Reading the Bible as Literature

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Lesson 1
What Traits Make a Bible Passage Literature?

The necessary starting point for studying the Bible as literature is to know what literature is. The purpose of this lesson is to define literature and delineate what these traits require of us as readers. This lesson may be too difficult for a high school student in the form presented here.

Although the focus of this lesson is on the Bible as literature, the defining traits of literature apply equally to the Bible and to literature generally. To read and interpret the Bible as literature does not require anything more nor less than what we apply to literature universally. In terms of defining traits, where the Bible is literary, it is literary in the same ways that English and American literature are literary. We should note in passing, therefore, that we will benefit immeasurably if we bring to bear on the Bible what we know about literature generally.

Three ingredients will make up this lesson. (1) The lesson will name and explain the qualities that make a text literary. (2) Where necessary, these defining traits will be accompanied by brief illustrations taken from the Bible. (3) Each unit will end with a statement of the kinds of activity that a given literary trait requires of readers and interpreters of the Bible.

Expository Writing as a Foil to Literary Writing

We need to begin not with literary writing but with expository writing. The qualities that make a text literary will stand out more clearly if we contrast it to the kind of discourse that we use in our daily routine. Such writing is called expository writing. The dictionary defines the word *expository* as "explanatory; informational." High school and college writing courses are courses in expository writing unless they are explicitly called creative or imaginative writing.

Several traits define expository writing. The goal of such writing is to convey information, facts, or ideas. It achieves this purpose best if it is transparent, meaning that it does not call attention to itself but points directly to the body of information that it is designed to impart. The typical structure of the material is either an accumulation of facts about an event or topic, or a series of ideas arranged into the form of a logical argument or line of thinking, packaged as paragraphs with topic sentences. The language tends toward abstraction. Alternatively, expository writing might be packed with facts, but even here the effect is abstract in the sense that it tells us *about* the event or subject rather than enacting or recreating it.

Common expository genres (kinds of writing or discourse) are the essay and the news report. Letters and emails are usually expository, having as their aim to convey information and ideas.

Here is a passage of historical writing in the expository mode: "The Spirit of the Lord was upon [Othniel], and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of

Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died" (Judges 3:10-11). The passage tells us *what* happened but does not recreate *how* it happened. We do not relive the events in our imagination but look at them from the outside as a collection of historical facts. By contrast, the story of Ehud that follows this passage (Judges 3:12-30) is a thoroughly literary passage that not only tells us *what* happened but recreates the event, thereby showing us *how* it happened.

The following is a passage of theological writing in the expository mode: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19). The purpose of the passage is to convey theological ideas. The language is abstract. The style is transparent, pointing directly to the theological ideas that the passage wants us to grasp with our minds.

The foregoing explanation of expository writing stands as a foil to the rest of this lesson—a contrast designed to highlight the nature of literary writing.

The Subject of Literature: Human Experience

It is no exaggeration to say that the direction of the career of the author of this course on the Bible as literature was set right at the beginning of his college education. He had the good fortune to be assigned an introduction-to-literature book (*Sound and Sense*, by Laurence Perrine [Harcourt, 1956]) that began with these words: "Whereas the most common use of language is to communicate information, [stories and poems] exist to bring us a sense and a perception of life, to widen and sharpen our contacts with existence. Their concern is with experience. . . . Literature exists to communicate significant experience. . . . Its function is not to tell us about experience but to allow us imaginatively to participate in it."

Expository writing tells us *about* an event, while literature presents human experience in such a way that we vicariously live it in our imagination. A literary text gets us to share an experience, not to grasp a set of facts or an idea with our mind. When we read literature, we find ourselves put in touch with human experience. Literary scholars call literature a *presentational* form, meaning that it presents some aspect of human experience instead of discoursing *about* it.

Our corresponding task as readers is to come to a literary text with the right expectations. We should not come with the same expectations that we bring to an expository text. With a literary text, we know that we will be given a slice of life, not a set of facts or ideas. This does not mean that a literary text is devoid of facts and ideas. It is based on facts, and it embodies one or more ideas. But in the act of reading, we need to open ourselves to reliving an experience.

By virtue of being a presentation of human experience, literature is *truthful to human experience*, which is a different type of truth than ideational truth (ideas that are true). Literature gets us to see human experience accurately; the knowledge that it conveys is right seeing. Nothing could be more useful than to see human experience and life in the world accurately. When we read the story of Cain, we *see*

the self-destructive nature of unchecked sin clearly. Novelist Joseph Conrad famously said that "my task . . . is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*." The reader is the one who needs to do the seeing, and this requires what literary critics call an "answering imagination" to the words that the author places before us.

Recognizable Human Experience

We need to add that the experiences we encounter in literature are universal in nature. They are bedrock, elemental human experience. A helpful formula here is *recognizable human experience*. We can see ourselves in a literary text in a way that we do not see ourselves in a television news report. It is true that literature is filled with concrete particulars, but they serve the purpose of capturing what is true for all people in all times and places. C. S. Lewis speaks of the particulars in a work of literature as being a net whereby the author captures the universal ("On Stories").

We need to get the adjective *recognizable* into the mix—recognizable human experience. When we do this, we are activated to name the human experiences that have been placed before us in a work of literature. Literary texts do not advertise the human experiences they present. Recognizing and naming the experiences takes time and thought on the part of a reader. Taking the time to perform this analysis will add an additional level of meaning to the Bible. The Bible is a human book as well as a divine book.

What recognizable human experience do we see when we observe Eve pondering the supposed virtues of the forbidden fruit and then eating it (Genesis 3:6)? We see the universal experience of thinking that doing a sinful act is appealing and carries no penalty. What universal experience do we see when Adam and Eve hide when they hear God in the garden after they eaten the forbidden fruit? We see guilt and a desire to hide the sin that produced it. It is not hard to see familiar human experience in the Bible if we activate ourselves to look for it.

The Permanence of Literature

If we take the foregoing discussion one step further, we can see that literature is permanent or timeless. Because the human experiences that are presented in literature are universal, they never go out of date. It is a truism that history and the daily news tells us what *happened*, while literature tells us what *happens*. American poet Ezra Pound said wittily that "literature is news that stays news" (*ABC of Reading* [London: Faber and Faber, 1951]). Novelist John Steinbeck claimed that the story of Cain is "the symbol story of the human soul" because it "is everybody's story," and then he added, "No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us. . . . A great and lasting story is about everyone" (*East of Eden*).

The timelessness of literature does not require anything more of us than was noted in the preceding unit. It does, however, prompt us to reflect on the persistence of a work's content throughout history, and to look for ways in which a given text is up to date in our own lives.

Showing vs. Telling

No motto is more constant in college writing and literature courses than the statement that the purpose of literature is to show, not to tell. To "tell" means to state something abstractly and propositionally. It means to summarize and spell things out. To "show" means to incarnate, embody, and enact, and to trust the embodied experience in the text to communicate truth.

An illustration is the quickest way to establish the point. In the Gospel of Luke (10:29-37) we read an account of a belligerent lawyer who asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" This was a situation tailor-made to yield a dictionary definition of the word *neighbor*, along the lines of, "Our neighbor is anyone in need with whom we have contact." That would represent "telling." Jesus refused to do it. Instead he told a parable about a compassionate Samaritan. That represents "showing," and it illustrates to perfection the literary impulse to present human experience instead of conveying information and facts. Similarly, whereas the sixth commandment of the Decalogue *tells* us not to commit murder, the story of Cain (Genesis 4:1-16) *shows* us that same truth, without even using the abstraction *murder* and without telling us to refrain from it.

What does the impulse of show us the truth instead of telling us require of us as readers? It requires us to be active readers. We are the ones who need to determine what the passage is about, and then to ascertain what the text says *about* that subject. Literature achieves its effects by a certain indirection, and it refuses to spell everything out. Nothing is achieved by arguing about this or asking for an explanation. It is as it is: literature incarnates its themes and meanings in a concrete form rather than an abstract and explicit form. On the basis of what the author has presented and shown us, we need to extract what the text tells by means of that presentation.

Right Brain Discourse

It will be helpful to look at the foregoing material from one more angle. Recent brain research into how the human brain functions goes by the name of "right brain—left brain." The left hemisphere of the brain is dominant in the exercise of analysis, reason, and logic. The right hemisphere is activated by visual and other sensory processes, and it is the side of the brain that is active in the display of emotion and grasping of humor. Similarly, the left brain dominates when a person reads a written text with abstract vocabulary, and the right brain with concrete language and metaphors.

If we apply these findings to our definition of literature, we can say simply that literature is right brain discourse. It awakens our sensory imagination. It uses concrete language. It appeals to our emotions. It gives us a picture of the world as image rather than abstraction or concept.

What this requires of us as readers is again to approach a literary text with the right expectations. Even when we end our reading experience of a literary passage in the Bible by extracting an idea or generalization or theme from the embodied experience of the text, that statement of theme is not an adequate substitute for the text or take-away from it. As fiction writer Flannery O'Connor famously claimed, "The whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction" (*Mystery and Manners* [Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961], 73). If we *experience* the neighborly behavior of the good

Samaritan, we have assimilated the major message that Jesus' parable exists to communicate, even if we do not formulate a concept that encapsulates the main idea of the parable.

It is not wrong to add a proposition or precept to the embodied example, but we need to avoid thinking that this statement of theme is the main point of a literary work. What Kenneth Bailey wrote about a parable is true of all literature: "A parable is not a delivery system for an idea that can be discarded once the idea (the shell) is fired. Rather a parable is a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence . . . and look out on the world from the point of view of the story" (*The Cross and the Prodigal* [IVP, 2005], 87). A work of literature encompasses us in a whole world of the imagination; residing in that world and absorbing it fully constitutes most of what a work of literature exists to communicate.

Literary Genres

Through the centuries, the most obvious and objectively verifiable way to identify a text as being literary is that it belongs to one or more literary genres. From time immemorial, the human race has agreed that certain genres or kinds of writing are literary, while others are expository. Stories and poems are literary genres, as are satire, proverb, and drama. Essays, historical chronicles, and office memos are expository genres.

The Bible is a whole library of diverse literary genres. The overall genre is the anthology, and no other anthology contains a greater range of genres than the Bible. The overwhelming majority of these genres is literary rather than expository. If a biblical text belongs to a literary genre, it is a work of literature. It is as simple as that.

