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# MENORAH



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## THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

*The Art of Biblical Narrative and  
The Art of Biblical Poetry*  
By Robert Alter  
Basic Books, Inc.

A Review essay by Cliff Edwards

There is a famous Zen story in which a beginner asks his master, "What is the first principle of Zen?" The master responds, "Attention." The beginner then requests Zen's second and third principles and receives the reply, "Attention, Attention, Attention."

Robert Alter's two volumes on the literary art of the Bible call the contemporary reader to a "close reading" of the biblical text with a newly informed alertness to subtle differences, fine calibrations, and minute alterations in language and style. Alter directs us to the text as literary artistry and demonstrates in passage after passage the rich rewards of sensitive literary "Attention, Attention, Attention."

Not only do Alter's volumes call us to a new attentiveness to the literary nature of the biblical texts, but we are invited to seek illuminating examples and guidance from sources far removed from traditional bibliographies in biblical studies. Alter himself chooses to place at the opening of *The Art of Biblical Poetry* a quotation from a literary artist known for his subtle play of language, Vladimir Nabokov: "The detail is everything." For Alter, Nabokov's stance is more to the point than that of Wellhausen. Citation of Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Voltaire, Flaubert, and Whitman replace references to Pedersen and Eissfeldt, von Rad and Meek, Cross and Albright. We are called to readjust our habits, whether as general readers or

scholars, and to recognize that the biblical texts have more in common with Shakespeare and *Tom Jones* than with Thomas Aquinas and *Archaeology of Palestine*.

Alter himself is no ordinary scholar of the Bible, and his freshness of approach likely has much to do with his freedom from the fraternity of traditional biblical scholars trained in seminaries or departments of theology. As professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley, his publications include studies of Fielding, Stendahl, the nature of the novel and literary imagination, and his specialty, modern Hebrew literature. As he recounts in his preface to *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, his "project" in biblical literature began in 1971 with the invitation to give an informal colloquium on the Bible at Stanford University. Popular interest then led to an article "On the need for a literary approach to the Bible" for *Commentary* in 1975, followed by articles in *Poetics Today* and *Critical Inquiry*, lectureships, conferences, and graduate seminars. The two volumes that have emerged are themselves a model of classroom conversation and probing at its best, informal, touched with humor, always allowing principles to derive from careful demonstrations focused on the text itself, avoiding dogmatism and obscurantism in favor of "suggestions" any alert reader might put to the test. I have already ordered *The Art of Biblical Narrative* to place alongside the Bible in my VCU course, "The Bible as Literature," and hope *The Art of Biblical Poetry* will soon appear in paperback to be added as a companion volume.

Chapter One of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, "A Literary Approach to the Bible," is a valuable overview of Alter's project for readers of either volume. At the heart of Alter's con-

cern is the severe limitation of "conventional biblical scholarship even at its best," an "excavative" scholarship wed to historical-theological concerns but largely uninformed regarding the true literary nature of the biblical text. Alter is not willing to accept the Bible as literature, one among many possible paradigms for biblical inquiry, any more than he would accept "Dante as literature" in such a condescending manner. For Alter, the Bible is literature, the literary approach has a special primacy and appropriateness, and "theological, moral, or historiosophical vision" are interfused with and can only be adequately grasped through the text as literary art.

Both Alter volumes focus upon the close reading of a series of selected texts, demonstrations intended to teach us "new modes of attentiveness as readers" appropriate to the nature of the Bible's own literary tradition. For many readers, the depth of meaning that emerges in the Tamar and Judah story, Esau's sale of his birthright, the Joseph stories, and the God Speeches in Job may well be high points of Alter's work. This is appropriate, as one of Alter's chief points is that scholarly analysis should not interpose itself between text and reader.

But a broader viewpoint and general rules for alert reading do emerge from these demonstrations. Focusing on the "golden age of narrative creation," the tenth through seventh centuries B.C.E., Alter contends that "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative." His analogy is illuminating: "The author of the David stories stands in basically the same relation to Israelite history as Shakespeare stands to English history in his history plays." But biblical literature is not in the tradition of detailed description from Greek to modern Western literature.

