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AN APPRAISAL OF THE LITERARY APPROACH

Having reviewed the history of the literary study of the Bible, we may now proceed to evaluation.¹ What are the disadvantages or even dangers of a literary approach, and can they be avoided? Are there benefits to be gained by analyzing the biblical text from this perspective?

PITFALLS

The Different Literary Approaches Are Contradictory

The first difficulty with the literary approach is that the field of secular literary theory and the related discipline of linguistics are divided among themselves. There is much infighting about the basic questions of literature and interpretation as a number of different schools of thought seek domination in the field. The biblical scholar faces a dilemma at this point. Students of the Bible find it difficult enough to keep abreast of their own field without keeping current with a second one. The usual result is that biblical scholars follow one particular school of thought or else one particularly prominent

¹This chapter was published in an earlier form as "The Literary Approach to the Study of the Old Testament: Pitfalls and Promise," *JETS* 28 (1985): 385-98.

thinker as their guide to a literary approach. Because of the natural desire to seem current or avant-garde, the most current theory is commonly adopted.

Francis Schaeffer described the lag that occurs between biblical studies and the rest of the disciplines.² A new philosophical approach that comes on the scene influences art, literary theory, sociology, music, and then finally biblical studies. This process may be observed in the case of Derrida's deconstruction. It gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s and just now is making an impact on biblical studies.

My concern is that the hard-and-fast school divisions in literary theory are imported into biblical studies with little methodological reflection. Every major movement in literary theory of the past forty years is mirrored in the work of biblical scholars: New Criticism (Weiss, Childs); Northrup Frye's archetypal approach to literature (Frye himself, Ryken); phenomenology (Detweiler, Ricoeur); structuralist (Jobling, Polzin, Patte); Marxism (Gottwald, liberation theologians); feminism (Trible, Reuther, Fiorenza); deconstruction (Crossan, Miscall).

The apologist must analyze the deep philosophical roots of each of these schools of thought. Students of the Bible and biblical scholars working on method, however, can recognize positive, though perhaps distorted, insights that each of these schools provides. I thus agree with John Barton, who has said that "all of the methods . . . have something in them, but none of them is the 'correct method.'" In his view, our methods are best seen as "codification of intuitions about the text which may occur to intelligent readers."³

Among the many positive contributions that may be gleaned from each of these schools of thought we could include the New Critical insight that we must focus our interpretation on the text rather than on the author's background; the structuralist attention to literary conventions; and the emphasis

²F. A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968), pp. 13-84.

³Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 5.

of feminism and Marxism on the themes of sexual and economic justice. Even deconstruction may give us an insight into the effect of the Fall on language, namely, the schism between signifier and signified.⁴

Notice that in each case the secular theory leads to a new imbalance. New Criticism rightly attacked certain cases of appealing to the author's intention for the meaning of a text, but it went too far in restricting the interpreter to the text alone, the text as artifact, leaving both author and reader out of the picture. Marxist and feminist readings distort the text by insisting that their themes are the only interpretive grids. And deconstructionists use their insight into the slippage between sign and object to attack theology or any type of literary communication.

The literary approach thus easily and often falls into the application of one particular (and usually current) literary theory to the biblical text. Biblical scholars, however, except in a very few exceptional cases, are not experts in a second field and therefore fall prey to the current theoretical fashion. The best approach in such a situation is an eclectic one. The Christian interpreter must reject any methodological insights that fundamentally conflict with basic Christian convictions but can, because of common grace, glean helpful insights from all fields of scholarship.

Literary Theory Is Often Obscurantist

The second pitfall is related to the first: literary theory is often obscurantist. Each school of thought develops its own in-language. Actant, *signifié*, narratology, interpretant, *différance*, and aporia are only a few among the many esoteric terms of the field. An illustration of the type of obscurantism to which I am referring is found in the structuralist analysis of the Book of Job by Robert Polzin. Following the method of the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Polzin summarizes the

⁴Edwards, *Towards a Christian Perspective*, pp. 217-37.

message of the Book of Job with the following math-like formula:⁵

$$F_x(a):F_y(b) \cong F_x(b):F_{a-1}(y)$$

While we need not argue against technical terminology, neither must we glory in it. When new technical terms are introduced into scholarly discussion, they must be carefully defined, a precaution that most theoretical discussions seem to ignore.