The ramifications of this are as follows. (1) We cannot master the Bible without acquainting ourselves with the genres represented in the Bible. (The best resource for this is a book by Leland Ryken listed in the further readings at the end of this essay.) (2) Every genre is governed by certain characteristics and rules. These conventions and rules are a set of expectations that can guide our encounter with a text and enable us to see and name what we are looking at as we work our way through it. (3) The ease with which the writers of the Bible handle their chosen genres shows their mastery of writing and literary technique, leading us to admire their literary ability. Biblical authors wrote with a full awareness of the operating rules of their chosen genres. As readers, we need to do the same. Doing so is part of an understood contract between author and reader.

The Interpretation of Human Experience

The foregoing discussion has tended in the direction of cautioning us not to reduce a literary work to a set of ideas. A work of literature *embodies* its message instead of expressing it directly as an idea. In Christian circles, the most common way of mishandling of the Bible is to reduce it to a set of ideas, thereby virtually bypassing the text itself.

Nonetheless, it is important not to overshoot the mark in this regard. Literary authors not only present

human experience; they also offer an interpretation of it. Novelist Joyce Cary once wrote that "all writers . . . must have, to compose any kind of story, some picture of the world, and of what is right and wrong in that world" (*Art and Reality* [Doubleday, 1961], 174). The first half of that statement ("some picture of the world") fits right in with everything that we have covered thus far. The additional idea that writers must have a conception of what is right and wrong in their imagined world speaks to the ideas that are embodied in a work of literature. There is a discourse ("message") level to literature, and more so with the Bible than with most other literature.

It is therefore incorrect to think that literature gives us the example *instead* of the precept. It is true (as developed above) that the example is what makes a text literary, and additionally that literary authors usually refrain from stating the precepts directly. But that does not mean that ideas and precepts are absent. It is obvious that the Bible is a book of ideas. But the more literary a biblical text is, the more thoroughly the burden of extracting the precept is placed on the reader.

The implication of this is that we will never derive the truth and edification that the Bible stands ready to impart if we remain passive readers. We need to be bold in extracting or deducing what ideas are embodied in a story or poem or other literary text.

This is a good place to tack on a feature of literature that could have been inserted at numerous points in this essay. Given the literary traits that are discussed in this lesson, it is obvious that a literary text does not carry all its meaning on the surface. It requires interpretation. This starts with the experiential content of literature. Literature embodies human experience but does not announce the human experiences that are presented in a text. We need to ponder the content of a work and decide what recognizable human experiences are present. Similarly, if literature gives the example and expects us to determine the precept, we need to take that interpretive step.

Special Resources of Language

The moment we take up a literary text, we sense that language is being used in ways beyond the everyday expository use of language. Even when we read or listen to a passage from a realistic novel or short story, the words strike us as being different from the conversation at the supper table. This is most obviously true of poetry, regarding which we can say that poets speak a language all their own. But the difference of literary language from everyday language is universal in the realms of literature.

The special resources of language start at the level of the individual words. The most obvious aspect of this is imagery (words naming concrete things or actions) and figurative language. This is by no means limited to the poetic sections of the Bible. We tend to think that the New Testament epistles fall into the genre of expository writing, but the following non-expository passage is in every way a typical specimen of epistolary writing: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:19-21). Everything in this passage represents special resources of language, chiefly metaphor.

Sometimes the deviation from ordinary discourse consists of the words used, but another way in which a passage can veer in the direction of literary language is the way in which sentence elements are arranged. We might say that the following passage (1 Corinthians 1:26) is expository writing designed to communicate the idea that God chose undistinguished people for salvation. But the rhetorical patterning called parallelism makes the statement stand out from ordinary expository prose: "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth."

Early in this lesson we noted that expository writing seeks to be transparent, not calling attention to itself. The counterpart is that literary discourse calls attention to itself from start to finish. One way in which it does so is by its use of special resources of language.

The aphoristic quality of the Bible deserves separate mention. An aphorism is a concise, memorable statement. It is striking and attention-getting. The proverbs and sayings of the Bible are the most obvious examples, but the Bible is continuously aphoristic. The phrase *verbal beauty* is an accurate synonym for aphoristic effect. The Bible supplies the greatest number of entries in any dictionary of famous quotations. This is a tribute to the biblical authors' skill with language.

What does all of this require from us as Bible readers? First, we need to recognize the special (non-expository) nature of what we are reading. In other words, we need to place such writing into the category of literature. Secondly, literary authors flaunt their skill with written and spoken discourse. We need to admire their skill and enjoy it. We also need to be receptive of the affective power of this extraordinary discourse.

Artistry and Beauty

Thus far we have described literature largely in terms of its content, though the preceding section on special resources of language has been a transition to this unit on the artistic dimension of literature. Literature is an art form, a "sister art" to music and painting. The categories of artistry and beauty are aesthetic ("artistic") ones. Their purpose is twofold—to give pleasure and to intensify the impact of an utterance. The forms of literary artistry are so many that it is superfluous to start citing examples.

Instead, we can profitably consider the implications of the presence of beauty in the Bible for readers. Literary artistry is self-rewarding, just as a beautiful painting or piece of instrumental music is. It is God's gift to the human race. If everything that biblical authors put into their texts is important, the artistic qualities that they embedded in their writings are worthy of our attention. And if that is true, is it not as wrong to handle the Bible inartistically as it is to handle it untruthfully? We handle the Bible inartistically if we pay no attention to and give no reverence to the beauty of expression that we find in the Bible.

The writer of Ecclesiastes speaks for all of the writers of the Bible when he states his philosophy of writing. In a self-portrait of himself as writer, the author claims to have "taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher [equally well translated as "the author"] sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth"

(Ecclesiastes 12:910). Here is a portrait of the biblical author as self-conscious composer, preoccupied not only with the "what" of his discourse but also the "how."

To tie this line of thought to the subject of this lesson, we know that a text is literature if it possesses beauty of expression. A work of literature in the Bible and elsewhere belongs in the same category as a beautiful painting or piece of music. This is the nonutilitarian side of literature, and the Bible possesses it in abundance. If God did not neglect beauty in his creation of the world, it is no surprise that he did not neglect it in his Word.

Archetypes

We know that a text is literary if we can see archetypes in it. Archetypes are the recurrent master images of human experience. More specifically, they are one of three things—an image or symbol like light and water, a plot motif like the quest and journey, or a character type like the hero and villain. The chief identifying trait of an archetype is its universality. Archetypes are the building blocks of literature, and the reason they recur in literature is that they recur in life. They make up the groundwork of the human psyche. Psychologist Carl Jung claimed that "it is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them (*Psychological Reflections* [Princeton University Press, 1953], 47).

The Bible is the definitive repository of archetypes for Western literature and culture. So much of the Bible consists of archetypes that the major reference book on the subject (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken and others) is over a thousand pages long. For our purposes here, it will suffice to say that we know that a text is literary if we can discern the presence of archetypes in it. When we read a newspaper or informational book, it is extremely rare that we are aware of archetypes. With a literary text, archetypes leap out at us.

The presence of archetypes imposes multiple obligations on us as readers. We need to acquaint ourselves with the archetypes of life and literature so we can recognize them when we encounter them in the Bible. With our antennae up in this way, we need to identify the archetypes that appear before us as we read a literary passage. We need to be receptive to the universality of these archetypes, and to their affective power. One of the advantages of an archetypal approach to the Bible is that it alerts us to *patterns* that are present in individual works and the Bible as a whole. Additionally, this approach is an avenue toward seeing what is universal and timeless in the Bible. Because archetypes make up the groundwork of the human psyche, being alert to them educates us into bedrock humanity and binds us to the human race. Awareness of archetypes helps to make the Bible both universal and timeless in our thinking.

Multilayered Quality

Putting all of the foregoing together, we can say that a final quality of literature is its richness and multiplicity. There is layer upon layer in a literary text. The list of aspects that call for our attention is expansive. By contrast, good expository writing is one-dimensional. It carries its meaning on the

surface. If readers need to exert themselves to understand a piece of expository writing, something is wrong. It is the task of an expository writer to hand over the meaning on a platter.

Compared to this clarity and efficiency, there is always an element of "excess baggage" in literature. If the goal were simply to tell us what happened, we would not need the literary wealth that literature devotes to showing us *how* it happened, enriched still further by an artistic dimension of beauty of composition. Literature is an exercise in generosity—of giving us more than the minimum.

But we will not reap this harvest of abundance if we are not active and analytic readers. Consider the aphorism that "the person who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor the person who loves wealth with gain" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Just reading the statement and moving on conveys a minimum of enrichment. We should take time to unpack what the verse stands ready to offer us. First, we can admire the verbal beauty represented by the two parallel clauses (expressing the same general thought in two different ways but in similar grammatical form). A good proverb like this not only *expresses* an insight but is so striking that it *compels* insight. Then we need to ponder how or why a person who loves money will not be satisfied with it. This proverb is a double comment on the pursuit of money: money will not satisfy a person because the appetite for it is insatiable, and secondly because money does not have the power to satisfy permanently and at the deepest level.

Summary

If we resolve to read the Bible as literature, we need to know what literature is and how it operates. This essay has defined what literature is and does. This is knowledge worth having, and it can serve as a guide that enables us to see all that there is to see in a literary text in the Bible. If a biblical text is expository, it requires that we grasp the information or ideas that are expressed. The transaction is relatively simple.

By contrast, if the text is literary, the obligations placed on us are greatly increased. We might protest against this, but the book that God gave us is at least eighty percent literature. Below is a recap of the things that make a biblical text literary, and the mere naming of the traits will doubtless trigger your awareness of what was said above about the corresponding tasks that are required of a reader.

1. Literature is experiential.
2. Literature gives us universal, recognizable human experience.
3. Literature is timeless and always up to date.
4. Literature shows rather than tells.
5. Literature is right brain discourse.
6. Literature is packaged in distinctly literary genres.
7. Literature offers an interpretation of the experiences that are presented.
8. Literature uses special resources of language.

9. Literature possesses artistry and beauty.
10. Literature is built out of archetypes.
11. Literature is multilayered and demands our attention on many levels.

Learning by Doing Exercise

The story of Cain as found in Genesis 4:1-16 provides an excellent text with which to show your mastery of the principles covered in this lesson. Using the list of traits that make a Bible passage literature, identify how the story of Cain is an example of literature in the Bible.

Further Reading

The theoretic definition of literature presented in this essay is abundantly applied to biblical texts in the following books by Leland Ryken: *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

Leland Ryken's books on biblical genres and archetypes are the most complete available: *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); and *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014).

