



The Bible as literature



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Every book needs to be read and assimilated in keeping with the kind of book it is. This is a principle that is regrettably missing from many people's experience of the Bible.

The Bible is a predominantly literary book. This is not something of interest only to a handful of people with literary interests. It is something that applies to every reader and teacher of the Bible. Not applying literary criteria to the Bible is a missed opportunity of massive proportions. It leaves us with an emaciated Bible, not the fullness that the Bible actually possesses.

For the purposes of this article, I will ask and answer three questions, as follows: Why is it important to read and interpret the Bible as literature? What does the concept of the Bible as literature not mean? What does it mean that the Bible is literature?

A literary approach to the Bible

I will begin with a defence of the literary approach to the Bible because unless we are convinced of the legitimacy and importance of such an approach, we have no incentive to practise it or even explore it as a possibility in our Bible reading.

I have already stated the most foundational reason we need to read and interpret the Bible as literature, namely, that any book needs to be read in keeping with the kind of book that it is. This is a principle that applies to all of life. We need to accomplish any task using the right equipment, which in turn is determined by the nature of the task.

The first reason to read and interpret the Bible as literature is thus that the Bible requires it by virtue of being a literary book. A story is a story and needs to be assimilated as such. The goal of Bible reading is to experience a passage as fully as possible. If we do not apply literary analysis to a literary passage, we are not reliving the text in its fullness.

To take this one step further, handling the Bible in keeping with its literary nature spares us from a type of reductionism that is widespread among Bible readers and teachers. A literary approach accepts that everything that biblical authors put into their writing is important and worthy of our attention. In fact, God inspired the authors to compose as they did, including the literary qualities of the Bible.

The most common way of handling Bible passages is to view them as a delivery system for an idea. But only a small proportion of the Bible fits that criterion. A literary text invites us to enter a whole world in which we take up residence. If we accept the invitation, we will relive a text as fully as possible and then look out from the world of the text to our own lives.

Additionally, a literary approach is attentive to the genres of the Bible – the types of writing such as narrative, poetry and vision. This is important for two reasons. One is that paying attention to the genres of the Bible alerts us to the variety of material that we find in the Bible, thereby sparing us from a common tendency to reduce the Bible to all one kind of writing. Every genre has its rules of operation. Knowing these rules can guide our experience with a text. It informs us what to look

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an inquiring mind*.

2. See L Ryken, *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2014).

for and enables us to see the details of the text as they really are. This, in turn, opens the way for us to read and teach the whole Bible. A pastor once confided that although he would often read a psalm to people in the hospital, until he embraced the literary approach to the Bible he would never consider choosing a psalm for a sermon because he 'didn't know what to do with it'. If we master the literary genres of the Bible, we will know what to do with any passage in the Bible.

Much more can be said about the advantages that come when we approach the Bible in keeping with the literary book that it is, but enough has been said that you should be open to the possibility that this is something that deserves exploration. A summary statement is that when we approach the Bible as literature, we can be confident that we are doing the right things with Bible passages. We are prepared to do something with everything that biblical authors put into their writings. We do not need to escape from a biblical text to its context or to a realm of theological ideas extracted from the text.

Four fallacies

Before we can fully embrace a literary approach to the Bible, we need to be relieved of legitimate anxieties that might attach to the idea. As an evangelical spokesman for the literary approach to the Bible, I have regularly sought to allay the misgivings that my audiences might feel about my topic. I will follow that procedure here as well. Before speaking of what the concept of the Bible means, I will delineate what it does not mean, phrasing the potential objections as fallacies.

Fallacy #1: to speak of the Bible as literature seems like a liberal idea and a product of modern unbelief. Several misconceptions converge here. First, the idea of the Bible as literature is not a modern idea. It began with the writers of the Bible. They are the ones who gave us a literary Bible. They were not only masters of literary craft; they also sometimes spoke with technical precision about the genres in which they wrote or spoke – chronicle, song, epistle, vision, saying, parable and others.

Furthermore, such towering figures from the past as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin did not doubt that the Bible possesses literary qualities. Today the literary approach to the Bible is widely practised in colleges and seminaries. As we survey the field, we find the same range of attitudes, from conservative to liberal, which we find with other approaches to the Bible. The literary approach is no more subject to aberration than other approaches.

When I teach my college course in the Bible as literature, I begin by sharing a dozen Bible verses in which the authors make claims about Scripture – its inspiration, reliability, truthfulness and status as being the Word of God. Then I assert that a literary approach needs to begin where every other approach begins – by affirming as true all of the Bible's claims about itself.

Fallacy #2: to say that the Bible is literary is to imply that it is fictional rather than factual. The fear is that the characters and events that appear in the Bible might seem to have the same made-up mode of existence as those that appear in a novel or fantasy story. The fear is unwarranted.

Although fictionality is common in literature, the qualities that make a text literary are unaffected by whether the material is historically accurate or fictional. A text is literary whenever it displays ordinary literary qualities.

Fallacy #3: to approach the Bible as literature means approaching it only as literature, without attention to the Bible's unique spiritual qualities. This fear is greatly exaggerated. We do not urge people to avoid reading the Bible as history for fear that they will read it only as a history book. The very nature of the Bible makes it impossible to read it only as literature or only as history.

Three types of writing converge in the Bible – the literary, the historical and the religious or theological. Most passages combine them. To neglect any one of them is to short-change the Bible. Most often, the history and theology are packaged in literary form, with the result that there is no history and theology without the literary form in which they are expressed.