The solution is not to throw out the literary approach but rather to seek clarity of expression. It is interesting that the two books that have had the biggest impact on biblical scholarship in the area of literary approach are Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*. Each one uses little technical jargon and gives much straightforward help in the explication of texts.

The Theory May Impose Western Concepts on Ancient Literature

The next danger is that of imposing modern Western concepts and categories on an ancient Semitic literature. If done, according to some critics of the literary approach, it could lead to a radical distortion of the text. On the surface of it, the danger appears real. Modern literary theory develops its concepts from its encounter with modern literature. Propp and Greimas developed their theories of the structure of folk tales by analyzing Russian stories.⁶ This schema has been applied to biblical stories by many, notably Roland Barthes.⁷ Theories of Hebrew metrics are usually based on systems employed in other modern poetic traditions. The oral basis of much of biblical literature is supposedly uncovered by means of comparisons with classical and Yugoslavian oral literature.⁸

⁵Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism*, p. 75.

⁶Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* and Greimas, *Structural Semantics*.

⁷R. Barthes, "La lutte avec l'ange: Analyse textuelle de Genèse 32.23-33," in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique*, pp. 27-40.

⁸F. M. Cross, "Prose and Poetry in the Mythic and Epic Texts from Ugarit," *HTR* 67 (1974): 1-15; see A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

Such a list could be lengthened considerably and apparently manifests an insensitivity toward what Anthony Thiselton calls the two horizons of the act of interpretation.⁹ The ancient text comes from a culture far removed in time and space from that of the modern interpreter. This distance must be taken into account in our interpretation or else the exegesis will be distorted by reading modern values and presuppositions into the ancient text.

James Kugel is the harshest critic of the literary method from this perspective. He expresses his reservations theoretically in an article entitled "On the Bible and Literary Criticism" and practically in his justly acclaimed *Idea of Biblical Poetry*.¹⁰ In the latter work he points out that biblical Hebrew has no word for "poetry." Thus, Kugel comments, "to speak of 'poetry' at all in the Bible will be in some measure to impose a concept foreign to the biblical world."¹¹ He also rightly points out that no single characteristic or group of characteristics can differentiate prose from poetry in the Hebrew Bible. Parallelism in fact occurs also in prose, and poetic meter does not exist. Instead of using the designation *poetry* to describe a distinct genre in the Old Testament, Kugel prefers to speak of "high style."

While one may agree with Kugel to a large extent, Kugel goes too far in rejecting the generic term *poetry*. If one reads a psalm and then a chapter of Numbers, one immediately notices a difference. On one level we can contrast the short, terse lines of the psalm with the lengthy lines of Numbers. There is also a heightening of certain rhetorical devices in the psalm that normally would not be found in the same magnitude in the Numbers section. In the psalm we encounter parallelism, metaphors, less restriction on the syntax, and so forth. In this relatively greater terseness and heightened use of rhetorical devices, we see a literary phenomenon that is related to our own distinction between poetry and prose. Kugel of course recognizes most of these differences but still hesitates to name the

⁹Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*.

¹⁰J. Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 99-104; idem, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*.

¹¹Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, p. 69.

feminism, and Marxism) to the reader and the reader's constitutive participation in the formation of meaning in the literary act.

One major voice has dissented from this trend. E. D. Hirsch posits an author-centered interpretive method that seeks to arrive at the author's intent.¹⁵ This approach, Hirsch believes, provides an anchor of determinant meaning in the sea of relativity introduced by other theories. Although Hirsch's views have not been widely accepted by his fellow literary theorists, his emphasis provides a needed counterbalance to the trends in secular theory.

I comment further on this fourth pitfall when I discuss below the promises of the literary approach. Somewhat paradoxically, while there is danger in moving away from authorial intent, there is also benefit in the fact that the literary approach focuses our attention more on the text than on the author during the act of interpretation.