Finally, Leland Ryken and Philip Ryken have edited a *Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019) that provides literary commentary on every passage in the Bible.

Lesson 2
Introduction to Biblical Narrative

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce biblical narrative at the broadest possible level. It will look at the Bible as a whole and cover a short list of topics. This lesson is not designed to yield a methodology for analyzing stories in the Bible; its function is to provide a way of looking at the narrative dimension of the Bible.

The Master Genre of the Bible as a Whole

If we take a wide-angle view of the Bible, we can see that the overall organizing framework is narrative or story. Although the Bible is comprised of dozens of literary genres, the dominant one is narrative. Even the non-narrative parts are placed within an overall story known as universal history and salvation history. A biblical scholar of a bygone era rendered the oft-quoted verdict that "the narrative mode is uniquely important in Christianity," starting with the Bible (Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971], 56). This was given an interesting twist by Henry R. Luce, founder of *Time* magazine, who said in an interview, "*Time* didn't start this emphasis on stories about people; the Bible did."

We can assign this dominance of narrative in the Bible to at least three causes. First, it is rooted in the character of God, who is the God who acts. Second, biblical writers are preoccupied with history, and they overwhelmingly want us to know what actually happened. To record what happened is to tell a story. Third, life itself has a narrative quality, being comprised of the very elements that make up a story—plot or action, character, and setting.

The fact that the overall shape of the Bible is a narrative pattern should not lead us to privilege the narrative genre over other genres of the Bible. Stories are not inherently more important than other biblical genres. We also need to resist a common fashion of the moment to make other forms such as poems seem more narrative than they really are. With this caution having been stated, we nevertheless need to credit narrative with being the organizing genre of the Bible as a book.

The Importance of Narrative in Human Experience

One of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in four words: "Tell me a story." The Bible satisfies this longing for story. Someone has written that "human kind is addicted to stories. No matter our mood, in reverie or expectation, panic or peace, we can be found stringing together incidents, and unfolding episodes" (John Shea, *Stories of God* [Thomas More Press, 1978], 7-8.) As the latter statement implies, we are all storytellers, which is one of the reasons that the Bible's emphasis on stories makes the Bible seem a natural part of our lives.

Our lives in the world have a narrative quality. They have a beginning, middle, and end, which Aristotle declared to be the inherent shape of a story. We live in a story-shaped world made up of the same ingredients as literary stories possess. The events in our lives are the equivalent to the plot of a story. These events occur in specific settings. And our lives consist of interactions with a never-ending cast of characters. It is no wonder that we can walk into the stories of the Bible with ease.

One of the great advantages of narrative as a literary form is its power of transport. A good story whisks us away in our imagination to the time and place of the narrated action. A New Testament scholar speaks of how the narrative genre "draws the reader into the story as a participant. The reader is *there* [in the events recorded in the Gospels] . . . . The natural function of narrative is to help the reader hear the voices, take part in the action, get involved in the plot" (Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* [Harcourt, 1974], 165).

The Master Story of the Bible as a Whole

We live in a day when the term *metanarrative* is a household word in the academy and beyond. The term denotes an overarching story that gives meaning to the experience of a nation or group. The Bible is the metanarrative of the whole human race. It begins with the literal beginning—the creation of the world. It ends with the literal end of earthly history. The middle is the universal history of the human race.

Several familiar narrative motifs make up this master story. Stories have a unifying plot conflict, and in the Bible it is the spiritual conflict between good and evil. A host of details makes up this conflict: God vs. Satan, God contending with sinful humanity, good and evil people, and good vs. evil within the individual human soul. Nearly every story, poem, and proverb in the Bible contributes in large or small ways to this master plot of biblical narrative.

The presence of this overriding plot conflict requires the characters in the story to make choices as a condition of living. Every sphere of life is claimed by God and counterclaimed by forces of evil. There is no neutral ground. Every human event in the Bible shows an allegiance to God or rejection of him. The Bible concentrates on the person at the crossroads. Life is momentous for the actors in the biblical drama. This is the greatest story ever told, and an additional dimension is that we are not only readers of the metanarrative that is placed before us but also participants in it.

Every story has a protagonist or central character, and in the story of the Bible the protagonist is God. He is the one whose presence unifies the story of universal history. A literary scholar named Roland M. Frye has given us the following excellent description of the situation:

> The characterization of God may indeed be said to be the central literary concern of the Bible, and it is pursued from beginning to end, for the principal character, or actor, or protagonist of the Bible is God. Not even the most seemingly insignificant action in the Bible can be understood apart from the emerging characterization of the deity. With this great protagonist and his designs, all other characters and events interact, as history becomes the great arena for God's characteristic and characterizing actions (introduction to *The Bible: Selections from the*

King James Version for Study as Literature [Houghton Mifflin, 1965], xv).

The story of the Bible is a record of God's acts in history, in nature, and in the lives of people.

Progression is important in every story. The unfolding purposes of God provide the progression in the master story of the Bible. One strand is the acts of judgment that God executes as he contends with forces of evil. This is one of God's perfections, and just as the psalmists celebrate God's acts of judgment, so should we. The acts of God also make up a story of providence—God's superintendence of the events of history and people's lives. Additionally, the term that theologians most regularly apply to the metanarrative of the Bible is salvation history—the history of God's plan to save people who believe in him from their sin and its eternal consequences. A summary statement is that the Bible tells the story of all things within a supernatural framework of God's acts of providence, judgment, and redemption.

Categories of Bible Stories

We will benefit from knowing the lay of the land in regard to leading kinds of stories in the Bible. Some stories turn on the fortunes of characters—the ups and downs of life, or success and failure. In literary circles such stories are commonly called stories of plot or action. Another category is the story of character. Of course all stories have a plot, but in the story of Daniel, for example, what most grabs our attention is the heroic character of Daniel.

Stories that begin in prosperity and descend into calamity are tragedies. As employed by literary critics, the term comedy refers not only to humor but also to a certain plot structure. The comic plot is a U-shaped pattern that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, and rises to a happy ending. Having mentioned tragedy and comedy, we should add two other types of plot, but as a framework for doing so, we need to bring a paradigm called the monomyth into the picture.

All stories (and in fact virtually all literary works) can be placed somewhere on a single composite narrative. It is called the monomyth because it is the "one story" of literature. We should picture a U-shaped half circle with a horizontal line drawn through the middle. Above the line we find romance, consisting of ideal experience—wish fulfillment, or life as we want it to be. Under the line we find anti-romance—unidealized experience, or experience that we try to avoid. Dream and nightmare, the scholar who invented this paradigm calls them. Downward movement from one to the other is tragedy (which we can picture as a downward arc on the left side of the diagram), and an upward swing from unideal experience to ideal experience is comedy (which we can picture as an upward arc on the right side). These are the four plots of literature, and together they make up a composite circle of stories.

Many further types of stories make up the narrative library of the Bible. Simply listing some of them will open up analytic possibilities, so here is a beginning list:

- change of fortune story, with tragedy and comedy possible versions
- story of crime and punishment

- reform story
- story of reversal (with conversion story as a subtype)
- story of initiation
- hero story
- love story
- quest story (often combined with journey or travel story)
- rescue story
- temptation story

This is not an exhaustive list but instead one that encourages you to (a) be aware of the range of story types and (b) attach the most accurate label to Bible stories as you read them. You should not hesitate to devise your own labels, even if they are not present in a handbook of literary terms. For example, the *Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Crossway, 2014) contains an entry for "stories of abundance," even though that category does not appear in other handbooks.

A Few More Foundational Principles

Stories themselves belong to an even larger genre, namely, literature as a whole. Literature *en masse* has defining traits that make it like a genre such as story or poem. The subject of literature is human experience, and we need to keep our grip on this foundational principle whenever we read a story. The subject of every story is human experience, and every story is an invitation to share an experience.

Secondly, works of literature are an art form in which the author's skill in the craft of storytelling is designed to entertain us and give us pleasure. The stories of the Bible are skillfully told. The authors were masters of plot construction and character portrayal. We should relish their stories as skillful performances.

Thirdly, literature imparts a view of life and a picture of how people should live. There is a discourse ("message") level to the stories of the Bible. So we need to move beyond the portrayal of human experience and the skillful exploitation of the rules of storytelling and ascertain what truth and wisdom are embodied in a given story. As an aid to this, a simple rule of thumb is worth its weight in gold: every story in the Bible is an example story. Example stories, in turn, are of two types—positive examples to imitate and negative examples to avoid.

A principle of all literature is that meaning is communicated *through form*. Without plot, setting, and character, the stories of the Bible would not even exist. That is why we first need to relive a story and then move from story to meaning or theme. Reliving the story—assimilating its narrative form in all its details—is not only a prerequisite to extracting ideas or themes. To relive the story is itself to absorb an important part of its meaning.

Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor made two very important statements in this regard. One is her statement that "the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction" (*Mystery*

and Manners [Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969], 73). O'Connor's related comment is that storytellers speak "*with* character and action, not *about* character and action" (76). *About what* does a storyteller speak by means of plot and character? Life. A Bible story is a story before it is an idea.

In the same vein, an expert on the parables of Jesus claims that "a [story] is not a delivery system for an idea that can be discarded once the idea (the shell) is fired. Rather a [story] is a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence . . . and look out on the world from the point of view of the story" (*The Cross and the Prodigal* [IVP, 2005], 87). To take up residence in the metaphoric house of a story is to relive the story as fully as possible.

Summary

This lesson is designed to get you thinking in a narrative direction about the Bible as a whole. A companion article entitled "How Stories Work" explores the dynamics of stories in a more detailed manner.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A *Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Crossway, 2014) contains entries on all the narrative genres, forms, and conventions present in the stories of the Bible. A more comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 3
How Bible Stories Work

This lesson is a companion to Lesson 2. Lesson 2 was designed to instill a general orientation to the narrative quality of the Bible as a whole. It was not designed to yield a complete methodology for analyzing Bible stories. The present lesson is designed to impart tools of analysis, but not in as much specificity as the next three lessons on setting, character, and plot.

To focus on narrative in these ways is called genre criticism (or genre analysis). The basis of this approach is that a literary genre like narrative has its own rules of operation. Knowing these rules and conventions becomes a guide to our encounter with a story. Knowledge of genre yields a set of expectations that prepares us to look for the right things and to name them as we encounter them. Without that set of expectations, our experience of a text is vague and unsystematic.

