INTRODUCTION:
SOME THOUGHTS ON ANCIENT JEWISH TEXTS
AND THE ‘LITERARY’

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the literary approach has considerably defined the academic landscape of biblical studies. As an answer to the historical-critical and theological studies of the Hebrew Bible, it offered a fresh look on an old text, focusing on its qualities as a piece of literature. Whereas the Bible text received much attention from literary scholars, the approach did not make its way immediately to studies of other ancient Jewish texts, such as the study of midrash, liturgical texts, or early commentaries. This article presents some observations regarding the relationship between literary analysis on the one hand and ancient Jewish text studies on the other hand.

In 2007, the academic journal *Prooftexts* issued a special volume entitled “Before and After the Art of Biblical Narrative.”¹ In this volume, articles are brought together that analyze the past, present, and future of the literary approach to ancient Jewish texts as it was given shape in biblical studies by Robert Alter in the early 1980s.² Some of the contributions are rather critical, accusing the method of having a hidden theological agenda³ and

a rigid conservatism not in sync with the evolution in the broader field of humanities.\textsuperscript{4} Others take a more positive stance, demonstrating the validity of the approach by applying it to both biblical texts and later texts inspired by the Bible.\textsuperscript{5}

For Starters: The Literary Approach According to Weitzman

By way of introduction, let us consider the following quotes by Steven Weitzman, who wrote the introduction of the \textit{Prooftexts} volume. He opens his piece by stating, “however newfangled it seemed in the 1980s, the ‘literary approach’ to the Bible, the attempt to understand it as a work of aesthetic and not just religious or historical value, is as old as most other methods of biblical study.”\textsuperscript{6} He continues that the declining interest in this way of reading the Bible will probably not come as a surprise to readers familiar with how the practice of literary interpretation has changed in the last twenty to thirty years, an era that saw the crystallization of deconstruction and other subversive reading strategies that sought to emphasize the elusiveness, ruptures, and self-contradictions of literary language or of the self in its relationship to language; the impact of reception theory that shifted the focus from the text and its capacity to shape interpretation to readers and their importation of meaning into the text; the rising dominance of a cultural studies paradigm that expanded interpretation’s purview from certain canonical texts privileged by their aesthetic merits to a broader array of discourse and modes of signification; ideologically committed perspectives for which literary analysis became a vehicle for critique; and other trends conventionally labeled as “theory.”\textsuperscript{7}

He concludes his article with the question, In which ways does the literary approach to the Bible remain an engaging and defensible project? Can it again play the role it did in the hands of an Alter, not just feeding off what scholars in other disciplines are doing with


\textsuperscript{6} Weitzman, “Before and After,” 192.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibidem}, 195–196.