The very "art of reticence," the "selective silence" in Hebrew literature, must teach us to adjust our reading habits and realize that no act or gesture is incidental to such a spare text, that the smallest dissonances may carry crucial meaning. "Type-scenes" whose variations interpret one another, montage techniques, the vital role of dialogue, recurring word-motifs, artful selectivity, all suggest "patterns of ambiguity" reflecting human nature caught in the "double dialectic between design and disorder, providence and freedom." Responding to the creative demands of monotheism, biblical writers developed a high literary artistry that could assume a godlike comprehensiveness of knowledge, yet maintain the gap between God's mystery and the indeterminacy and contradictory aspects of human individuality and choice in history.

Although Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry* can stand on its own merits, it is a far richer work if one has read the biblical narrative volume first. Rejecting the "thought-rhyme" notion of deployed synonyms as the basis of biblical poetry, Alter stresses the dynamic movement from one verset to another within the line of biblical poetry, a "heightening, intensification, focusing, specification, concretization." Developing a sense for the variety within Hebrew poetic technique, Alter finds in prophetic poetry a "particular way of imaging the world," an intensification from verset to verset, line to line, that demonstrates a process skidding toward an abyss, history being transformed into "the stuff of apocalypse," a mythologizing movement toward an "archetypal horizon." But all Hebrew poetry must not be pressed into the same mold. Though narrative poetry is generally avoided, a "narrativity" developing metaphor can be found, the secular love poetry of Song of Songs can be "instructively untypical" in its own way, and the puzzle of the Book of Job can best be fathomed as "a clash between two modes of poetry, one kind spoken by man, . . . the other the kind of verse a poet of genius could persuasively imagine God speaking."

What is one to say of Alter's persuasive volumes and their place within the context of biblical studies?

Certainly Alter provides a focus for the growing resistance to top-heavy historical-theological traditions and structures that have tended to dominate biblical studies and to alienate the ordinary reader from the biblical texts. In Alter's view, the ordinary reader must be alert to new ways of attending to detail, but the reader and the text belong to each other.

Further, Alter carries the challenge of "Bible as Literature" into the camp of historical, theological, and related experts with a new confidence. Even so radical a literary reader of the biblical text as David Robertson (*The Old Testament and the Literary Critic*) offered only the timid claim that the Bible is an "adopted child" of literary criticism based upon an "arbitrary assumption" that "the Bible is imaginative literature." Alter goes well beyond this. He affirms that the Bible is the work of writers of great literary artistry, and its text is literature and should be dealt with as such. This challenge posed by Alter will be much debated and attacked, but Alter's demonstrations from the text itself have a persuasive power that will do much to change the nature of biblical studies. One immediate result may be the encouraging of other literary persons into the field of biblical study, and a movement of the center of biblical studies more and more from the seminary and theological school to the wider university community.

Standing by this judgment, I must still voice a concern that some may too easily assume that the literary-critical establishment will bring unity, solving the problems of biblical studies in our day. The tasks of biblical study remain, and archaeology, historical construction, theological work, and the like continue to have their task and contribution. But more to the point, anyone who has made even a tentative excursion into literary-critical circles today realizes the creative disarray of that field, with pre-structural, structural, deconstructionist, Anglo-American, French, and Russian vectors crossing in bewildering directions. Alter's own orderliness cannot protect biblical studies from the confusing variety of literary operations on the biblical texts we may see in the near future.

To my reading, Alter provides a creative and balanced Anglo-American "New Criticism" that is also trained in Hebrew and aware of Israeli scholarship and Jewish tradition. He is indebted to Russian semioticians, but distrustful of the complexities of French deconstructionist thought. In a way, the battles fought by "new critics," the campaigns waged by Ransom, Tate, Brooks, and others to save English studies from "excavative" scholarship some decades ago, find a creative voice in biblical studies through Alter. Confusion may follow, but let us hope that it will be a creative confusion.

Cliff Edwards is professor of religious studies at VCU.

#### THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS?

*None Is Too Many*  
By Irving Anella and  
Harold Troper  
Lester and Orpen Dennys

A Review essay by Michael S. Strohm

*None Is Too Many* is a book that describes Canada's abysmal record in receiving Jewish refugees during the Second World War and the genteel anti-Semitism that underlay Canadian Judeo-phobia. "During the 12 years of Nazi terror, from 1933-1945 while the United States accepted more than 200,000 Jewish refugees; Palestine, 125,000; embattled Britain, 70,000; Argentina, 50,000; penurious Brazil, 27,000; distant China, 25,000; tiny Bolivia and Chile, 14,000 each, Canada found room for fewer than 5,000."