What Reading the Stories of the Bible Requires from Readers

There can be no doubt that the age of the moving screen has been detrimental to the reading of stories. Viewing a story is a very different experience from reading a story. When we view a story, all we need to do is look and listen. We do not need to awaken our imagination in order to call something into being. The moving images on a screen do all the visualizing that is required. Passivity becomes nearly inevitable.

The first step to becoming a competent reader of Bible stories is to turn off the viewing mode and awaken the reading mode. We need to do the maximum with the words on the page. The words themselves do nothing. We are the ones who need to bring them to life. This requires alertness and a resolve to imagine or bring into existence what the storyteller places before us through the medium of words. We need to be active in visualizing scenes, in entering into the spirit of events, and in identifying with characters. Personal involvement, achieved by an active imagination, is the first requirement for reading Bible stories.

Reading a story is an invitation to share an experience. We share that experience with the characters in the story, first of all, but at another level we share the experience with the storyteller. The storyteller is the one who is addressing us. Every storyteller remains a guiding presence in a story. Storytellers are travel guides, and therefore also fellow travelers with us. We should aspire to be an observant traveling companion of both the storyteller and the characters in the story. Additionally, travelers do not simply observe; they also make judgments and draw conclusions about what they see. As readers, we need to do the same.

There is an additional reason we need to be active readers with the stories of the Bible. Contrary to virtually all other traditions of storytelling, the storytellers in the Bible (a) gravitate to what literary scholars call the brief unit and (b) write in a spare, unembellished style. Compared to virtually all other

stories that you have read, you are given less material to work with in regard to Bible stories. This means you need to read slowly, ponder abundantly, and make the most out of the few details we are given.

The Basics of Narrative

The most foundational thing we need to know about stories is that they consist of three main ingredients—action or plot, characters and characterization, and setting. These are the "air" that we breathe as we read stories. The next three lessons are devoted to each of these ingredients, so we will not go into detail with them here.

If these three ingredients make up a story, it is obvious that analysis and discussion of a story needs to consist primarily of interaction with these three items. An important principle is at stake here, namely, that content is always communicated *through form*. There are no moral and theological ideas in a Bible story apart from plot, character, and setting. Yet Bible commentaries and sermons preached on Bible stories are notably lacking in attention to plot, character, and setting. Religious analysis of a Bible story needs to begin with literary analysis. That is where contemporary biblical scholarship and preaching have let us down. If you pay attention to the three main elements of narrative, and if a published commentary does not, then your analysis is better than the commentary.

Along these lines, your first responsibility as a reader of a Bible story is to relive the story as fully as possible. Do not be in a hurry to formulate statements of themes and religious ideas. That is the final step in being edified by the stories of the Bible. Before you get there, you need to pay attention to everything that the author has put into the text. The writers of the Bible do not put extraneous material into their texts. Whatever they put there is important. Taking time to notice these details and let them register is not a waste of time.

It is helpful when reading the stories of the Bible to draw upon what we know about stories beyond the Bible. One thing we know about stories in general is that to tell a story is to (a) entertain and (b) make a statement. There is no good reason to ignore the entertainment value of Bible stories. If the stories were not interesting and entertaining, they would not hold our attention and remain in our memory. If a person set out to read the so-called sacred books of the world, the Bible is the last one that a reader would lose interest in reading. Not only are Bible stories captivating and entertaining; most of them are constructed with great skill and with an understanding of the craft of storytelling. The writers exercised their skill as storytellers in the expectation that we would notice and admire that skill.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a treatise called *Poetics* that is still the "last word" on the basics of storytelling. One of Aristotle's principles was that a story is an action having a beginning, a middle, and an end. That may look simplistic, but it is actually profound. A story is an action that is whole and complete, which is the import of the formula beginning—middle—end. Nothing essential has been omitted, and nothing needs to be added. A story is a carefully constructed whole. In the next three sections of this lesson, Aristotle's threefold formula will provide the organizing framework.

Getting Started

The first piece of narrative business that a story needs to transact is transport. This, of course, is a particular virtue of stories: they transport us in our imagination from our own time and place to another time and place. In turn, the first thing that we need to do as we begin to read a story is to allow ourselves to be transported. This may seem like a passive thing and a contradiction to what was said earlier about the need to be active readers, but that would be an incorrect conclusion. We need actively to give ourselves to the transport that the storyteller invites us to accept. If we remain passive and refuse to arouse our imagination, we remain rooted in our own world and thwart the entire narrative experience, which is based on the premise of transport.

The opening sentences of a story are a supreme test for storytellers as well as readers. Storytellers need to provide the means of transport. The stories of the Bible show a range in regard to how consciously an author in a given instance was thinking in terms of a story opening. But every Bible story has a story opening with its strategy of transporting us, simply by virtue of being a story.

Some stories plunge us at once into an action already in process: "Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field" (Genesis 25:29). There is no background explanation here but rather an action already under way. We need to make haste to situate ourselves in the kitchen or tent where the stew is cooking and a hunter has just entered.

Alternatively, a storyteller can throw the spotlight on character. Thus when we read that "the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man" (Judges 3:15), we know that the story will feature a resourceful hero. To be sure, there is no shortage of exciting action in the story of Ehud's assassination of Eglon, but we go through the series of events paying most attention to the characterization of Ehud as a resourceful trickster, a consideration of character.

Less often, but equally captivating to our imagination, we find a story opening that transports us by means of a striking setting. Here is an example: "On that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison" (Acts 12:6). This description of a physical setting is fully as compelling to our imagination as a story opening that focuses on action or character.

Does it matter that we analyze by what strategy a given story provides the initial transport? Yes, to pay attention to story openings is part of being an active reader. If we refuse to be alert and analytic at the outset, chances are overwhelming that we will continue to be lazy readers right through to the end of the story. Any bit of analysis we perform is welcome because it is a way of moving beyond the surface level of plot summary. Paying attention to a storyteller's opening strategy of transporting us will pay dividends. Often a story opening is an early signpost of the direction in which a story is headed.

The End

Before we explore the Aristotelian "middle" of a story, we can profitably leapfrog over it and think about the ending of a story. It will be helpful to have a few examples before us:

- "Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Genesis 4:16).
- Esau "ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34).
- "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36).

The first thing that leaps out is that these story endings lend a note of closure to the stories in which they appear. They have the same feel as the concluding phrases and notes of a song. So one function of a narrative conclusion is to bring the metaphoric air balloon back down to the ground. We sense that the journey is over and we are ready to step out of the basket and resume our lives. There is something artistically and psychologically satisfying about the story endings quoted above. It is the satisfaction of closure.

A second function of story endings is that they are a moment of epiphany (revelation, insight) for us as readers. They signal at least part of what the story is intended to say by way of lesson or meaning or edification. At this level, a story ending is a device of disclosure that allows the storyteller to take us aside and offer an interpretation of what has preceded. Only rarely does the storyteller come right out and state a proposition. The burden is on us to extract the right interpretation. But the ending is the writer's way of pointing us to the correct exit gate.

Additionally, a story ending resolves the plot conflict that is at the heart of storytelling. It is a commonplace among literary critics that we know that a story is over when the issues that have been introduced are resolved. In the story of Cain, for example, Cain's self-destructive habit of rejecting God's offers to him to reform his life reach a point of final alienation from God. When Cain leaves the presence of the Lord, the story is finished.

All of the foregoing considerations are important for us as readers. We are the ones who need to "put it all together" at the end of a Bible story. Novelist Joyce Cary claimed that "a reader should never be left in doubt about the meaning of a story" (*Art and Reality* [Harper, 1958], 114). The storytellers of the Bible have done their part to make this happen, but they cannot perform the task by themselves. It requires an active reader to draw the right conclusions about what a story means.

The Middle

The opening of a story transports us and situates us in the main narrative business, which is often a conflict. After that, the Aristotelian "middle" of a story takes over. Of what does it consist?

Before we answer that, we can note a helpful piece of methodology for analyzing a story. Novelist E. M. Forster famously said that a story can have only one merit—"that of making the audience want to know what happens next" (*Aspects of the Novel* [Penguin, 1927, 1962], 35). This actually yields a very helpful piece of methodology. Asking what draws us into a story or episode, or what arouses our curiosity about outcome, or what maintains our interest, yields excellent insights into a story. It might be an

aspect of storytelling technique, or it might be something that we can call good story material. An *action* might be compelling, and just as often the characters in a story are what we find riveting. Often it is a combination of things.

The prolonged middle of a story is the means by which we move from the initial conflict or problem needing a solution to the destined end of the story. Usually it revolves around the twists and turns of a central plot conflict. Along with the progressive unfolding of the plot, it is customary for character development to be an important ingredient. And in addition to these developments in the story itself, the act of reading also produces growth in understanding within the reader. If we are participating in the action as we should, we keep learning more and more about the unfolding action and the characters in the story. We all know that characters in a story change and reach fuller understanding about what is happening. As readers we need to keep in step with them—and not infrequently pull ahead of them—in reaching a complete understanding of what is unfolding and what it means.

The Subject of Every Story

The foregoing discussion has focused on the form or technique of Bible stories; the remainder of this lesson will deal with content. The subject of every story is the same as the subject for every other genre of literature, namely, universal, recognizable human experience. Unless we have a firm grip on the experiential nature of stories, we will not see their relevance to life. In regard to the stories of the Bible, traditional approaches have tended to short circuit the richness of the stories by quickly reducing them to a set of ideas. There is a whole further type of truth beyond the ideational, and it is this other type of truth that is the particular specialty of literature. We can accurately call it truthfulness to human experience and reality.

Drawing an analogy between a photograph and a work of literature will clarify this. A photograph puts a picture of life before us. It prompts us to stare at the photographer's "slice of life." As we stare at it, we come to see an aspect of life with heightened clarity. This is true of literature as well. The knowledge that literature imparts is knowledge in the form of right seeing.

The best methodology for seeing recognizable human experience in the stories of the Bible is simply the conviction *that* the stories embody familiar human experience. If we are committed to the idea that a story is filled with the familiar experiences of life, we will be able to see and name them.

We can see how this plays out with the story of Cain (Genesis 4:1-16). The story comes from the very dawn of human history and belongs to what Bible scholars call primeval history. It is a mere sixteen verses long. We might be inclined to say that such a story has little carryover to life in our own world. But in fact the story of Cain is brimming with recognizable human experiences, as the following list shows:

- sibling conflict and sibling rivalry
- siblings with opposite temperaments and abilities
- domestic violence

- lying to an authority figure
- attempted cover-up
- the model child and problem child
- the domineering older sibling
- the innocent victim
- lack of self-control
- refusal to admit wrong or confess
- harboring a grudge
- anger at having gotten caught at wrongdoing
- being called to account
- punishment for wrong action
- giving in to an evil impulse
- self-pity
- making a bad decision and having to live with the consequences

That is a *partial* list!