Contemporary Theory Denies Referential Function to Literature

The last pitfall is the most significant. Along with the move away from the author in contemporary theory, one can also note the tendency to deny or to limit severely any referential function to literature. "The poet affirmeth nothing," states Philip Sidney. Frank Lentricchia's masterful *After the New Criticism* follows the history of literary theory for the last forty years, using the theme of the denial of any external reference for literature. Literature in this view represents not an insight into the world but rather a limitless semiotic play.

Perhaps this modern tendency goes back to Saussure's theory of the sign. In his view, there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified. The relationship between the two is arbitrary, or conventional. For Saussure, the fact that different languages have different words for the horse, for example, indicates that the relationship is arbitrary and determined by custom. Also note that, according to Saussure

¹⁵See chapter 1, "Author-centered Theories."

and the semiotic tradition that emanates from his writings, the sign does not point to an object in reality. The sign unites an acoustical image with a concept, rather than a word with a thing.¹⁶ (The word sign might point to a nonexistent or metaphorical horse.)

In any case the rupture between the literary and the referential is an axiom of modern literary theory. As one might expect, recognition of the literary characteristics of the Bible has led scholars to equate the Bible and literature, with the corollary that the Bible as a literary text does not refer outside of itself and, in particular, makes no reference to history. This position leads on the part of some to a complete or substantial denial of a historical approach to the text, which most often takes the form of denying or denigrating traditional historical-critical methods. Source and form criticism particularly are attacked. The following quotations represent the views of some who adopt the literary approach.

Above all, we must keep in mind that narrative is a *form of representation*. Abraham in Genesis is not a real person any more than the painting of an apple is real fruit.

Once the unity of the story is experienced, one is able to participate in the world of the story. Although the author of the Gospel of Mark certainly used sources rooted in the historical events surrounding the life of Jesus, the final text is a literary creation with an autonomous integrity, just as Leonardo's portrait of the Mona Lisa exists independently as a vision of life apart from any resemblance or nonresemblance to the person who posed for it or as a play of Shakespeare has integrity apart from reference to the historical characters depicted there. Thus, Mark's narrative contains a closed and self-sufficient world with its own integrity. . . . When viewed as a literary achievement the statements in Mark's narrative, rather than being a representation of historical events, refer to the people, places, and events *in the story*.

As long as readers require the gospel to be a window to the ministry of Jesus before they will see truth in it, accepting the gospel will mean believing that the story it tells corresponds

¹⁶F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, p. 118.

exactly to what actually happened during Jesus' ministry. When the gospel is viewed as a mirror, though of course not a mirror in which we see only ourselves, its meaning can be found on this side of it, that is, between text and reader, in the experience of reading the text, and belief in the gospel can mean openness to the ways it calls readers to interact with it, with life, and with their own world. . . . The real issue is whether "his story" can be true if it is not history.¹⁷

For these authors, the truth of "his story" is independent of any historical information.

Similar evaluation may be seen in the hermeneutics of Hans Frei, who pinpoints the major error in both traditional critical and conservative exegesis in the loss of the understanding that biblical narrative is history-like and not true history with an ostensive, or external, reference.¹⁸ Alter's brilliant analysis of Old Testament narrative is coupled with the assumption that the nature of the narrative is "historicized fiction," or fictional history.¹⁹

The result of this approach is a turning away from historical investigation of the text as impossible or irrelevant. The traditional methods of historical criticism are abandoned or radically modified or given secondary consideration. Concern to discover the original *Sitz im Leben* or to discuss the tradition history of a text languishes among this new breed of scholar. This attitude understandably concerns traditional critical scholarship, so that we find among recent articles ones like Leander Keck's "Will the Historical-Critical Method Survive?"²⁰ While evangelicals might in some respects be glad to see the end of

¹⁷Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, p. 13; D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: The Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 3-4; R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 236-37.

¹⁸H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

¹⁹Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

²⁰Leander Keck, "Will the Historical-Critical Method Survive?" in *Orientation by Disorientation*, ed. R. A. Spencer (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), pp. 115-27.

historical criticism, they, along with historical critics, have a high stake in the question of history.