The Canadian point of view can be found in the attitude of Prime Minister MacKenzie King as recorded in his diary: "We must . . . seek to keep this part of the Continent free from unrest and from too great an intermixture of foreign strains of blood." In September 1938, King wrote of Hitler: "He might come to be thought of as one of the saviours of the world."

In 1935, Canadian immigration was in the hands of the director of the Immigration Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, Frederick Charles Blair. The attitude of MacKenzie King was expressed even more bluntly by Blair: "Pressure on the part of Jewish people to get into Canada, has never been greater than it is now, and I am glad to be able to add, after 35 years of experience here, that it was never so well controlled. . . . I suggested recently to three Jewish gentlemen with whom I am well acquainted, that it might be a very good thing if they would call a conference and have a day of humiliation and prayer, which might profitably be extended for a week or more, where they would honestly try to answer the question of why they are so unpopular almost everywhere. . . . If they would divest themselves of certain of their habits I am sure they could be just as popular in Canada as our Scandinavians. . . ."

This attitude to the rescue of Jews was not unique to Canada as has been pointed out in the new book, *The Abandonment of the Jews* by David S. Wyman. American rescue efforts were filled with excuses and technical difficulties. Congress was uninterested, the State Department wary. Restrictive immigration interfered with rescue efforts and most was too little and too late.

There is a moral in all of this. That moral is to be found in the words of Blanche Dubois in the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." This statement reveals her character, her dependence and vulnerability, her behavior, and her need. For 2,000 years, the Jewish people have depended on the kindness of strangers. Sometimes the strangers have been nice, sometimes not so nice. This too explains aspects of our national character, especially some of those we like least, our vulnerability, our insecurity, our simultaneous desire to melt into the majority and to assert our identity, our pride in Jewish Nobel prizewinners and movie stars, our embarrassment when a thief or child molester is Jewish. The Jewish people of 1985 are the result of 2,000 years of depending on the kindness of strangers.

From the middle of the nineteenth century to 1933, no nation was kinder to Jews than Germany. Jews had a prominent role in the arts, the economy, and in the life of the universities. Many American professors of Jewish studies got their doctorates in Germany. Most Jewish scholarship of the last century, which is not in English or Hebrew, is in German. The general acceptance of Jews is indicated by the high rate of intermarriage. Intermarriage is not an indication of the Jewish willingness to marry non-Jews as much as an indication of the willingness of non-Jews to marry Jews.

But kindness given can be kindness withheld. The Holocaust demonstrated the extent to which the lives of Jews are dependent on the will of strangers and how easily beneficent acceptance can turn to hate and mass murder. The ultimate lesson of the Holocaust is Jewish vulnerability, and that in the Diaspora we live at the whim of others. It is clear that the Nazis had no initial plan. They did not know how far they could go. But the Nazis found that there was no limit to how far they could go, and Jews could be turned easily from good German citizens into pariahs.

Berthold Auerbach (1819-92) was one of the creators of modern German literature and a popular German author. He said "I am a teutonic Jew, a German, as good I think as anyone that exists. . . ." Berthold Auerbach was a believer in the integration of Jews into Germany. Nonetheless, after the outbreak of anti-Semitism in 1880, the same Auerbach said "I have lived and laboured in vain . . . to live among Jews alone, how glorious this must be."

We, too, of course live by the kindness of strangers. No community has attained the acceptance, affluence, and integration of the North American Jewish community. Of course we never had a Jewish president or prime minister; still conditions for Jews are better even than in pre-Nazi Germany. In the recent past, it was difficult for Jews to enter certain professions or certain schools or certain clubs or to live in certain neighborhoods in both Canada and the United States. Things are not like that any more; are we not grateful!

We know, however, that this is at the whim of others. We do not expect kindness to be withheld, and it may never be, but we know it can be. We seem to live with a time bomb. It ticks slowly. It may tick forever and never explode, but Jews live with the ticking in the background. It influences our character, our behavior, our anxiety, our worship of our children, our ambivalence to our identity, our feeling that we are never quite at home in the way others are, our feeling of vulnerability that non-Jews never seem to understand.

The Zionist Movement arose out of a desire of Jews not to be dependent on the kindness of strangers, never again to have our lives, our very existence vulnerable to the whims of others. The reluctance of Israel to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank with Yasser Arafat as president flows from taking seriously the Palestine National Covenant, which calls for the destruction of Israel. While some say that the PLO will become moderate in power and that Israel can ultimately trust the kindness of the Arabs, Israel is reluctant to live dependent on the kindness of the Arabs. Others say that the United States will guarantee the security of Israel, and if anything happens, the U.S. will come to Israel's protection. But Israel does not even want to live dependent on the kindness of the United States. Israel's almost obsessive desire to be self-sufficient and able to defend itself flows from Jewish history. If we do not understand the feeling of vulnerability produced by 2,000 years and the desire to end it, we will never understand Israel's policy. More than any other nation, Israel does not want to live vulnerable to the whims of others.