There is no shortage of recognizable human experience in the stories of the Bible, but it takes time and analysis to discern them. Taking the time and engaging in the analysis always pay dividends. They yield a form of knowledge or truth that is worth having—truthfulness to human experience, and knowledge in the form of right seeing (seeing reality clearly). We should therefore always take time to ask and answer, What aspects of human experience does this story silhouette with heightened clarity?

From Story to Meaning

The foregoing unit has already introduced the subject of meaning in stories by asserting that truthfulness to human experience in the world is an important type of meaning that stories convey to us. This concluding unit will explore how stories embody ideas and themes, so that by "meaning" we here mean ideational meaning. There are multiple ways to move from story to meaning. Below are four of them.

The simplest way to formulate a statement of theme for a story is to operate on the premise that every story is an example story. We need to identify what the story is an example *of*, realizing that a given story might be an example of more than one thing. Examples can be either positive examples that we should emulate and negative ones that we should avoid. These are what the story has embodied and asserted. Of course we need to pay attention to the story's devices of disclosure by which the author nudges us in the direction of sympathy or aversion in regard to characters and actions in the story.

Equally useful as a way of moving from story to meaning is to operate on the premise that characters in a story (and the protagonist supremely) undertake an experiment in living. We need to state what

that experiment in living is as accurately as possible. Cain, for example, bases his life on the practice of not checking the evil impulses of his soul. Then we need to note the outcome of a character's experiment in living. If the experiment in living leads to success, the story has affirmed the principle involved in the experiment, and on the basis of that we can formulate a statement of theme or idea. If the experiment fails, we can formulate a statement of theme on the basis of this failure.

Another well-tested way of extracting edification from a Bible story is the framework of topic and theme. We can arrive at an understanding of topic by asking what a story is about (again with the understanding that it might be about more than one topic). The story of Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6) is about trusting in God even in the face of great danger. The theme is what a story says *about* the topic. The story of Daniel in the lions' den asserts that God is able to protect people who trust in him even in the face of great danger.

Finally, every story creates a picture of the world that we enter in our imagination as we read. This world, moreover, is offered as an accurate picture of reality. The world that we enter in Daniel 6 is a world of extreme hostility to believers in God. It is a world that would instill utter panic in the life of a believer. Secondly, a storyteller not only creates a picture of the world but also of what is right and wrong in that world. The story of Daniel in the lions' den asserts that it is right to resist forces in our world that would intimidate us from worshiping God, and secondly that it is right to give God our ultimate allegiance even in the face of threat to our lives.

Summary

The stories of the Bible have two aspects—form and content. The form is the vehicle by which the content and its edification are conveyed to us. At its most basic, narrative form consists of plot, character, and setting, though subsequent lessons in this course will show more complexity to the situation than this simplified version. A story is not a mere collection of events. It is life given shape and meaning.

The edification of a story consists of truthfulness to life (so that we see it clearly) and ideas or themes by which we can order our lives.

Learning by Doing

It is important that you try your hand at applying the principles stated in this lesson on how Bible stories work. You can start by reviewing the foregoing material and drawing up your own list of essential topics and questions to bring to an analysis of a Bible story. Then see how each of those elements is present in the story of Jonah's attempt to run away from God as narrated in Jonah 1.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Crossway, 2014) contains entries on all the narrative genres, forms, and conventions present in the stories of the Bible. A more comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 4
Setting in Bible Stories

Setting is the neglected element in many people's experience of stories, and that is very regrettable. Not only does setting play a crucial role in stories. It is also a leading pleasure of narrative analysis to explore the role of setting. It can be enjoyable to explore how thoroughly setting permeates a story and contributes to its meaning.

The reason most readers and teachers of Bible stories remain at the surface level of plot summary is that they do not know how to beyond it. Analyzing the role of setting in Bible stories will show you how to be analytic and move beyond plot summary. Bible reading and teaching need to begin by reliving a Bible story as fully as the details of the text enable us to do. Doing the most with details of setting is a chief means of reliving a Bible story in detail.

It would be totally wrong to conclude that analyzing the part that setting plays in Bible stories is an optional topic, of interest only to people with literary interests. Narrative ingredients such as setting are not "only the form" in which the edification of Bible stories comes to us. Instead, they are *the only form* in which the edification comes to us. Meaning is always communicated *through form*. Without characterization, plot, and setting, Bible stories would not possess religious content. Before we can extract religious meaning form Bible stories, we need to possess the narrative forms that embody the message. Without the "how," Bible stories do not even express a "what."

Defining Setting

In order to make sure that we give setting its due in our analysis of stories, we need to give it a broad definition. The starting point is that setting is the physical location where an event happens. But that is only the starting point. In the oldest surviving piece of literary theory (*The Poetics*), the Greek philosopher Aristotle used the word *spectacle* instead of our familiar term *setting*. We can infer that spectacle covers anything that we can visualize in our imagination (an inference supported by the fact that Aristotle was discussing drama when he used the term). This might include the clothes a character is described as wearing or the positioning of characters in relation to each other or in a given place.

For example, in the story of Ehud's assassination of Eglon, we read that the king's attendants are dismissed from the room, that Eglon was sitting in his cool roof chamber when Ehud arrives, and that he stands up when Ehud announces that he has a secret message from God for the king (Judges 3:19-20). Are these details of physical positioning of characters important in the story? Yes, they are an essential part of the action. In an event recorded in Acts12:21, on the very day that God struck Herod with a sudden terminal illness, Herod sat on his throne arrayed in "his royal robes" that he "put on" for the occasion. Is what Herod decided to wear for the day an important detail of setting (broadly defined)? Yes, it is crucial, to the point of signaling a state of soul on the part of Herod.

But setting is not only a physical place and the clothing and body posture and positioning of characters. It is also temporal, so that (for example) if an event occurs at daybreak (as when Abraham "rose early in the morning" on his journey to offer his son Isaac to the Lord [Genesis 22:3]), that is part of the setting of story. The season of the year can become the setting for an action, as when David had his adulterous affair with Bathsheba "in the spring of the year" (2 Samuel 11:1).

Setting also encompasses the cultural and historical context that operates within a story. In a similar way, geography can take on meanings rooted in a historical and cultural context, so that setting becomes more than physical location. When we read that a king "placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made" (1 Kings 12:32), the references are a code language, with Bethel having important historic associations and high places denoting a place of idol worship.

This is not to imply that we need to possess advanced scholarship in order to analyze setting in Bible stories. Good analysis begins with a keen eye for surface details. But as we increase our familiarity with the Bible, we can see more and more in it, helped by such resources as a study Bible.

The Pervasiveness of Setting in Stories

Before we proceed to explore the functions of setting in a Bible story, we should take time to observe how pervasive and omnipresent setting is in a story. In order to see this clearly, we need to get the word scene into the mix, in two ways. One is the formula "scene of _____"—scene of violence, scene of danger, scene of deception, etc. The other is "_____ scene"—murder scene, encounter scene, trial scene, etc. The moment we place the word *scene* on the table, we begin to see elements of setting everywhere. We can take Luke's account of Peter's denial of Jesus (Luke 22:589-62) as a test case:

> Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them.Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

The overall setting is one that we have seen many times on television—the place outside a courtroom where someone's fate is being decided. That is the overall setting, but if we look more closely, we discover that every phase of action can be matched to a specific setting, as follows:

- verse 54: arrest scene
- verse 55: scene of waiting (outside the courtroom)

- verses 56-60: three repeated scenes of accusation, which are also scenes of testing, of denial, and of betrayal
- verse 61: scene of encounter, which is also a scene of recognition or discovery (Peter recognizes or discovers what he has done)
- verse 62: scene of weeping

British author Elizabeth Bowen once wrote that "nothing can happen nowhere." Initially that seems simplistic, but when we look closely at the phases of a story using the formulas built around the word *scene*, the statement becomes genuinely illuminating: nothing in the story of Peter's denial happens nowhere.

The Functions of Setting in a Story

The primary function of a setting in a story is to provide a fit container for the characters and events that exist within it. One way to view this is to say that a setting *enables* the action that occurs within it. Analyzing how this is true in a story yields excellent insights. When Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:18-28), the setting enables the action: it is remote and far from prying eyes; it has empty wells into which to deposit a despised brother; and it is on the trade route, making it easy to sell Joseph to a passing caravan.

A complementary way to view the relation between setting and action is to say that setting *corresponds* to the characters and actions that exist within it, or *correlates* with them. A literary critic uses the formulas *scene-agent ratio* and *scene-action ratio* to name this correspondence. He writes as follows:

> The scene contains the act . . . and the agents. . . . It is a principle of narrative that the nature of acts and agents should be consistent with the nature of the scene. . . . The scene is a fit 'container' for the act, expressing in fixed properties the same quality that the action expresses in terms of development. . . . There is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action that is to take place within in. This would be another way of saying that the act will be consistent with the scene. . . . The scene-agent ratio is the consistency between person and place. In stories the agent is at one with the scene. (Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives* [Meridian, 1962], 3, 6-9.)

Taking time to analyze the correspondence between the details of setting in a Bible story and the characters and actions that occur within that setting is a necessary part of analyzing a story.

In addition to being a fit container for characters and actions, settings are a chief means by which storytellers make their stories come alive in a reader's imagination. Storytellers know that the function of a story is to "show" rather than "tell," so they include small details of setting to make a story vivid. Analyzing this begins at a descriptive or observational level, and we should not regard this as unimportant. We need to let the literal, physical details of setting register with us. We also need to exercise our imagination in visualizing the details of setting that a storyteller has placed before us.

Exercising our imagination is an acquired skill, but it is within everyone's reach. Here is a model to follow: in the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac, we read, "God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I'" (Genesis 22:1). In a famous passage of literary criticism, a literary scholar named Erich Auerbach imagined the situation as follows: "The two speakers are not on the same level: if we conceive of Abraham in the foreground, where it might be possible to picture him as prostrate or kneeling or bowing with outspread arms or gazing upward, God is not there too: Abraham's words and gestures are directed toward the depths of the picture or upward, but in any case the undetermined, dark place from which the voice comes to him is not in the foreground" (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [Princeton University Press, 1953], 8).

