

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE LITERARY GUIDE TO THE BIBLE, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. 678 pages, \$29.95.

There are a number of good reasons for preachers not to use *The Literary Guide to the Bible*: The first and most obvious reason is its price tag (though \$29.95 attracts less and less attention these days as a high price). A second and more likely reason not to buy the book is that, like so many compilations, the quality of the work varies greatly from contributor to contributor. Frankly, some of the offerings are disappointing. A third and more logical reason to bypass the book is that, as a colleague recently pointed out, it's as though the contributors did not agree in advance on what a *literary guide* might be. As a result the contributions vary not only in quality but in format which means that calling the book *the* literary guide is a bit presumptuous. And, of course, for the busy parish parson, the book is at once too large and too small. That is, the whole of it is too large to fit into most of our study schedules yet it is too small to do all it sets out to do. In addition to all of those there is a smattering of language that is unnecessarily sexist.

Having said all of that, however, there are at least two good reasons for the preacher who takes her or his art seriously to consider including this book in her or his library. The first and most compelling reason is that biblical literature can, on its own merit, inform preaching as a literary art form in its own right. To be sure, the book was not compiled as a guide to better homiletics. Nevertheless, if preachers recognize, as more and more of us are recognizing, that most (if not all) of the Bible was written for oral interpretation, then the art forms used in the Bible can inform our own weekly homiletical offerings. Alter and Kermode's book can be a readily available help in grasping literary art forms used in the Bible.

The second good reason to own *The Literary Guide to the Bible* is related to the first. That is, for most readers of *Journal for Preachers* the book will only be useful as a *reference* tool. I emphasize *reference* because, after all, those who preach regularly just don't have time to dig through mountains of scholarly articles in order to keep up with the latest in biblical scholarship. Most of us, for example, who cut our biblical teeth on form criticism *et al* are aware of recent developments in literary criticism, but wading through the literature is more than most of us can afford the time to do. That, I believe, is another place where *The Literary Guide to the Bible* can help. In a matter of an hour or less a busy parish preacher can garner reliable and up-to-date literary information on any book in the Bible (that is, any book of the Bible which is ". . . recognized by modern Jews as constituting their Bible, and all the

books that Christians agree upon as part of theirs"). Such a resource can be particularly helpful while preparing to preach on a lectionary series or when preparing to teach a Bible study. To be sure, the data will not be as exhaustive as one might find in one's seminary library; but, on the other hand, most of us can't go trekking off to the seminary library every time the lections change.

Alter is the Old Testament scholar and Kermode the New Testament scholar. They are from Berkeley and Cambridge respectively. In addition to introductory material they each contributed sections (Alter on *Psalms* and Kermode on *Matthew* and *John*). Their own contributions inspire confidence. In addition to the treatment of the various books of the Bible there are very helpful general essays on "The Hebrew Bible and Canaanite Literature," "The New Testament and Greco-Roman Writing," "The Cannon," "Ancient Hebrew Poetry," "Midrash and Allegory," and "English Translations of the Bible."

Those familiar with Robert Alter's earlier book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981) will have high hopes for the present volume. For the most part, they are not apt to be disappointed.