Every Jew has gained from the reality of Israel, physically by the existence in the world of a place where Jews are not dependent on the kindness of strangers and emotionally by the liberation that comes to us vicariously through Israel's independence. We feel more at home everywhere because we have a home somewhere. The Holocaust was the final chapter on Jewish dependence. There is not a Jew who has not been traumatized by that event and its evocation of our

feeling of total vulnerability. It has created new Jews who do not have to feel that passivity is our lot, that our destiny is always in the hands of others, that we must live by our wits and our ability to be one step ahead of anti-Semitic scheming.

In some ways, of course, Israel is itself vulnerable, and we Jews in the Diaspora bear both our Diaspora vulnerability and share in the different kind of vulnerability and dependency on great powers that is true of Israel. Therefore, in ultimate terms all Jews remain in galut and the liberation of Israel waits for the Days of the Messiah. In pre-Messianic history, however, Israel has done much to make us whole, to give our children confidence in their identity, and to remove from us the perpetual anxiety of depending on the kindness of strangers. In this, the Third Jewish Commonwealth is the miracle of the twentieth century.

*Michael S. Stroh is rabbi of Temple Har Zion in Ontario, Canada.*

### RESURRECTION AND DIVINE WARFARE: THE BIBLICAL CONNECTION

By Leonard J. Greenspoon

The belief in resurrection is a characteristic feature of Judaism. The traditional interpretation holds that this belief is supported by many biblical passages. By contrast, most biblical scholars today argue that authentic expressions of a belief in resurrection are found in very few places in the Hebrew Bible, all composed at a comparatively late date.

In my opinion, however, the idea of bodily resurrection—which in the Hebrew Bible is characteristically described as a reawakening of the dead to life—appears much earlier and more frequently than the prevailing scholarly consensus allows. While the origins of this belief cannot be fully uncovered, references to it can be located in some of the oldest material preserved in the Hebrew Bible.

The concept of resurrection—like other biblical concepts—did not originate or develop as an isolated entity, but was part of a larger complex of ideas and language. In seeking a full,

elaborated theme out of which the specific concept of resurrection could have arisen, I was drawn to the image of Divine Warfare and of the Lord/Yahweh as Divine Warrior. Frank Cross and other scholars have discerned a mythic pattern through which many ancient Near Eastern writers pictured the warfare between their deity or deities and enemies in the human realm or in nature. According to the myth, the actions of the Divine Warrior have ramifications throughout nature: The Divine Warrior's anger, as he marches off to battle, destroys the life-producing processes of nature; the earth becomes sterile and lifeless. Nature's response to the Warrior's eventual victory is a joyful reawakening of bounteous fertility and other productive activity (for these contrasting pictures of nature see, for example, Isaiah 34 and 35). It is this reawakening of nature that initially suggested to me a connection between the activities of the Lord as Divine Warrior and the process of resurrection.

Do humans also respond to the marches of the Divine Warrior out to and back from military engagements? Isaiah 35:5f appear to affirm this. These verses speak of the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the dumb in the context of nature's restoration at the return of the victorious Divine Warrior. If such healing is possible, could biblical writers go further and affirm that humans, or at least some of them, reawaken from the dormancy of death through the life-producing stimulus of the Lord as Divine Warrior? This is what I set out to demonstrate.

I am aware that for some people it seems inappropriate to assign to the God of Israel the role of Divine Warrior and to fit Him into a pattern ultimately derived from polytheistic sources. However, biblical writers themselves explicitly speak of God's role in warfare: He is the source of numerous military rules and regulations; He frequently fought on behalf of Israel during the Conquest and afterwards; when necessary, He is, in the words of Exodus 15:3, "a man of war." Nor should suggestions of extra-biblical parallels cause undue concern. There are many concepts and literary images that biblical writers shared with their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Beliefs at odds with Israel's monotheism were filtered

out; biblical writers effectively and creatively used the residue to draw contrasts between the one true God and the numerous deities that populated the pantheons of their adversaries.