Settings can be symbolic as well as physical. They often create an atmosphere—of danger or safety, for example. The rural world in the story of Ruth symbolizes abundance and the good life. Abraham encounters God on a mountain top (Genesis 22), a place of transcendence where earth meets heaven. Jonah's confinement in the belly of a great fish symbolizes his punishment for attempting to run away from God. At the very least, settings tend to hold either positive or negative connotations, which is an incipient level of symbolism.

Setting as the World of a Story

Whenever we read a story, we enter a whole imagined world that possesses its own distinctive features. This is an extension of the concept of setting. A literary scholar has written as follows about the world of a story:

> In a work of art, there is presented to us a special world, with its own space and time, its own ideological system, and its own standards of behavior. In relation to that world, we assume (at least in our first perceptions of it) the position of an alien spectator, which is necessarily external. Gradually, we enter into it, become more familiar with its standards, accustoming ourselves to it, until we begin to perceive that world as if from within (Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* [University of California Press, 1973], 137).

As we come to master a story, we need to take time to analyze the traits that make up the overall world of the story. An important part of this analysis is that the imagined world that a storyteller projects is understood to be the author's view of reality—a statement about what really exists and how people should live. Here is a novelist's summary of the situation: "all writers . . . must have, to compose any kind of story, some picture of the world, and of what is right and wrong in that world" (*Art and Reality* [Doubleday, 1961], 174). For the more major stories of the Bible, we can profitably analyze what picture of the world is placed before us, and of what is the right and wrong way for people to live if we grant the author's premises.

In addition to a conception of right and wrong, the world of a story implies a scale of values in which some things matter more than others, and in which one value is elevated to a position of supremacy. Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor believed that "it is from the kind of world the writer creates, from the kind of character and detail he invests it with, that a reader can find the intellectual meaning of a book" (*Mystery and Manners* [Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969], 75). This will yield best results with the longer

stories of the Bible, or a combination of individual stories as in the book of Genesis.

Rules for Analyzing Setting in Bible Stories

The following rules of analysis are a summary of what has been covered in this lesson on the nature and functions of setting in Bible stories. The principles have been phrased as questions, on the premise that conducting literary analysis of a text can be thought of as questioning the text, or asking a series of questions in regard to it.

1. Where does the action occur? The settings might be multiple.
2. What are the literal, physical properties of each setting?
3. How does each main setting serve as a fit container for the characters and actions that exist within it? As part of this, how does each setting *enable* the actions that occur within it, and/or how does it *correspond to or correlate with* characters and actions?
4. Do temporal and/or cultural settings (in addition to physical ones) play a role in the story?
5. What details of setting take on symbolic meanings?
6. As you work your way through the story unit-by-unit, what successive labels can you give to the phases of action using the formulas scene of _____ or _____ scene?
7. While working your way through the story in this unit-by-unit way, what smaller details of costuming or positioning of characters or gestures are operative?
8. What are the distinguishing features of the world of the story?

This list of questions tells you what to look for in regard to setting. But application of the list requires an active reader. Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor famously wrote that "the writer should never be ashamed of staring" (*Mystery and Manners*, 84). Readers, too, should never hesitate to stare at a text. Of course, we need to know what to look for. The foregoing list tells us what to look for in regard to setting in Bible stories.

Learning by Doing Exercise

You can test your mastery of the content of this lesson by applying the foregoing list of questions to the story of Cain as narrated in Genesis 4:1-16. Do not overlook the subtle point that according to verses 6-7, a leading scene of the action in this story is Cain's very soul. Starting with verse 9, you may wish to use terminology from law—arrest scene, questioning or interrogation scene, sentencing scene, and so forth.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 5
Characterization in Bible Stories

Plot, setting, and characters are the ingredients of every story. This lesson will be a comprehensive account of how authors present the characters in a story, and the corresponding methods of analysis that their techniques require of readers. One thing that will emerge is how relatively complicated and many-sided the art of characterization is. It will be good for you to be exposed to this complexity.

That having been said, it is up to individual readers to determine the level of complexity they wish to apply to a Bible story. In this regard, the primary rule regarding characterization is this: *get to know all of the leading characters in a story as fully as the information the author has given you allows, and on the basis of this determine what the storyteller is saying about life by means of the characters in the story.*

We need to remind ourselves continuously that the first item on our agenda as readers and teachers of Bible stories is to relive the stories as fully as possible. Paying detailed attention to characterization as outlined in this lesson is an excellent aid to reliving the stories of the Bible. Analysis of character is not simply a literary exercise; it is a means of experiencing a Bible story as fully as possible.

Overview of the Subject

The subject of characterization in Bible stories falls naturally into three separate topics, as follows:

1. Who does the characterizing? This is the *agent* of characterization.
2. By what means do these agents conduct the characterizing? This can be called the *agency* of characterization.
3. What elements make up a character in a story? This is the actual *portrait or profile* of a character in a story.

Additionally, we need to understand that while real life provided *the materials* for the characters who appear in Bible stories, the characters as they exist in the stories are the result of many choices on the part of biblical authors. Our quest as readers is to understand how the authors selected and molded their real-life characters and what wisdom they intended to impart by means of these character portrayals. The authors have given us *a selection and distillation* from the details that real life provided. Then they *silhouetted* certain things so they stand out clearly.

Given the brevity of the stories in the Bible, the vividness and memorability of the characters in the Bible are testimony to the skill of biblical storytellers. With just a few strokes, the Bible's storytellers have given us a gallery of striking characters. In view of this, it is appropriate to speak of the marvelous skill of biblical authors in character creation. It is one of the most obvious gifts of biblical authors.

Who or What Does the Characterizing?

Behind the stories in the Bible is an author or storyteller. This person controls what we see and don't see, as well as the perspective from which we see it. In that sense, the storyteller does the characterizing. But that is simply a background premise. *Within the story*, who does the characterizing?

Whenever we are aware of the author's presence within the story, the author has become what literary scholars call the narrator of the account. On such occasions, we can say that the narrator does the characterizing. An example occurs in the story of the separation of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13) when we read that "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord." In this case, we are fully aware that the narrator is doing the characterizing.

What is surprising about characterization in the Bible is how rarely the authors steps forward in the role of narrator. Overwhelmingly, the storytellers in the Bible tell us what happened but do not directly explain it. It is up to us as readers to draw the right conclusions.

Secondly, and again only occasionally, a character in a Bible story will say something that characterizes another character. For example, in a moment of bitterness at having been cheated out of his blessing by Jacob's deception of his father Isaac, Esau blurts out regarding his brother, "Is he not rightly named Jacob ["he cheats"]? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Genesis 27:36)? Again we need to note how rarely this technique appears in the Bible.

Thirdly, and again not often, characters in a Bible story characterize themselves in a manner that we can call self-characterization. For example, when Jacob stands before the Egyptian king Pharaoh, he gives this thumbnail sketch of himself: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life" (Genesis 47:9). Jacob here characterizes himself as a tragic figure who has lived a life of suffering.

If characters in biblical narrative are only rarely characterized by the narrator in the story, other characters, or themselves, who or what does nearly all the characterizing in the Bible? The answer is the actions of characters in the stories. From what characters do, we are expected to infer certain character qualities and to put these together to form a portrait or profile of characters in a Bible story.

The framework of who does the characterizing does not yield the primary methodology of analyzing characterization in a Bible story, but it is valuable information for at least two reasons. First, the more we know about characterization in a Bible story, the more confidently we will deal with this aspect of biblical narrative. We will rightly feel that are in control of the subject as a whole. Secondly, as we ponder how four different agents potentially tell us about characters in a Bible story, we can hardly miss the point that character creation is not something automatic but rather the result of choices that the storytellers of the Bible made in their authorial role. As storytellers build their characters, they choose from among available methods.

How Characters Are Portrayed in Stories

If the four agents noted in the preceding unit are the ones who do the characterizing, the next logical question is *how* the characterizing is done. *By what means* do the four agents of characterization construct their portraits? The answer is that two strategies are available. Storytellers use *direct* methods of characterization and *indirect* methods.

Direct characterization consists of statements by the narrator about a character in a story. One category of direct statements is descriptive and observational, and therefore largely objective. For example, the narrator of the story of Joseph tells us that Joseph "became a successful man" (Genesis 39:2) and that he "was handsome in form and appearance" (verse 6). We accept these direct statements as objectively true.

The other category of direct statements consists of evaluative statements that make a judgment or assessment of a character. When we read that a king "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 24:9), we receive a summary spiritual assessment stated directly. As with directly stated descriptive statements by a narrator, direct evaluations of characters are extremely rare in the Bible.

This brings us to the alterative to direct characterization. Overwhelmingly, storytellers in the Bible use indirect methods of characterization, and this puts a burden of interpretation on readers to infer character traits. The resulting picture is relatively complex, as the following list of indirect methods of characterization shows:

1. Storytellers use the *actions* of characters to reveal their nature. When Job rejects his wife's advice to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9), that action shows him to be a patient man and someone of exemplary godliness.

2. *Dialogue* (the words that we hear characters utter) is a means of indirect characterization. We can see Esther's heroism and self-sacrifice as we hear her say, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

3. *Foils* are another means of indirect characterization. A foil is a contrast that "sets off" (the literal meaning of *foil*) something in a story. In the story of the separation of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 13, the selfishness of Lot stands silhouetted by being contrasted to the generous spirit of Abraham in allowing Lot to choose his place of residence, and the generosity of Abraham stands out even more clearly by being contrasted to the selfishness of Lot.

To summarize where we are in this discussion, at any given point in a story, one of four agents is doing the characterization (narrator, a character himself or herself, another character in the story, actions by characters). These agents execute the characterization either directly or indirectly.

Learning by Doing Exercise

If you wish to test your ability to discern the foregoing considerations in a Bible story, turn to the account of two events in the life of the prophet Elijah as narrated in 1 Kings 17. There are two characters with whom to apply the frameworks presented above, so apply your analysis to both Elijah and the widow.

