

Why Teach The Bible as Literature?

BY WILMA McCLARTY

As every teacher knows, many forces compete for students' attention. Too often the classroom gets only leftovers from weekend cinemas, late-night TV reruns, too-easily-obtained "adult" videos, racy magazines, or even sensational news.

How can teachers contend with the ever-present effects of the media? What strategies will capture the minds of students reliving *Rocky IV* violence or fantasizing about an illicit relationship? Unfortunately, the glorious truths of the Scriptures fail to grasp the attention, ignite the imaginations, or relate to the needs of far too many students.

One way to make Bible truths come alive for students is to help them view biblical literature through the eyeglasses of literary analysis. Reasons for teaching the Bible as literature are more than impressive: they are compelling.

The Bible Is Great Literature

"Christianity is the most literary religion in the world," and the Bible the best evidence of this.¹ Recently, we are seeing renewed interest in the Bible's literary qualities, and "the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority" that has molded the lives of millions of people for more than 2,000 years.²

Accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a book of dos and don'ts, students will be impressed to learn that the Bible is undeniably recognized as world-class literature by believers and unbelievers alike.

Bible Writers Were Skilled Craftsmen

The biblical writers wrote as craftsmen whose works display a grasp of literary forms and conventions" requiring "a sophisticated response."³ The literary impulse for Israel of old was just about as strong "as the religious impulse, or, to put it more accurately, . . . the two were inextricable." Consequently, to understand the Bible's religious inspiration one must take into account the writers' literary inspiration.⁴

The craftsmanship of the Bible authors goes basically unnoticed by the general reader, who is too intent on content to notice the style that made the content memorable. Writers order words because the arrangement pleases "but also, very often, because the order helps them refine meanings, make meanings more memorable, more satisfyingly complex, so that what is well wrought in language can more powerfully engage the world of events, values, human and divine ends."

The Bible's Hebrew writers "on every level from word choice and sentence structure to the deployment of large units of composition" showed a love of writing craftsmanship. These writers were intent, of course, on presenting content—the "origins of the world, the history of Israel, God's ethical requirements of mankind" and future views of troubles and salvation, but they still gave *intentional* form to their messages.⁵

But the telling has a shapeliness whose subtleties we are only beginning to understand, and it was undertaken by writers with the most

brilliant gifts for intimating character, defining scenes, fashioning dialogue, elaborating motifs, balancing near and distant episodes, just as the God-intoxicated poems of the psalmists and prophets evince a dazzling virtuosity in their arabesques of soundplay and syntax, wordplay and image.⁶

However, students do not automatically appreciate great literature, secular or sacred; they must be taught critical skills.

Good Literature Demands Informed Readers

The complex interplay of literary aspects "calls for expert literary appraisal."⁷ The Bible's literary sections should "be approached with literary expectations and by asking the questions we ask of literature."⁸ A conscious attention to the Bible's literary merits will enhance students' understanding and appreciation of Bible truths.

The Literary Approach Has Pervasive Usefulness

Although Bible and English teachers will obviously profit most from this approach, literary analysis enriches almost any biblical study, not just that done in Bible or literature classes. The "literary approach is one necessary way to read and interpret the Bible, an approach that has been unjustifiably neglected."⁹

The Many Genres Provide Variety

Making students aware of the numerous Biblical genre types—literary or expository (informational)—will help stimulate their interest. Both types include stories, poetry, drama, historical chronicles, genealogies, theological treatises, sermons, orations, and letters. But the "major literary genres are narrative or story, poetry (especially lyric poetry, proverb, and visionary writing) (including prophecy and apocalypse)." In addition, history-based "writing in the Bible frequently moves in the direction of literary narrative by virtue of its experiential concreteness or the principles of pattern and design that permeate such writing."¹⁰

Even the New Testament epistles "frequently become literary because their style is either poetic or artistic or both, and biblical satire usually employs a literary vehicle to communicate its attacks."¹¹ Take Paul's letters, for example, which are of little interest to most teenagers. If students are told to expect certain characteristics from letters as a *genre*, these expectations will help them know what to expect.