The question of humankind's relationship to nature is treated in several places in the Bible. The account of Creation in the early chapters of Genesis makes it clear that humans stand in close relationship to all other created beings—to animals and to the earth itself. In a few biblical passages, however, the conventional thought, "man is part of nature," received a significant modification. For example, in Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17, the wicked are not judged worthy of participation in the positive, fructifying aspects of the natural process; they are like chaff, like a desert shrub. The righteous, on the other hand, are like healthy trees with strong, deep roots and vibrant leaves and fruit.

This distinction between the wicked and the righteous came to mind when I observed that throughout most of the Hebrew Bible resurrection is reserved for the righteous, who in Isaiah 26:19 are called God's dead: "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. Those who dwell in the dust shall awaken and sing for joy." (The text I quote here is based on scholarly research into the original form of the Hebrew Bible; unless otherwise noted, other biblical quotations in this article are drawn from the Revised Standard Version.) Several verses earlier, at 26:14, Israel's wicked overlords are specifically excluded from participation in resurrection: "They are dead, they will not live. They are shades, they will not arise" (see also Jeremiah 51:39, 57: "They shall sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake"). In their alienation from nature, the wicked have excluded themselves from the "natural" process of resurrection.

Isaiah 26 forms part of the Isaiah Apocalypse (chapters 24–27), a section filled with references to Divine Warfare. The occurrence of resurrection language in this Apocalypse led me to explore the resurrection-warfare connection elsewhere.

A similar context is provided by the Vision of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37, one of the most familiar passages in the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars

hold that this passage speaks figuratively of the hope of national restoration, rather than literally about the resurrection of the dead. It is not, however, a case of either resurrection or restoration; Ezekiel uses imagery associated with resurrection to convince his fellow exiles of the certainty of their restoration to the Land of Israel. In so doing, Ezekiel must himself have been convinced that his intended audience had a full understanding of what "literal" resurrection was all about. And there is little doubt that the Vision concerns resurrection—the dried out, parched condition of the bones reflects the sterility of the environment, a setting brought back to life through Ezekiel's carrying out of God's command. Both here and in the prophet's first encounter with Him (chapters 1ff), God is portrayed as the Divine Warrior.

There were other humans through whom Yahweh manifested the power to bring about resurrection, especially the ninth-century prophets Elijah and Elisha. To both of them is credited what we might term a "provisional" resurrection, that is, a dead child brought back to life on earth, presumably to meet a final death and possible second resurrection at a later date (see 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4). The complex of stories about the two prophets is filled with incidents that demonstrate their close connection with God as Divine Warrior. Elijah's contest with prophets of the Canaanite god Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18), to determine which deity had ultimate control over nature, is one example. The same prophet's being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 4) is another. Though these stories may not be as old as the prophets themselves, they are nonetheless authentic indications of an early belief in God's power to effect the bodily resurrection of humans and of the connection of this belief with the larger theme of the Divine Warrior.

In common with the main lines of rabbinic interpretation I conclude that Deuteronomy 32:39 ("I kill and I make alive") and the almost identical language in 1 Samuel 2:6 ("The Lord kills and brings to life") point to an even earlier existence for the belief in resurrection. I was struck by the order of the verbs in these two verses—

(a) to kill, (b) to make alive/bring to life—which I believe refers in each case to God's activity in relation to one and the same individual: The same person God causes to die He also has the power to bring back to life through the process of resurrection.

At least three other passages merit inclusion in this discussion. First is the final portion of the fourth "Servant" song in Isaiah 53:10 ff. I agree that this individual, whoever he may be, did suffer a humiliating death, followed by burial and post-mortem exaltation in the heavenly realms. It should not be overlooked, however, that the author of this passage says nothing about the means by which the "Servant" went from earthly burial to heavenly vindication. This writer, like his probably contemporary Ezekiel, could confidently assume familiarity with the concept of resurrection on the part of his audience. His silence becomes eloquent testimony to the fact that belief in bodily resurrection was neither novel nor obscure in the sixth century.

1 Kings 18:27 forms part of Elijah's taunt as Baal's prophets, despite repeated self-mutilation and endless prayers, were unable to convince their patron deity that he should send fire to ignite their offering. Verse 27 speaks of Baal's being asleep and of the necessity of awakening him: "Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." As I interpret it, Elijah's point is that Baal finds himself bound by the power of sleep (i.e., death), from which he is unable to awaken (i.e., resurrect) himself. How, then, could any follower of this so-called deity seriously consider him a rival to the Lord?