Fallacy #4: to speak of the Bible as literature is to reduce it to the level of ordinary literature. To say that the Bible is literature is simply an objective description of the form in which the Bible comes to us. There is no intention either to elevate or demote the Bible.

The experience of British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge is instructive on this point. Regarding his methodology for reading the Bible, Coleridge claimed that it was his practice to read the Bible 'as I should read any other work'. But the effect of his encounter with the Bible was that 'in the Bible there is more that finds me than I have experienced in all other books put together ... the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being.'¹

In other words, if we read the Bible as literature, it elevates itself and reveals its unique spiritual quality and power. As with the other fallacies I have noted, it would be tragic if we allowed ourselves to be deterred from reading the Bible as literature by fears that turn out to be fallacies.

Four literary traits of the Bible

The traits that make a written work literature, whether in the Bible or beyond it, is of course a very large topic. For my purposes here, I will divide the material into four topics. They provide a good starting point for answering the question of what it means that the Bible is a literary book.

1. Literary genres in the Bible

The issue of literary genres is the most obvious and incontrovertible feature of literature. A literary

genre is a kind or type of writing. Throughout human history, there has been general agreement that some genres are literary and others are expository or informational. At least 80 per cent of the Bible is packaged in the form of literary genres. The four major ones are narrative or story, poem, vision and epistle. However, the actual number of literary forms in the Bible exceeds 200.²

Is an awareness of genre important? Yes, we cannot relive a Bible passage fully without interacting with it according to the rules of its genre. A story, for example, consists of plot, setting and character. A poem is comprised of images and figures of speech. These are what we immediately encounter as we begin to read. If we do not analyse and assimilate a text in these terms, we are not reliving the text. That is why a noted preacher observed to me that 'all genuine Bible exposition is literary analysis'.

2. Human experience: the subject of every literary passage

The subject matter or content of literature is human experience, concretely portrayed. A story or poem or vision, and even an epistle, is not made up of ideas. It consists of recognisable human experiences that we vicariously share as we read. For literary scholars, this is simply a familiar fact and tool of classroom teaching. If it seems unfamiliar to you, I would encourage you to operate on the premise that it is true, and then see what doors open up to you as you apply the principle. The list of recognisable human experiences embodied in the story of Cain (Genesis 4.1–16) keeps expanding as we start to name them – unchecked sin, lack of self-control, hatred, domestic violence, attempted cover-up, harbouring a grudge, giving in to an evil impulse, etc. American novelist John Steinbeck famously said that the story of Cain is the signature story of the human race because it is everyone's story.

The truth that literature, including the literature of the Bible, conveys to us is truthfulness to human experience. A major part of the edification that a literary text imparts to us comes as we relive an experience from the viewpoint that the author has planted in the text. The author of the story of Cain does not hand us an idea but instead gets us to share events from life of Cain.

Literature is the voice of authentic human experience. It is the human race's testimony to its own experience. A literary approach to the Bible makes this available to us. The Bible is more than a book of ideas, and we need to experience it as such.

3. Showing rather than telling

My next point is an expansion of what I have said about the subject of literature being recognisable human experience. It is a cliché in literature courses and imaginative writing courses that the literary author's task is to show rather than tell. To 'tell' here means to state a truth abstractly and propositionally

and as a generalisation. To 'show' means to embody or incarnate human experience concretely.

For example, the sixth commandment of the decalogue tells us in the form of a proposition, 'You shall not murder' (Genesis 29.13). The story of Cain (Genesis 4.1–16) shows us that same truth in by means of characters and events occurring in specific settings. When asked to define neighbour, Jesus avoided telling us in the form of a dictionary definition and instead showed us in the form of a story about a good Samaritan (Luke 10.25–37).

What are the implications of the impulse of literature to embody and enact rather than summarise in the form of abstractions? It requires that we read with what contemporary brain research has taught us to call the right side of the brain. Whereas the left side of the human brain processes ideas and abstract concepts, the right hemisphere is active with sensory stimuli and concrete images. All of us possess both capacities, and we need to exercise both when reading the Bible. My appeal as a literary scholar is that we need to activate our image-making capacity as we interact with the Bible.

4. Literary artistry and beauty

Literature is an art form. It is the product of human creativity and a display of craftsmanship. The medium of this art form is words carefully arranged into larger units. The authors of the Bible, writing under the inspiration of God, met these criteria. They were wordsmiths and creators of verbal beauty. The storytellers in the Bible knew how to construct well-made plots and mould real-life materials into memorable characters. The poets of the Bible, including Jesus, spoke naturally in the verse form of parallelism, in which what is stated in one line is expressed in different words but the same grammatical form in the next line.

It is no wonder that the writer of Ecclesiastes spoke of himself as assembling his book 'with great care' and as seeking 'to find words of delight' (Ecclesiastes 12.9–10). The beauty of literary form that we find in the Bible is ready to be enjoyed and admired. All we need to do is awaken our capacity for it.

Summary

The literary parts of the Bible adhere to the usual traits that we find in literature universally. If we attune ourselves to the genres of the Bible, to the universal human experiences concretely presented and to the beauty of literary form that we find in the Bible, we will not only possess a Bible that we have perhaps not fully known. We will also find the rewards of experiencing the Bible that God gave us.