Literary Skills Increase Comprehension

Knowing the different genre types and corresponding characteristics can guide a reader's expectations and interpretations.

Awareness of genre helps structure the "reading of a work, giving it a familiar shape and arranging the details into an identifiable pattern."¹²

Take the genre of parable, for instance, which is not only "inherently literary" but also has a literary influence on its reader, who must do more than merely understand an idea; he or she must respond with "imagination and emotions to a real-life experience."

Great literature is "affective, not cool and detached," which is why Jesus used literary parables so effectively—" [His] parables often drew his listeners innocently into the story and then turned the tables on them after it was too late to evade the issue at hand."¹³

Indeed, a literary analysis can enhance such well-known parables as that of the Good Samaritan. It takes students beyond the "everyone-is-your-neighbor" theme to

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the richness of the symbolism of Jesus' being everyone's Good Samaritan, ministering to wounded humanity.

What makes this parable great literature? "Everything about it: its experiential approach to truth, its sensory concreteness, its narrative genre, its carefully crafted construction, and its total involvement of the reader—intellectually, emotionally, imaginatively."¹⁴

A Literary Approach Prevents Misreading

"For example, exaggeration in a story that purports to be factual history is a form of untruth, while that same type of exaggeration in lyric poetry is called hyperbole and is a standard way of expressing emotional truth."¹⁵ *Students should approach the Bible with realistic expectations, demanding no more nor no less than the writer aimed to accomplish.*

Literary Styles Change

Because it is such a difficult genre for teenagers, poetry needs to be considered in the context of its culture. Biblical poetry is no exception, as its poets frequently

use the technique of parallelism. "The key to Hebrew poetry... is that it is a structure of *thought* rather than of external form and that a Hebrew poem is composed by balancing a series of sense units against one another," three common types being synonymous, synthetic, and antithetic.¹⁶

By contrast, modern literary forms "do not encourage repetition; still less are they built on it. But the Hebrew poet thought otherwise and worked within a different tradition." Modern poets, having made a statement, "will be anxious to urge" their compositions forward. "The ancient Hebrew poet, on the other hand, seems to have been in no hurry. If a thought was truly important, it could not be exhausted in one statement."¹⁷

Helping students understand that different forms are prevalent in some cultures and missing in others, will assuage their frustrations at unlocking the mysteries of "that dumb poetry." They will thus gain an understanding that enhances their appreciation for literary skills and the truths in biblical poetry.

A Literary Approach Helps Decode Figurative Language

"The Bible recognizes that a person's world view consists of images and symbols as well as ideas and propositions."¹⁸ Although all genres use figurative language, poetry's use is more concentrated. And since the Old Testament contains about one-third poetry, with only seven books containing no poetry,¹⁹ a Bible student who ignores figurative language because it is difficult to understand will miss most if not all of the message.

Symbols, similes, metaphors, and images "are the backbone of poetry." These types invoke concrete pictures that suggest or embody other meanings. "Thus, light is a common biblical symbol for God, goodness, truth, blessing, etc. Milk and honey are Old Testament symbols for material prosperity."²⁰

Symbols appear often in Biblical narrative as well. In the book of Esther, the queen herself becomes a symbolic representation. She is "above all a national heroine. Her importance as a person is completely subordinated to her status as a representative of the Jewish people."²¹

Esther has also been called a "type or pattern of the Virgin Mary, and the gigantic gallows built by Haman is supposed to foreshadow the cross of Jesus Christ (the Hebrew word for 'gallows' most often means 'tree')."²² Mordecai too has become a symbol for "the Jew who will not be bowed by circumstances and who will seize unforeseen opportunity."²³ Unless students realize the symbolic dimensions of the Bible text, they will simply not grasp the author's complete meaning.