We turn finally to Daniel 12:2, which is frequently the starting (and sometimes also the ending) point for discussions on resurrection in the Bible: "And many of those who sleep in the land of dust shall awake. Some to eternal life and some to eternal contempt." (The text quoted here is based on scholarly research.) In my opinion this verse marks the culmination and distillation of earlier thinking, and, in addition, introduces a powerful innovation. Previously, resurrection *per se* had been thought of as the reward for the

righteous, a reward from which the wicked were excluded. But Daniel explicitly states that of those resurrected, some will be rewarded and others punished. This new formulation is a response to the contemporary events of the Maccabean revolt. Never before had so many Jews turned traitors to their religion—and been so richly rewarded. Never before had so many of the righteous and pious suffered so severely, even to the point of death, for their beliefs. This incongruous state of affairs would be righted, if not on earth, then surely in the heavenly court, at which *all* would be called to account.

As I chart it, the Biblical concept of bodily resurrection of humans is an outgrowth of thoughtful consideration concerning certain aspects of the belief in God as Divine Warrior. This concept was not static. Ninth-century writers used different language and had somewhat different presuppositions than authors in the sixth century. Second-century Daniel responded creatively to new pressures in his society. In the post-biblical period, speculation concerning the end of time, resurrection, and life after death assumed a far greater—and more explicit—role.

In dealing with the origins of the belief in resurrection and its development within the Hebrew Bible, I have consciously avoided the question of inspiration. As a scholar one can get away with such avoidance; it is more difficult for the part of me that is a believing Jew. It is my belief that the biblical writers were indeed responding to an authentic call from God when they composed their works. That call gave them insight, clarity, and strength. It did not diminish, but rather enhanced their humanity. As humans they sought answers to problems we still face. Among the answers revealed to them, which they in turn revealed to us, is the idea of bodily resurrection.

*Author's note: Several years ago I wrote an article, "The Origin of the Idea of Resurrection," which appeared in Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith (eds. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson; Eisenbrauns, 1981), a volume honoring Harvard professor Frank Moore Cross on his 60th birthday. The foregoing is based on material contained in that article.*

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**SELFHOOD AND  
DIALOGUE: THE MODERN  
LEGACY OF MARTIN BUBER**

*Martin Buber's Life and Work: The  
Later Years, 1945–1965*  
By Maurice Friedman  
E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

A Review essay by S. Daniel  
Breslauer

In 1957, while Martin Buber was in the United States for his second visit, he participated in a vigorous dialogue with psychologist Carl R. Rogers. During the discussion Buber insisted that a therapist cannot afford to maintain a perfect non-directive or client-centered relationship with the patient. As in teaching, so in therapy the situation may demand less than a full I-Thou encounter. Rogers responded in amazement: "Now I'm wondering who is Martin Buber, you or me." Buber simply declared, "I am not 'Martin Buber' in quotation marks."

It is rare to be free enough to remain uninfluenced not only by others but by one's own reputation. Buber is remarkable because he demonstrates a unique liberation—the liberation that comes from a refusal to imitate even oneself. A familiar hasidic tale focuses on Reb Zushya's declaration that he was not worried whether he would be asked why he had not been Abraham or Moses but rather why he had not been Zushya. Buber keenly felt the relevance of this tale. Another tale, however, tells of the son of a Rebbe who inherited his father's position. When criticized for bringing innovations into his father's hasidic practice, the son replied, "I follow my father exactly. He would imitate no one; I too will not imitate another, even my father." This last story represents the legacy of Martin Buber, the person, to modern women and men. He is not a model to be slavishly imitated but rather an inspiration to a growing selfhood that develops through meetings—and mismetings—with others. He is thus a model of both dialogue with others and an uncompromising affirmation of self.

Today modern Americans are familiar with the ideas and writings of Martin Buber. His classic *I and Thou* has become a staple of the liberal arts curriculum. His existentialist approach is standard study in departments of philosophy, and his writing on Hasidism enriches the study of religious mysticism. Jewish thinkers debate the relevance of Buber's Zionism and interpretation of Jewish law at length. All this, however, focuses on Buber the author, Buber the philosopher. The legacy of Buber the human being is equally important, if not more so. Perhaps the most important vision provided by the third volume of Maurice Friedman's masterful study *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Later Years, 1945–1965* is its evocation of the man who was not "Martin Buber." The earlier volumes are valuable to the historian of religions generally and to the historian of Judaism in particular, although they are enlivened with a sense of Buber the human being. This final volume, however, most closely fulfills Friedman's desire to create a "dialography," which evokes a personality emerging from events and meetings. Buber's writings are not neglected, but they form the background to an engrossing life of meetings. Malcolm Diamond has told how Buber would lecture to audiences during his first American visit, giving the lectures that would be published as *The Eclipse of God*. As Friedman also suggests, the audiences were impressed but untouched since Buber was answering questions they had not asked. In the question periods that followed the lectures, however, Diamond noted that Buber's relationship to the audience became electric and alive. It is the merit of Friedman's work that these living dialogues are vividly recalled in his writing.