According to Wellek and Warren in their *Theory of Literature*, the distinguishing characteristics of literature are fictionality, invention, and imagination. To identify Genesis simply as a work of literature is thus to move it out of the realm of history. This characterizes some, if not much, of the literary approach to the study of the Old Testament.

Frye's comment, quoted above in the introduction, suggests an alternative approach: "The Bible is as literary as it can well be without actually being literature."²¹ We thus may consider Genesis, for example, more than simply literature. On the one hand, Genesis is not reducible to a work of fiction. On the other hand, we must apply a literary approach because it possesses literary qualities.

Another distinguishing characteristic of literature is its self-conscious structure and expression. In Russian formalist terms, language is *foregrounded*. As the framework hypothesis has pointed out, there is literary artifice in the parallelism between the first three days of creation and the last three.²² Similarly, literary craft is displayed in the symmetrical structures of the Flood story, in the Babel story, or moving beyond Genesis, in the Solomon narrative.²³

The point is that we do not have so-called objective, neutral, or unshaped reporting of events. (As many have pointed out, there is no such thing as a brute fact; an uninterpreted historical report is inconceivable.) Genesis is clearly not attempting to report events dispassionately. Rather it contains proclamation, which shapes the history to differing degrees. The biblical narrators are concerned not only to tell us facts but also to guide our perspective and responses to those events.

²¹Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 62.

²²See among others, M. G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," *WTJ* 20 (1958): 146-57.

²³Wenham, "The Coherence"; J. P. Fokkelmann, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1975), pp. 11ff.; R. B. Dillard, "The Literary Structure of the Chronicler's Solomon Narrative," *JOT* 30 (1984): 85-93.

Old Testament prose narrative may thus be described as selective, structured, emphasized, and interpreted stories. The author/narrator controls the way in which we view the events. Here we can see how plot analysis, narrator studies, character studies, point-of-view analysis, and suspense-creating devices may be helpful, though definitely partial, approaches toward the understanding of a text.

The question of historical truth boils down to the question of who ultimately is guiding us in our interpretation of these events. If we look ultimately to human authors, then literary art may be deceptive. If we look to God, then we cannot have deception. A literary analysis of a historical book is thus not incompatible with a high view of the historicity of the text, including the view that affirms the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture in the area of history. (I do not want to give the mistaken impression that all of Scripture is historical in nature. The generic intention of each book and each section needs to be analyzed before attributing a historical reference to the book.)

We should note that some scholars argue that literature is an act of communication between the writer and the reader, an act that functions in more than one way. Besides a poetic function, the text may also have a referential function, according to Roman Jakobson's communication model of literary discourse.²⁴ Of course, the poetic function may become so dominant that the referential function ceases to exist, so that truly "the poet affirmeth nothing." The opposite pole is reached when there is a concerted effort to rid the text of self-referential language (i.e., metaphor), an impossible goal, as it is in scientific discourse. The biblical text for the most part is somewhere in between.

PROMISES

While there are potential pitfalls in pursuing a literary approach to biblical interpretation, we see that they are

²⁴Cf. N. R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 33ff.

avoidable. Positively, though, what value is there in a literary approach? I have hinted at answers a number of times: while not to be reduced to literature pure and simple, the Bible is nonetheless amenable to literary analysis. Indeed, some of the most illuminating work done on the Bible in the past decade has been from a literary point of view, often done by literary scholars. Biblical scholars, particularly traditional critics, do not always make the most sensitive readers as C. S. Lewis once complained:

Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. . . . These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.²⁵

A literary approach, however, offers promise in three general areas.

Literary Theory Reveals the Conventions of Biblical Literature

A literary approach assists us in understanding the conventions of biblical storytelling. Alter has observed that

every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.²⁶

The literary text is an act of communication from writer to reader. The text is the message. For it to communicate, the sender and receiver have to speak the same language. The writer, through the use of conventional forms, sends signals to

²⁵C. S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), pp. 106, 111.

²⁶R. Alter, "A Response to Critics," *JSOT* 27 (1983): 113-17.

the readers to tell them how they are to take the message. We all know the generic signals in English (e.g., "once upon a time," "a novel by . . ."); we recognize poetry by all the white spaces on the page.