The Ingredients of a Character in a Story

Knowing who does the characterizing and by what means is useful information that increases our confidence as we handle characterization in a Bible story. But those things are not what actually produces the characters that we are expected to get to know as we read Bible stories. This unit will spell out the elements that make up a character in a story. Regardless of who does the characterizing, or by what means, here are the things by which we know a character:

1. *Physical actions*. When Jacob deceives his father and cheats his brother out of his blessing (Genesis 27), his actions show him to be a selfish and deceitful person.
2. *Thoughts (mental actions)*. What characters in a story think is part of their identity. Motivations for actions are part of the picture. In the story of the separation of Abraham and Lot, we read that before Lot made his choice of a place to live, he "lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere" (Genesis 13:10). What was Lot thinking as he made his choice? He was thinking about his future financial prosperity.
3. *Words*. The moment people say something, they show something about who they are. When Joseph responds to the overtures of Potiphar's wife with the words, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) we see his spiritual integrity and know what kind of person he is.
4. *Feelings or emotions*. When we read that Jesus was "moved with pity" at the sight of a leper (Mark 1:41), we see his compassionate nature by his display of feeling.
5. *Traits and abilities*. In some ways these can be viewed as something that we conclude on the basis of the preceding elements in our list. Much of a person's identity consists of personal traits and abilities. What traits and abilities do we see when David kills a giant with a slingshot (1 Samuel 17)? Courage, physical strength, and skill with his hands in managing a home-made weapon.
6. *Relationships and roles*. Much of a person's identity is rooted in relationships and roles, such as spouse, parent, king, or farmer. This is an unjustifiably overlooked aspect of many readers' analysis of characters in a story.

7. *Responses to events or people*. This is also a missing item in many readers' profile of characters in a Bible story. What a person does, often immediately or intuitively, in response to an event or crisis reveals a lot of that person's character. We see Jacob's capacity for spiritual experience and transcendence when his immediate response after waking up from the dream of the ladder is to exclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place.... How awesome is this place" (Genesis 28:16-17).

8. *Archetypes*. Archetypes are the recurrent master images of life and literature. One category of archetypes is character types. If we are attuned to archetypes, linking a character in a Bible story with the right archetype is an important part of understanding the character. Jacob is sometimes the archetypal trickster. Ruth is the loyal daughter-in-law. Abel is the innocent victim. In Genesis 3, the serpent is the archetypal tempter.

As we ponder the elements that make up a character in a story, it is obvious how active we need to be as readers. All of the items in the list require a reader to draw conclusions based on the data that is presented. We need to draw out what is implied but not stated directly. In other words, we need to be active in *inferring* things. These interpretive acts extend to localized details, and also to overall conclusions that we make about a character as a whole. The label by which to understand the process of getting to know characters in a story is that we are *determining character* in the story.

Not to accept the responsibility of being active readers who engage in interpretation of the details that the author has placed in the text is to read at a superficial level of plot summary. This is not God's goal for our understanding of biblical narrative. To lend urgency to the situation, although plot, setting, and character all play a part in a Bible story, if we ask which of the three narrative elements embody most of what the author wishes to convey about life, the answer is "the characters."

Tips for Analyzing Characters in a Bible Story

Good analysis of the characters in a story begins at a simple level—with the literal facts. Before we start making interpretive leaps, we need to observe and describe the data of the story accurately. This includes assembling the cast of characters in a story, and then dividing the characters into categories of major and minor. As part of this overview, we need to draw some conclusions about the functions of each character in the action. Good narrative analysis begins with a keen eye for the obvious.

With the considerations covered in this article in mind, our best procedure is to work our way through a story from beginning to end. For each detail that the text provides, we should ask, What do I know about this character on the basis of this data? Ideally this should be done for every character, but if this degree of detail is beyond your goal for a given occasion, at least proceed through the story asking this for the major characters. The authors of the Bible's stories included every detail for a purpose. It is our task to make something of the detail. Analyzing characterization is a pleasurable activity.

Finally, we need to operate on the premise that the storytellers of the Bible intend to say something about life, and especially about the moral and spiritual life, by means of their characters. As part of this, we need always to remember that God is an active character in most Bible stories. Getting to know

him by means of his characterization in the stories of the Bible is a leading goal of reading the Bible.

Learning by Doing Exercise

> An earlier "learning by doing" option singled out the agents and agency of characterization. For this exercise, you might profitably forgo those two considerations and concentrate on the more important aspect of determining character in a Bible story. A good story with which to test your ability to compile portraits of characters on the basis of data presented in a story is Ruth 2, which narrates the first encounter between Ruth and Boaz. Both Ruth and Boaz are richly characterized in this chapter.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 6
Plot in Bible Stories

The plot of a story is its action. But a plot is more than simply action. It is action arranged in a certain way and containing an abundance of further defining features and conventions. The purpose of this lesson is to impart a working understanding of the essentials about plot, but without exploring it in such detail as to overwhelm you. "Enough but not too much" is the goal.

We cannot remind ourselves too often that a Bible reader's first task is to relive a text or passage as fully as possible. This has particular relevance to the stories of the Bible because a story above all other genres lends itself to reliving a series of experiences. The features of plot discussed in this lesson are the tools that will enable you to relive a Bible story. The reason most readers and teachers of the Bible remain at the surface level of plot summary is that they do not know what to do in an analytic way. This lesson gives you the tools to be analytic and move beyond plot summary with the stories of the Bible.

Plot Structure and Unity

For actions and events to rank as a plot, they need to be carefully organized according to set principles. A plot is not a random collection of events. It is a coherent whole in which one event leads to the next one and that one to the next one, and so forth. Furthermore, there is a unifying principle to which the individual parts relate. The overall shape of this sequence is what the Greek philosophy Aristotle called beginning—middle—end. As that formula suggests, a plot is a whole and complete action, with nothing omitted and nothing that needs to be added.

Before we know what the unifying action of a story is, we need to work our way through the successive units, determining what the separate units are and naming them accurately. The best label for this is that we are *identifying the action* by naming the individual episodes or units. After that edifice is standing, we can formulate a summary of the main action, and after that we might wish to go back and label the units more precisely in keeping with what we now see is the unifying action.

Here is how this plays out with the story of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac as narrated in Genesis 22:1-19. With this story, we know from the outset what the unifying action is because the opening sentence tells us: "After these things God tested Abraham." This is a story of the testing of the hero. With that as the unifying motif, we can label the units in such a way as to show the relation of each unit to the plot, as follows: the test announced (verses 1-2); preparations for the test (verses 3-8); taking the test (verses 9-10); interruption of the test (verses 11-12); interpreting the test results (13-18); returning home after the test (verse 19).

Identifying the action is not always that clear cut, but if we are committed to naming the parts and discovering how they fit together to form a unified plot, we will find a way to do it. The story of Jesus'

calming of the storm (Mark 4:35-41) provides an illustration:

> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Here is how we can wrestle the story into its sequential structure: leaving the shore and launching out to sea (verses 35-36); crisis in the form of a life-threatening storm (verse 37); the disciples' panic and rousing of Jesus' from his sleep (verse 38); Jesus' calming of the sea (verse 39); Jesus' rebuke of his disciples for lack of faith (verse 40); response of the disciples in the form of fear (verse 41).

We need to begin inductively like this, describing the units accurately even before we see the big pattern. Once we have labeled the units, we need to analyze what the big pattern is. On a physical plane, the plot of the story of Jesus and his disciples on the lake is a story of threat and rescue. We sense that this is not the deeper meaning of the story, but it is important to begin at the level of observation and description of the literal facts. Our final verdict on this story is that it revolves around the revelation of Jesus as God and therefore as the one who is worthy of our faith. The plot is a lesson in placing our faith in Jesus. Viewed as an example story, this story gives us a negative example to avoid (the disciples' lack of insight and faith).

The takeaway from the first unit of this lesson is (a) that the plot of a story is made up of a related sequence of actions or units and (b) that these units form a unifying whole. The units have a central thrust that unites them. The corresponding actions required of us as readers is to label the units accurately and then find the unifying principle that joins them.

Plot Conflict

Another essential principle of plots in a story is that they are organized around one or more plot conflicts. That is simply how stories work. Since stories do not announce what the plot conflicts are, it is our task as readers to discover what they are.

These conflicts can involve the following agents or opponents: (1) character conflicts (characters in conflict with each other); (2) conflict with one's environment (either nature or society); (3) conflict with supernatural beings; (4) inner conflict (characters in conflict within themselves, as when the disciples struggle with their lack of knowledge about Jesus and lack of faith in him in the story of the calming of the storm).

Regardless of who or what the combatant is, the nature of the conflict can be (1) physical, (2) psychological or mental, (3) emotional, and (4) moral or spiritual.

It is the nature of plot conflicts that they move to resolution, usually at the end of a story. When the conflicts that have been introduced reach a point of resolution, the story is finished. It is important that we formulate a statement of how a given plot conflict is resolved at the end of the story. This resolution is usually an important part of the meaning of a story.

Here are the conflicts in the plot of Jesus' calming of the storm (printed above): Jesus and the disciples in physical conflict with nature in the form of a great windstorm; the disciples in conflict with their emotional fear of drowning (inferred); the disciples' implied frustration with Jesus' in his seeming lack of concern for the danger to their lives; Jesus' rebuke of his disciples (a form of conflict); the disciples' conflict with their fears and their lack of faith and understanding (conflict with ignorance). Jesus' rescue of the disciples from the storm resolves most of these conflicts, but the story ends with an unanswered question, so the resolution is not complete.

Learning by Doing Exercise

This lesson has already covered a fair amount of territory, so if you wish to test how well you have mastered the dynamics of plot, this is a good place to pause and take the test. The two topics covered have been (1) plot structure and unity, and (2) plot conflicts. The story of Peter's denial of Jesus as narrated in Luke 22:54-62 is a good specimen with which to show your mastery of the concepts covered above.

Plot Devices and Conventions

The first half of his lesson has dealt with the big aspects of plot. Storytellers also have a bag full of smaller plot devices that they insert into their stories. Another name for these devices is *conventions* of storytelling. These are not only part of the craft of storytelling. They also contribute significantly to the meaning of stories.

Exposition. The opening phase of every plot is called exposition. It consists of background information or explanation that readers need to know in order be able to understand the action that unfolds in the middle of the story. This explanatory material can be viewed as *enabling* the story to get started.

Inciting moment or inciting force. The exposition normally ends with a "trigger" that starts the actual plot. This trigger is known as the inciting moment or inciting force. Given the complex of ingredients that the exposition has established, the inciting moment introduces something into that mix to get the plot conflict started. In the story of Jesus and the storm printed above, verses 35-36 are the exposition, and the onset of the windstorm is the inciting force.