Buber's response to Carl Rogers suggests his importance as a model for modern women and men. Buber had a unique view of many aspects of modern life, of Judaism, of psychotherapy, of Zionism. When he presented these views he did so as an honest human being, secure in his selfhood, standing uncompromisingly at the threshold of his own tradition. While there are aspects of Buber's view of Judaism, his social theory, and presentation of Hasidism

with which modern Jews may well be restless, his human significance transcends these limitations. In his meetings and mismetings with others Buber shows the possibility of standing as a unique self without rejecting the religious past from which he came. Sometimes such a stance can be interpreted as rejection. It is easy to mistake Buber's emphasis on meeting and encounter as a romantic assimilation of the self to the other. Perhaps it is significant that Walker Kaufmann's mismetings with Buber developed from his failure to accept the limitations that Buber set on interpersonal dialogue. Kaufmann longed for Buber's approval, turning from him when Buber refused a long-distance correspondence. Kaufmann's subsequent criticism focused on the romantic oversimplification he saw in Buber's thought. The criticism may well result from Kaufmann's own misunderstanding of I-Thou encounter. The vital presence of Buber the human being is a useful corrective to the romanticism that some readers have projected into Buber's writings.

Kaufmann's was not the only mismatching in Buber's life. Time and again people would expect "Martin Buber" and discover a real human being who could not be neatly categorized. One important mismetings was that of Buber and Gershom Scholem. Friedman recognizes—and most scholars concur—that from an academic and historical perspective, Scholem's critique of Buber stands. Buber does not, as Friedman acknowledges, respond to that critique. Buber had taken Hasidism as he had the Bible and transformed it into a medium of communication. Through the *Tales of the Hasidim* and his exposition of biblical religion, he initiated his readers into ways of experiencing a religious text. Neither of these works is rigorous scholarship. While Buber was informed by German biblical studies, his own work sought to uncover the human event that lay behind the writing of the narratives, the religious struggle to give concrete expression to an existential encounter. When evoking Moses at Sinai, Jeremiah's confessional suffering, Second Isaiah's servant in "the quiver of God," or Zushya in "the fool of God," Buber teaches how a text

can require a living answer. His explications of these works are not merely scholarly explanations of the historical, social, or psychological dynamics of a particular religious phenomenon. They engage the reader and lead to new questions about the meaning of living as a human being. Scholem criticized this subjective approach to the literature of a major religious movement and demonstrated the selectivity and bias that shaped Buber's presentation of Hasidism. When, after a long delay, Buber responded to this criticism, many readers were dissatisfied. Nobel Prize winning author S.Y. Agnon felt that this answer was not worthy of the writer of *Tales of the Hasidim*, and in fact the reply failed to meet any of the scholarly objections Scholem had raised. Buber did not offer any cogent defense of either his method of selecting hasidic texts or his subjective approach in interpreting them.

Perhaps, however, Buber was responding not to Scholem the scholar but to the young man he had once encouraged in Germany. Buber may have been practicing his renowned concern for human beings rather than engaging in an academic exercise. Buber had met the young Scholem and encouraged both his Zionism and scholarship. Scholem describes a "promise" he had extracted from Buber that he would write a presentation of "the theology of Hasidism" after the younger man had published a book on the *kabalah*. Scholem's later reflection contended that his book had in fact done the opposite; Buber had told him that if Hasidism were as Scholem had presented it, then "it would not interest me at all." Buber's written response should be read as an appeal to Scholem to recall his human rather than scholarly interest in Hasidism. Buber the human being was asking Scholem the historian to listen once again with the ears of youth to the texts that he had been reading.