A literary approach explores and makes explicit the conventions of biblical literature in order to understand the message it intends to carry. It is significant to discover that Deuteronomy is in the form of a treaty, that the narrator shapes the reader's response to the characters of a text in different ways, and that repetition is not necessarily a sign of multiple sources but a literary device.

Now in ordinary reading we recognize much of this information automatically. We passively let the narrator shape our interpretation of the event being reported to us, we make an unconscious genre identification, and so forth. As interpreters of a text, however, it is important to make these conventions explicit, even more so with the Bible, since it is an ancient text and the conventions employed are often not ones we are used to.

A Literary Approach Stresses Whole Texts

Evangelicals commonly tend to atomize the text and to focus attention on a word or a few verses. Traditional critical scholarship displays the same tendency for a different reason, not believing that the whole text is original. The literary approach asks the question of the force of the whole. For this reason many evangelical scholars have seen the literary approach serving an apologetic function. If it can be shown that the Joseph narrative, the Flood narrative, the rise of the monarchy section (1 Sam. 8–12), and the Book of Judges are all examples of literary wholes, then we apparently have little use for source criticism.²⁷

²⁷Wenham, "The Coherence"; L. Eslinger, "Viewpoints and Point of View in 1 Samuel 8–12," *JSOT* 26 (1983): 61–76; D. W. Gooding, "The Composition of the Book of Judges," *EI* 16 (1982): 70–79.

Literary Theory Focuses on the Reading Process

Work in literary criticism helps us to understand the reading process. I described above the act of literary communication as the author sending a message (text) to the reader. In the act of interpretation our focus must be on the text. As Geoffrey Strickland has said, "All that we say or think about a particular utterance or piece of writing presupposes an assumption on our part, correct or otherwise, concerning the intention of the speaker or writer."²⁸ But we must also recognize the role of readers and their predisposition as they approach the text. While not advocating the view of some reader-response theorists that readers actually create the meaning of the text—rather, the text imposes restrictions on possible interpretations—we must recognize that the readers' background and their interests will lead them to attend to certain parts of the Bible's message more than other parts.

In this connection we must consider the relevance of contextualization and multiperspectival approaches to the text. We also must mention here the value of what might be called ideological readers, even when they are unbalanced. Feminists and liberation theologians, for example, read the Bible with colored glasses, which often leads to distortion, but such readers do bring out important issues and themes that other, less interested, readers miss. My basic point here is that reading involves the interaction of the writer with the reader through the text, so that any theory that concentrates on one of the three to the exclusion of the others may be distorted.²⁹

More could be said about the promise and benefits of a literary approach. In the final analysis, however, the proof is the illuminating exegesis that this approach has led to. I refer to such insightful analyses as those of R. Alter, C. Conroy, A.

²⁸G. Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism? Thoughts on How We Read* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 36.

²⁹After completing this chapter, I had occasion to read the helpful introductory book by L. Ryken, *Windows to the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), which also adopts what I consider to be a balanced view of the dynamics of reading.

Berlin, R. A. Culpepper, D. Gunn, and others listed in the section on further reading at the end of the book. Following a review of basic principles in chapter 3, I turn in part 2 to a discussion of several specific examples.

3

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Thus far we have surveyed the history of literary approaches to the study of the Bible and have analyzed their positive and negative features. Along the way we have pointed to a positive program for literary readings of biblical texts. Before applying literary insights to particular prose and poetry texts, however, it will be advantageous to summarize and explicate more fully some of the major theoretical premises upon which the studies in part 2 are based. I consider, then, the act of literary communication and several functions of biblical literature.

THE ACT OF LITERARY COMMUNICATION

Communication involves a message that a sender directs toward a receiver. Different media may be used to send a message. A message may be (1) oral in face-to-face conversation, a phone call, or a radio show; (2) sent by signals of one sort or another; or (3) written. Literature is a subset of this third type of communication between a sender and receiver.

In the act of literary communication, the sender may be referred to as the author or the poet. The message is the text or literary work, and the receiver is the reader, the critic, or the audience. We have already observed that the various schools of