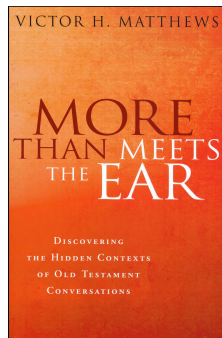


○ REVIEW OF VICTOR MATTHEW, *MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR: DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN CONTEXTS OF OLD TESTAMENT CONVERSATIONS*

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In 1981, Robert Alter's book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* introduced a new sort of biblical interpretation to the world. To say that the appearance of this work commenced a new school of study is stretching the truth. In reality, there was already a change taking place, a movement away from the atomistic nature of biblical study represented by the so called historical-critical methods. However, the appearance of this work coupled with the extraordinary response it received (and indeed, continues to receive) legitimised this new approach, and galvanised others who had grown tired of the old, well used methods.

The publication of Alter's book was soon followed by others, not all of whom agreed with his approach, but all of whom sought to discover new ways of reading the text following a synchronic approach. Most notable amongst these subsequent publications are works by Bar-Efrat, Gunn and Fewell and more recently, Yairah Amit. Alter, a literary critic and professor in comparative literature, had adapted tools from secular literary criticism that had to this point lay outside the parameters of the biblical scholar's arsenal. This synchronic approach, not the invention of Alter, though certainly championed by him, has since been utilised in the cause of many other reading strategies, particularly those with a liberationist agenda.

In the nearly thirty years that have passed since the initial appearance of Alter's book, biblical studies has increasingly utilised the advancements in other disciplines to create new ways of reading. Study of the narrative sections (following Alter's lead) of the Old Testament has been particularly enriched through this endeavour. Victor Matthew's book, *More than Meets the Ear: Discovering the Hidden Contexts of Old Testament Conversations* is one such attempt. Matthews has utilised sociolinguistics and discourse analysis in his investigation of embedded dialogue within Biblical Narrative. He states that the work is written for those who are willing to stretch

beyond the boundaries of traditional exegesis and to delve into what the world of the social-sciences can provide (x).

Matthews' book is informed by his work as an educator. The book is well set out, with inset boxes to further explain or illustrate new concepts or terms. He is careful to ensure that these ideas are communicated in a way that makes sense, and on that front he is very successful. As you read, there is a sense in which you feel equipped to use the tools which Matthews has both demonstrated and explained. One need not have a working knowledge of the concepts used before approaching this book, as Matthews introduces them so well. It is in this sense, an introductory level book, as Matthews suggests.

At the commencement of his investigation of discourse analysis, Matthews acknowledges that while this area of study encompasses many methodologies (18), underlying it is a commitment to studying language against its contextual background. In this way, knowledge of the history and cultural norms which lie behind the biblical world, both in what is recorded and the world from which the text emerges, is necessary. As it relates to narrative, and in particular, embedded dialogue, the social positioning of the characters becomes primary. What do the characters represent? Are they identified in a specific way? What are their social roles? Do they fulfil these roles within the text or is there some other device being used? In addition to the characters, there are objects or props used within the scene; how do these objects function culturally? Do they carry a meaning? For example, the prostitute's attire that Tamar dresses herself in (Gen 38) both distinguishes her as a prostitute (seemingly), but also functions as a disguise which fools Judah. It is a communicative element employed by the narrator for a purpose.

Matthews also discusses the use of spatial markers. These are not just geographical markers, but also ideological markers. One has a specific set of behaviours in mind as appropriate for the 'tent of meeting' for example, which is vastly different to what one might expect in someone's home, or the gate of the city and so on. The spaces where events occur mark them as appropriate or otherwise. Additionally, the events which take place in certain spaces mark that space as authoritative (134). The way characters behave in relation to the space they are in is a device the narrator can use to make inferences about their character. Interaction within that space is guided by cultural conventions which, when violated, lead to serious drama and charged dialogue. Matthews relates this to contemporary 'frame theory' (80). The frame represents what is socially acceptable or normative. When the parameters of the frame are breached, which is a narrative device, the tension within the narrative will normally be resolved by some significant action. For example, in Numbers 25, Zimri is reported as bringing a Midianite woman, Cozbi, into his tent in the view of the tent of meeting, where the people of Israel are weeping following the apostasy at Baal Peor. This spatial marker is used as a device to condemn Zimri's actions, and to justify Phineas' response in savagely murdering them.

All of these observations are used to filter what is said within dialogical encounters. In regards to biblical dialogue, Matthews is right, there is 'More than Meets the Ear'. It is interesting that this work is published in the subsequent year to Gary Yamasaki's *Watching A Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (London: T and T Clark, 2007), a book which focuses on an optical approach to interpreting narrative material. This only further reiterates the way that the study of Old Testament narrative continues to expand.

The brief examples cited serve to illustrate just a few of the numerous tools which Matthews puts at the disposal of his readers. This is a book, not unlike Alter's, to which one will be able

to return to in order to sharpen one's own work. In producing a work such as this, Matthews has placed into the hands of the serious student a guidebook from which to commence the sometimes daunting and overwhelming task of interdisciplinary interpretation. For that, he should be praised. The work ends with a comprehensive bibliography that enables readers to trace his thought and process and which also serves to encourage ongoing dialogue between the disciplines.