Buber is exemplary because he calls to his readers, as he did to Scholem, to read and hear anew words to which they have become dulled. Questions may need to be asked in new ways so that appropriate answers can be formed. Buber's investigation of theology points in that direction. Living in a post-Holocaust world, the modern Jew has lost faith

in both God and humanity. The biblical texts—Job's challenge to theodicy and Psalm 73's affirmation of faith in particular—were read anew by Buber, precipitating what Maurice Friedman once called "Buber's new view of evil." Buber reflected on the tragic history of contemporary humanity, examined its existential restlessness, raised the recurring questions of human nature and human hope with new urgency, and sketched both the possibilities and limitations of a world afflicted by "the eclipse of God." That phrase conjures up the tradition of existential protest—sometimes optimistic and sometimes pessimistic—that stretches from Nietzsche through Heidegger and Sartre. Buber stands in that tradition but with a difference. During his first American visit in which these ideas were being developed, a man once told him not to despair. He responded, "Despair! I never despaired even in the darkest days of our people." The modern Jew may well be a questioner; the theology of the past and the history of the present often seem at odds with each other. Buber suggests that a different type of listening may yield a different type of question and answer. Here again Buber teaches by being himself. He encounters the modern crisis as both a Jew tutored by the past and as a human being caught in a new and destructive situation. When he declares that he believes with Job that "My redeemer lives," one feels certain that this is no naive statement but one that grows out of a dialogue

and wrestling with traditional texts and teachings and the modern context as well.

Theology, however, may be a luxury. Human beings are confronted by the reality of social and political necessity. Buber held an extraordinary Zionism, which countered ideological positions with a compassionate realism. He stood at the fringes of politics, not because he was unrealistic but precisely because those who created the State of Israel were, like David Ben Gurion, locked into an ideological fantasy. Buber attracted the young of Israel, some intellectuals, and those committed to peace and a united government in which Jews and Arabs would share alike. Some critics claim that Buber's social ethics was too vague to be workable. His controversy with Ben Gurion shows how tangible and concrete his suggestions could be. If the primary ethical injunction is that of creating a social context in which human beings can meet one another fully and openly, then a social ideology that glosses over disconfirming facts and projects a narrow rather than universalistic messianic vision has defeated its own purpose. It was with an awareness of this danger that Buber helped found Ihud, an organization seeking unity and peace between Jew and Arab and that shaped his responses to Israeli politics, whether that involved the trial of Nazi war criminals or belligerence toward Arabs. What emerges from Buber's political activity is once again his sensitivity as a person and his stand as a

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distinctive individual. His conflict with Ben Gurion was sharp, but he affirmed his opponent as person and interacted with him with deep human compassion.

Buber can be a model for the contemporary Jew in his affirmation of self, in his creative way of listening to traditional texts, in his dedicated involvement in political and social life. A traditional Jew, however, cannot help but be restless with Buber's rejection of Orthodox Jewish law and ritual—a rejection made clear in this volume but explained at length in the previous one. In a witty and delightful aside, Maurice Friedman describes his relief on learning that Buber was nonobservant. That this bearded patriarch could also be a model for a nontraditional American Jew came as a surprise and an unexpected boon. There are many Jews—not only in America—who are seeking a guide who is unmistakably and unashamedly Jewish but whose Judaism is one with which they can identify. Buber opens a door to these Jews by standing resolutely at his own threshold, the threshold of a distinctly nontraditional home. In order to grow and mature, it is neces-

sary to be ready to change; the readiness to change, to risk becoming different, however, often depends upon a prior satisfaction with oneself. We need to be secure enough in our own self-esteem to be willing to transform that self. Buber leads the way to risk-taking by enabling Jews to affirm the Judaism they practice, to feel that even a Judaism that is not "maximal" may still be valuable.

We need not identify entirely with any one of our guides. Indeed it is dangerous to try to assume, ready made, the shape of another's self. Those who stand within traditional Judaism would be both foolish and self-deceiving if they were to accept, uncritically, Buber's rejection of Jewish law. The lessons Orthodox Jews can learn from Buber may well be different from those the non-Orthodox learn. Some lessons, however, transcend such differences, and Buber's determination to be himself and not "Martin Buber" can be emulated not only by all Jews but by every human being.

*S. Daniel Breslauer is professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas.*

## BALANCING

*According to the effort is the reward.*

Is there any greater reward than knowledge of your own self-existence:

work requiring no more effort than to wake up each morning

and for which if necessary you are even willing to put in overtime?

—Carol Adler

*Carol Adler, a poet living in Pittsford, New York, is a frequent contributor to Menorah Review.*



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