Source and form critics want to reconstruct the transmission of Biblical traditions, the identity of the writers or schools, the modes of editorial work, the tampering by way of interpolation, scribal misadventure, and so forth. In each case, then, interest focuses on an object behind the text—on a state of affairs or development that operated at the time as a source (material, antecedent, enabling condition) of Biblical writing and that Biblical writing now reflects in turn.⁴¹

In contrast, discourse analysis corresponds with the work of advocates of literary approaches. Discourse-oriented analysis sets out to understand not the realities behind the text but the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect. What does this piece of language signify in context? What are the rules governing the transaction between storyteller or poet and reader? What image of a world does the narrative project? Why does it unfold the action in this particular order and from this particular viewpoint? What is the part played by the omissions, redundancies, ambiguities, alternations between scene and summary or elevated and colloquial language? This is a synchronic rather than a diachronic analysis, an analysis of the text itself rather than of its prehistory.⁴²

It is not that one approach is valid and the other is invalid; rather, each is asking different kinds of questions of the text, aiming at different goals. Nor are they totally independent of each other since answers to discourse-oriented questions may involve genetic solutions and since answers to source-oriented questions must begin by first understanding the text as it stands, the realm of discourse analysis.

Sternberg is critical of Alter for categorizing Biblical narrative as "prose fiction."⁴³ Rather, he is convinced that much of the Bible has historiographic intent, even quoting sources like the Book of Yashar and

⁴⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics* 13.

⁴¹ Ibid. 15.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 24-29.

royal chronicles.⁴⁴ Sternberg prefers to say that descriptive historiography and fiction have much in common since the former, like the latter, must use imagination and invention in its reconstruction of the past and therefore may be indistinguishable in style from fictional narration, both exhibiting literary and esthetic qualities.

Biblical narrative, according to Sternberg, is a complex, multifunctional discourse that works on a number of principles: ideological, historiographic, esthetic.⁴⁵ Discourse analysis examines how these various functions work together in the narrative.

What can be said about the emergence of "the literary approach" or "rhetorical criticism" or "discourse-oriented analysis"? Should we look upon it with favor or disdain?

There is certainly danger here. As we can see in Alter, this approach is often combined with the view that Biblical narrative is essentially fictional. Such a conclusion makes us evangelicals uneasy. Of course in some cases lack of historicity is not essential. The story of Job, for instance, would have lasting didactic value even if Job is a fictional creation. But in other cases, as in the promise of Abraham or in the exodus, much more is at stake. To reject the historicity of these events is to render meaningless all exhortations in the Bible to trust in God because he has been faithful to his promises, if in fact those promises were never made or fulfilled. Yet the literary approach need not be antihistorical. Sternberg's criticisms of Alter are useful in this regard.

I for one am enthusiastic about literary approaches, provided that they are properly qualified (as Sternberg has done). Several features make them attractive to evangelicals.

Discourse-oriented analysis makes it easier for evangelical scholars to dialogue with nonevangelicals. Even if we disagree about the authorship, date, setting and historicity of a portion of Scripture we can all talk together about the way in which the story has been expressed. We may disagree over whether Moses ever existed in history, but we can certainly agree that he exists as a character in the story. Discourse analysis will make us seem somewhat less out of step with other Biblical scholars when we deal with the text in a holistic way.

Furthermore this form of analysis helps us defend the unity of the Bible. Alter, Berlin, Sternberg and Herbert Brichto reject Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis on the basis of the literary approach, for the very phenomena that were interpreted by source critics as indications of source divisions are explained instead in terms of literary functions, thereby eliminating the need to posit sources. A refutation of the documentary hypothesis on literary grounds has recently been attempted by Kikawada and Quinn.⁴⁶ It may be premature to announce the collapse of Wellhausen's edifice, but rhetorical criticism is eroding its foundations.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 30-31.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 41-42.

⁴⁶ Kikawada and Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*.

But regardless of these other considerations, this methodology offers a fresh and fruitful way of looking at the Biblical text. We evangelicals are often quick to give superficial answers to probing questions. If we are asked why events are recorded in the Bible we say, "They are recorded because that's the way it really happened." But even if it did actually happen, that does not explain why it is recorded. Lots of things happened to Moses that are never recorded. Why is the one considered worthy of record while another is not? Why is one event given as dialogue while another is recorded without the implied dialogue? Why are these particular details mentioned? Why are they expressed in the particular way that they are? It is the posing and answering of such questions that will help us penetrate into the Biblical text more deeply.

And this is true not only of narrative. Sternberg notes that his discourse analysis could be applied to any work of writing, not just what is commonly classified as literature. It is applicable to the Magna Charta as well as to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁴⁷ As such, the method can be applied to the various lists, genealogies and collections of laws⁴⁸ in the Bible as well as to narrative.

The future, I think, will see growing interest among Biblical scholars in literary approaches to the OT. Not everything that goes by the name "literary approach" is good, of course; structuralism and feminist literary approaches, it seems to me, are of limited value.⁴⁹ And yet the overall trend is a healthy one, eminently worthy of our encouragement and participation.

⁴⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics* 23.

⁴⁸ See my forthcoming dissertation, "A Literary Approach to Biblical Law: Exodus 20:22-23:33" (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College), in which I shall present a rhetorical analysis of the so-called Book of the Covenant. The present article is adapted from this work.

⁴⁹ I agree with D. J. A. Clines, "What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Irredeemably Anthropocentric Orientations in Genesis 1-3," a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, December 1987, who notes that feminist readings of texts not infrequently either misread texts by anachronistically projecting feminist ideals into them or else stand in judgment over the text because of its failure to reflect feminist ideals. He therefore calls for "post-feminist" readings of narrative. P. Tribble's paper "Miriam, Moses, and a Mess," read at the same meeting, illustrates Clines' point. Tribble accuses the "Priestly" writer of suppressing the Miriam traditions, thereby obscuring (though not completely) the "fact" that Miriam had actually been Moses' equal in leadership status. Her interpretation is guilty of both of Clines' accusations. For a critical evaluation of various other literary approaches cf. Longman, *Literary Approaches* 13-58.