"Literature exploits, for example, such devices of language as metaphor, simile, allusion, pun, paradox, and irony." These language resources constitute the "very essence of poetry." But in "the Bible... they appear everywhere, not just in the poetry," which is why "a literary approach is necessary throughout the Bible and not just in the predominantly literary parts."²⁴

Literary language enhances the Cain and Abel narrative, for example. God said to Cain, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground... which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Genesis 4:10, 11, NIV).²⁵ "This, too, is figurative and an obvious deviation from normal language," showing "that even in nonpoetic parts of the Bible the writers use literary and poetic resources of language," with every book of the Bible having some literary sections.²⁶

Literary Analysis Prevents Superficial Reading

If literature is composed of "writings which interpret the meanings of nature and life, in words of clearness and power, touched with the personality of the author, in artistic forms of permanent interest,"²⁷ then the Bible certainly qualifies as literature. And although an analysis of a literary work never equals a reading of the work itself, yet knowledge of the literary qualities of biblical passages will surely heighten the reader's appreciation, increasing awareness of stylistic and thematic issues often missed in a plot-oriented reading.

Ellen White speaks against literature that "encourages the habit of hasty and superficial reading, merely for the story."²⁸ Students simply cannot read superficially when grappling with the thought-provoking skills of literary analysis.

In his article, "Literature in Adventist Schools," Gibbs makes a strong case about the importance of how a literary work is read, mentioning four places in the Bible where Jesus asks, "How readest thou?" "But in our neglect of the how we may have stumbled into an over-emphasis or a faulty interpretation of the *what*."²⁹

A literary approach can provide a very helpful heuristic, giving students some specific how-to-read tips.

A Literary Approach Works in the Classroom

Now for a personal testimony. I recently had to teach the book of Esther to a Sabbath school class consisting of grade school children, academy and college youth, as well as young and older adults. My audience represented such a broad range of ages that finding a target group was almost impossible. I decided

to teach Esther from the elements-of-narrative approach, analyzing the plot, characters, style, setting, viewpoint, and then theme of the story. The discussion was lively, with all ages participating, since the format allowed for observations from simple plot questions to more problematic ones about theme.

This approach works in the English classroom too, as the Bible writers provide examples of writing skills for composition students and literary analysis skills for literature students. Too often students tend to treat incidental issues in a story as the main theme. When they do, I use the Esther story as an example of how careful literary analysis can keep us from getting off on side issues that do not relate to the author's purpose(s).

After completing a lengthy literary analysis of the book of Esther,³⁰ I became more aware than ever of the craft-conscious skills of its author. Careful analysis shows how the narrative elements of the Esther story support such themes as God's providence and the feast of Purim celebration—not the theme of why a Jewish girl would marry a pagan king.

Conclusion

There is an increasing awareness that the "Bible is a work of literature and that the methods of literary scholarship are a necessary part of any complete study of the Bible."³¹

Artistic skills serve "the purpose of intensifying the impact of what is said, but also the purposes of pleasure, delight, and enjoyment." The artistic craftsmanship "is not extraneous to its total effect." It is no mere cosmetic to be added or subtracted at will. The big question that remains is whether readers are ready "to recognize and enjoy the artistry."³²

And who is to prepare the readers? The mantle of instruction falls particularly—but not entirely—on Bible and English instructors. If students don't learn in the Christian classroom how to unlock the deepest treasures of Biblical truth, where then will they learn? Surely not in the cinema, the TV reruns, nor the racy magazines.

The Bible demands a literary approach because its writing is literary in nature. The Bible is an experiential book that conveys the concrete reality of human life. It is filled with evidences of literary artistry and beauty, much of it in the form of literary genres. It also makes continuous use of resources of language that we can regard as literary.

A literary approach pays close attention to all of these elements of literary form, because it is through them that the Bible communicates its message.³³

McLuhan was right—the medium and the message are inseparable. In the Bible as elsewhere, the medium is the message.

The content and the artistry form a symbiotic relationship that cannot be ignored without a loss to both. □

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