

BOOK REVIEW

Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture, by Robert Alter (Yale University Press, 2000), 198pp. US\$18.50

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Robert Alter, an old friend of studies which combine literary scholarship with the Bible, surprises us once more with four startling and thought-provoking essays. Basing this work on a paper prepared for a book co-edited by his friend David Biale and on three lectures delivered at Yale during the spring of 1999, Alter sets out to unfold the genesis of the literary and biblical canons from a surprising new angle. Alter is uneasy about the contemporary trend which sees the canon as a mechanism for ideological coercion, or at best as the result of an ongoing clash of wills between the writers and their predecessors. He hypothesizes, instead, that literary canons (the Bible first of all) are no more and no less than part of "a dynamic trans-historical textual community, and not a timeless inscription of fixed meanings," the result of the display of literary achievements where influences and continuity patterns prove to be unsystematized and thus resist a structured classification.

In the introduction to the book, Alter defines his idea of canon and outlines the sequence of the four essays. He uses the first to present a theoretical outline of his thought and the remaining three to apply his theory to the analysis of three modern writers (Kafka, Bialik, and Joyce). By so doing, he attempts to explore the dynamics of canonicity by giving examples of the ways the Bible (which he calls "the exemplary canonical corpus of the Western tradition") manages to influence and let itself be reused by modern poets that refer to it – through allusion and the use of language – in order to express the concerns of literary modernism.

Basically, his thoughts can be summarized in his definition of the double canonicity of the Bible. While the theological canonicity of the books of the Torah and the Prophets have been traditionally accepted, part of the Writings has been usually rejected as belonging to the canon. The solution, says Alter, is to consider the literary canonicity of those books (specifically, he mentions Esther, Job, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes). While their theological cano-

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nicity could be under discussion, their literary importance undoubtedly played a role in the process of canonization. The remaining books of the Hebrew Bible are also important as literature, while their theological content was enough to give them a place in the Jewish canon. In other words, explains Alter, there were instances in the process of formation of the Hebrew Bible when the stylistic authority of some "wayward" books seems to have been powerful enough to cast a shadow over their doctrinal importance. And he sums up by stating that in "the sense of the literary canonicity of the Bible, considerations of doctrine are suspended."

In the three remaining chapters, Alter sets out to show the practical applications of his ideas as he analyzes and reflects on the impact the Hebrew Bible had for the work of three modern writers. The first is Franz Kafka, an iconoclast who nevertheless – according to Alter – "wrenches" Scripture through allusion towards a borderline between tradition and modernism. While Kafka's relation to Scripture is never consistent and systematic, his works display the Bible as a source of ironic and contrastive reflections. In the next chapter, Alter analyzes "The Dead of the Desert," by Haim Nahman Bialik. Alter believes that in this poem Bialik superimposes two opposite worlds where the poet "most drastically disrupts the canonical authority of the Bible" by resorting to the same biblical language that he seems to reject. (Let us remember that Bialik wrote in Hebrew). The result is a shift of the grounds of the canonicity of the Hebrew Bible towards a modernist stance, where Scripture nevertheless plays an important role by shaping essential aspects of contemporary cultural consciousness. Finally, in the last chapter, Alter analyzes what he calls "the synoptic canon" of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Alter shows in which ways – while apparently ignoring the Scripture in a traditional sense – Joyce manages to formulate his understanding of the biblical canon anew by using the Bible (and for this matter, Homer's *Odyssey*) as the "fundamental allusive matrix" of the novel.

Given the relevance of the topic and the originality of the approach, it should not be surprising that Alter's book leaves more questions than answers. In fact, this is perhaps one of its major contributions. First of all, the book is based on the presupposition that – in the theological and literary realms – the processes of canonicity were (and still are) of similar nature. That notion is implied from the very beginning, since the "history" of biblical

canonicity becomes the key to our understanding of modern writing. No other proof for this presupposition is presented than the author cataloguing the Bible – as we have said – as "the exemplary canonical corpus of the Western tradition." But there are other questions related to this simplistic but relevant approach. We cannot help but asking ourselves: Where do we stand as regards our notion of the biblical canon? Should not our ideas about canonicity in general, and of biblical canonicity in particular, be revised and "updated"? What degree of tightness or elasticity does our conception of the canon allow? On the other hand, is it necessary to discredit the theology of the Writings in order to account for their inclusion in the biblical canon as outstanding works of literature? No doubt, these and other questions would deserve further study.

Then, in the practical realm, it is not difficult to wonder if the proposal of modernism is the only choice available. What would happen if – taking into account Alter's notion of the literary canon – other contemporary works would be analyzed? In other words, in which ways the Bible is moving in or out of cultural consciousness as a significant means of social and cultural reflection.

Finally, we cannot avoid but asking: What are the ultimate implications of reducing the Bible – according to a traditional point of view – to nothing more than a powerful tool for cultural reflection? For the conservative mind, is it enough to think of the Scripture as a highly-achieved literary composition under no additional canonical claim? Robert Alter decisively brings the issue to the forefront: "The question . . . in regard to our concern with the fate of the authority of Scripture, is whether a common point of cultural reference is equivalent to canonical status." Is it, as he finally states, "a canonicity that can still nourish us"? In other words, what are our expectations as we approach the biblical text? Have they changed? Must they? For all interested in the biblical canon and its literary counterpart, as well as in the subtle but steady connections between the two, Alter's book triggers thought and pushes the reader towards an open confrontation with his or her stance before one of the most influential books of human history.