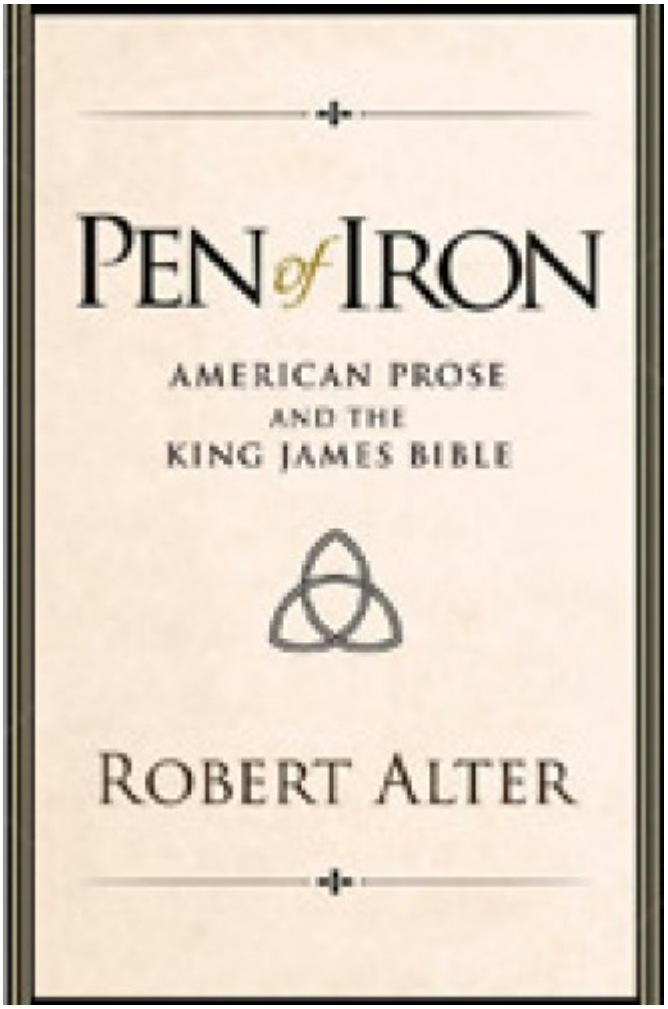
A review of Pen of Iron

reviewed by Jean K. Dudek in the November 30, 2010 issue

In Review



Pen of Iron

By Robert Alter
Princeton University Press

My go-to Bible is the New Revised Standard Version. I could probably find a King James somewhere at my church, but it's not the Great-Big-Bible-on-the-Lectern, and

it's not the version of the pew Bibles. And yet some pigheaded, atavistic part of me believes that the right way to say the 23rd Psalm is the way it is in the King James (even though I've read it in Hebrew).

Sometimes the older folks in my congregation advocate for the superior style of the King James. Which leads me to the question: When is the last time you thought about its literary style? Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California-Berkeley, claims that acknowledgment of style, let alone analysis of it, has fallen by the wayside due to the academic world's focus on writers' ideology and race-, class- or gender-based political agendas.

In *Pen of Iron,* Alter's goal is to explore how the King James Version "made a difference in style for certain major American novelists" and to elucidate its "abiding role . . . in the shaping of style in the American novel." In particular, Alter examines Lincoln's Gettysburg and Second Inaugural addresses and the novels *Moby-Dick, Absalom, Absalom!, Seize the Day, The Sun Also Rises, Gilead* and *The Road.*

The two major aspects of style that Alter considers are word choice and sentence structure. English is a delightfully wordy language, encompassing hard, strong Anglo-Saxon words and intricate, complex Latinate words. (The King James translators tended to choose Anglo-Saxon.) Alter revels in paratactic sentences. He identifies them in Hebrew and finds them in the King James Version and detects them in numerous American novels. If you read *Pen of Iron,* you will learn to recognize the previous sentence as paratactic, which is in contrast to a hypotactic sentence, where subordinate clauses are assembled and coordinated.

People who write sermons—or anything else—would do well to think about style and about what makes a literary work memorable and compelling. Also, as we approach the 400th anniversary of the 1611 publication of the King James Version, some thinking is in order about its virtues, achievements and deficiencies. One reason the King James is not as widely used today is that better, older biblical manuscripts have since been found—but that is irrelevant to its literary style.

The major hole in Alter's book is that he seems to have forgotten that the King James Bible includes the New Testament. In the prelude, he (unconvincingly) attempts to explain his focus on the Old Testament. It's fair to say that the Old Testament was more important to the Pilgrims than it is to present-day Americans, but that is not a reason to disregard the New Testament. It is reasonable to think

that most of the writers whose work Alter analyzes (Lincoln, Melville, Faulkner, Bellow, Hemingway, Marilynne Robinson, Cormac McCarthy) knew the New Testament as well as the Old. The major exception could have been Saul Bellow, yet Alter tells us that Bellow read the King James Version of the New Testament avidly when hospitalized as a child.

Alter therefore misses some of the biblicisms in the works he examines. When discussing a passage in *Moby-Dick* about the odor from rendering whale blubber—"It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit"—Alter calls "the left wing" reference "an inspired ad hoc invention." Well, no, I thought it was an obvious allusion to the Judgment Day description in Matthew 25:33—sheep at the right, goats at the left (at least Alter recognizes that in 1851 *left wing* could not yet have been a football term). His truncated frame of reference is also evident in his referring to Ecclesiastes as a late biblical text. I can quickly think of 27 biblical texts that are later. Alter does a marvelous job of tracing the threads of the style of the Hebrew Bible, but he would have been more accurate to use the subtitle "American Prose and the King James Version of the Old Testament."

Alter is at his best in the first chapter, in which he explores the style that results from the "interplay of different levels and provenances of diction," and in the chapter on *Moby-Dick,* where he identifies threads of style from the King James Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, nautical terminology and colloquial 19th-century language. He is less successful in his chapter on *Absalom, Absalom!* where he examines Faulkner's use of a "thematic lexicon" of words from the Hebrew Bible. This chapter does not support Alter's thesis regarding the style of the King James Version. The words in this thematic lexicon—dust, flesh and bones, land, curse, son, birthright and house—are found in the New Revised Standard Version and most other current English translations (and no doubt in English translations prior to 1611). I am unconvinced that Faulkner's choice of these biblically freighted thematic words has anything to do with the style of the King James translation per se, as opposed to the content of the Hebrew original. Alter's analysis of other novels focuses on the use of parataxis, the sentence structure found in much of the prose of the King James Version of the Hebrew Bible.

This well-written, thought-provoking book doesn't take too long to read, but there is a distinct possibility that it will make you want to read or reread *Moby-Dick, Absalom, Absalom!* and other classics (and drink more deeply of them and enjoy them more thoroughly). And that will take quite a long time indeed.