Foreshadowing. Foreshadowing occurs when something in a story makes us aware of something that will occur later. The dynamic of foreshadowing is that once the foreshadowing has been planted in our

awareness, we look for its fulfillment. When the fulfillment comes, we have experienced the event twice. Foreshadowing can be either explicit (direct) or subtle (indirect). An example of explicit foreshadowing is Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him (Luke 22:34), a prediction fulfilled in the famous story of Peter's denial (Luke 22:54-62). Usually foreshadowing is subtle, requiring us to discern it through our own alertness. In the story of Ehud's assassination of Eglon, Ehud's left handedness combined with his hiding his homemade sword on the unexpected right side (Judges 3:15-16) foreshadows his ability to hide his weapon and escape detection. Similarly, we read that "Eglon was a very fat man" (Judges 3:17), foreshadowing Ehud's ability to conceal his sword in the belly of Eglon.

Suspense. Narrative suspense occurs whenever we are led to wonder how something in a story will turn out. The story of Cain (Genesis 4:1-16) is a suspense story in which we are repeatedly led to wonder how Cain will respond to God's counseling of him and the opportunities God gives him to reform his life, confess his sin, etc.

Testing. One of the most constant techniques of storytelling is that characters in a story (and the protagonist preeminently) are placed in situations that test them. Faced with the test, characters need to make a choice, and in that choice they display their identity. David's courage and resourcefulness are put to the test in his battle with Goliath. Daniel's loyalty to God is tested when he is faced with the edict to worship the king (Daniel 6). The testing of characters in Bible stories reveals and determines their character.

Poetic justice. This oddly named narrative convention consists of the rewarding of good and the punishment of evil. Most Bible stories end with poetic justice, which becomes the disclosure of what the storyteller approves and disapproves. Poetic justice can occur in the middle of the story as well.

Surprise and reversal of expectations. We all love to be surprised as we are reading or listening to stories. Often this surprise is combined with a sudden reversal of what we or characters in the story expect. In the story of Jacob and Esau's reunion after a long history of conflict (Genesis 33), we share Jacob's expectation that Esau will be vengeful, and to our surprise, Esau is full of forgiveness and lavish in his display of good feeling to Jacob.

Dramatic irony. Dramatic irony occurs when we as readers are aware of something of which one or more characters in a story are ignorant. When Joseph's brothers appear before him in Egypt (Genesis 42-44), we are aware at every point that the ruler with whom they are dealing is their despised brother, while the brothers undergo the events without knowing this. It is a sustained instance of dramatic irony.

Summary

This lesson on the dynamics of plot has covered a host of separate details, but stories are such a familiar part of our lives that the material is completely manageable. The three main subjects have been plot structure and unity, plot conflict, and narrative devices and conventions.

Learning by Doing Exercise

If you wish to put the foregoing material into practice, begin by skimming what has been presented in the article. Then turn to Acts 12 and apply the methodology that has been recommended in this lesson. Acts 12 as a whole is built around the conflict between Herod and the Christians living in this territory; within this larger story, the story of Peter's rescue from prison is narrated in full detail (verses 6-17). You could limit your analysis to that unit, but the surrounding material will enable you to apply a few more of the items covered in this article.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 7
Hero Stories in the Bible

Biblical scholars, Bible teachers, preachers, and Bible readers would acquit themselves so much better if they added the category of hero story to their repertoire. Possessing the tools of analysis covered in this lesson will give you what you need to do justice to many, many stories in the Bible. In this regard, we should note that most of the full-fledged stories in the Bible (as contrasted to brief entries in historical chronicles) are hero stories.

An important part of hermeneutics (rules for interpreting a text) is that we need to do justice to the specificity of a text. What this means is that we need to approach a text in terms of the specific subgenre to which it belongs as well as the main genre. A Bible reader or teacher can do a creditable job with the story of Ruth by applying the analytic tools that we use for narrative in general. But we will do a *better* job with the story if we add the considerations of hero story. If we do that, we will see *more* in the text than otherwise, and we will see certain things *more clearly* if we operate in an awareness of the genre of hero story.

The conventions of hero story covered in this lesson are a layer of analysis that we need to add to narrative analysis in general. They are not a substitute for what we do with all stories. The most plausible places to insert this additional overlay of considerations are early in the discussion and, even more, at the end.

Defining the Genre of Hero Story

The starting point is to define what we mean by a hero in a story. We need something more precise than the common use of the word *hero* in everyday life, though certainly a literary hero has much in common with the heroes who appear in the media. The following definition of a literary hero has proven its worth in half a century of teaching by the author of this lesson:

> A traditional . . . hero must be more than merely the leading figure or protagonist of a literary work. The true hero expresses an accepted social and moral norm; his experience reenacts the important conflicts of the community which produces him; he is endowed with qualities that capture the popular imagination. It must also be remarked that the hero is able to act, and to act for good. Most important of all, the narrative of his experience suggests that life has both a significant pattern and an end. (Walter Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds, *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* [Houghton Mifflin, 1968], xxiii.)

We can break this definition down into the following constituent parts:

1. It is best to reserve the title *hero* for the protagonist (central character) in a story. Exemplary secondary characters who fit the definition of hero can appropriately be

designated as *heroic* but not as the hero of the story.

2. A literary hero is *representative*, either of a specific group or the whole human race. In the character of the hero we can see our own experiences, conflicts, struggles, and triumphs. Even if a hero enacts experiences that are beyond us personally, we have *observed* such feats and in that sense they belong to our sphere of experience.

3. Beyond embodying the *experiences* of a culture or group, a literary hero also expresses the *values* of that group. Hero stories codify and reinforce what an individual or group believes to be good and strives to practice and avoid.

4. A hero is thus an *exemplary* character who serves as an example to be imitated. We ourselves want to be like a hero.

5. A hero story is a statement about what constitutes *heroism of character*, and additionally it gives us a version of what constitutions *heroic action*.

6. A hero is a *largely* idealized character, but only rarely a *wholly* idealized character. There are only a handful of completely idealized heroes and heroines in the Bible. It is part of the realism of literature and its truthfulness to life that literary heroes display minor failings of character and conduct. But to rank as a hero, a character must be largely exemplary.

7. A hero captures people's imaginations. One function of heroes is to serve as an inspiration and provide a model toward which people aspire.

All of these considerations are useful to hold in our mind as we read a hero story and summarize our final impressions at the end.

While real life provides *the materials* from which to create a literary hero, it does not provide heroes. A hero like Daniel or Esther is always the product of selectivity and shaping by the storyteller. An author *distills* the heroic qualities and actions from a larger available repository of data.

Applying the Definition

The foregoing traits of a hero story can be turned to analytic use by asking and answering a series of questions. The most customary place to formally ask and answer these questions comes after we have finished reading a hero story and wish to codify our understanding of it. We can think of this as a "putting it all together" exercise as we move from the story to its meaning at the end of our reading or teaching session. But we can also make *some* use of these questions as we read and analyze the unfolding story along the way.

1. What experiences, conflicts, struggles, and triumphs does the hero enact that are representative of people generally?

2. What exemplary character traits and conduct does the hero exhibit and prompt us to imitate? Based on what we see in the hero, how should we live? What constitutes

virtuous conduct?

3. What values do the hero's character and conduct affirm and offer for our approval?
4. What negative traits and conduct (if any) does the hero embody? These fit into the overall strategy of a hero story by giving us negative examples to avoid and by that very strategy show us how to live and what to value.
5. What traits of the hero capture the popular imagination, thereby enabling the hero to be a model and inspiration?
6. By way of summary, according to this hero story, what constitutes heroic character and action for us?

Analyzing Hero Stories in the Bible

Applying the considerations of a hero story is particularly important as we reach closure when reading or teaching a Bible story. That is where it pays particular dividends to systematically ask and answer the questions listed above. An example is the following application to the story of Ruth.

1. Knowing that a hero enacts common human *experiences*, in what spheres of life do we see Ruth encountering ordinary life as we, too, know it? Family living, romantic love and marriage, death, loss, and adapting to massive changes in one's personal life and situation. Ruth is representative of the common person.
2. Knowing that a hero also enacts the *struggles* that are the common lot, how can we see these occur in the life of Ruth? Ruth encounters the death of a spouse (widowhood), the need to renounce a pagan past and choose to follow the true God, the deprivation that accompanies leaving one's homeland for a foreign culture, the difficulty of being an immigrant and starting life anew, finding a spouse, and what is commonly called the struggle for survival (the need to find the means to sustain physical life).
3. If we accept Ruth as our model to emulate, what *virtues* should control our conduct? Loyalty in family relations, courage, willingness to take a risk, humility, hard work, affection to a spouse, and a model of a woman finding fulfillment in her domestic role.
4. What *values* are affirmed in Ruth's experience and lifestyle? Family, home, marriage, children, the commonplace or ordinary, nature, adherence to social norms, living in community, and trusting in God.
5. How does Ruth *capture our imagination* and inspire us? By her strength of character, her loyalty to her mother-in-law, her industriousness, her resilience in not being destroyed by the calamities of life, her willingness to abandon her past and embrace a new life, her taking a risk by appealing to Boaz to marry her, her commitment to domestic values (in this role of motherhood even becoming a link in the messianic

> line), and choosing to trust in the God of the Bible. Heroes are what we loosely call "bigger than life figures;" all that we know about Ruth is magnified in our imagination, even though in principle everything in her life is part of the common human lot.

The italicized words in the list highlight the essential ingredients of a hero and the accompanying story of that hero: universal human experience, the struggles of common humanity, virtues that are offered for approval, values that are affirmed, and inspiration to us as readers.

Learning by Doing Exercise

To put the foregoing into practice, choose either the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) or the story of Hannah as narrated in 1 Samuel 1. David is a hero of extraordinary ability and accomplishment, while Hannah is a heroine of the common person. Both stories yield their beauty and meaning if we apply the methods of analysis recommended in this article.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical narrative can be found in *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987.

Lesson 8
Fact and Fiction about the Poetry of the Bible

The purpose of this lesson is to refute commonly held misconceptions about the poetry of the Bible, and in place of these fallacies to assert ten truths on the subject. Unfortunately, the poetic parts of the Bible lie neglected in many Christian circles, for very flimsy reasons. A voice of truth needs to be spoken into the abyss.

Why Some People Ignore the Poetry of the Bible

This unit of the lesson we will consider why many people disparage and ignore the poetry of the Bible. These objections will be stated objectively, as people express them. A rebuttal of these arguments will come in the next section of this lesson. The "reasons" listed below should be understood as expressing *reasons people give for not reading the poetry of the Bible, and/or pressuring Sunday school teachers not to teach it*. As the next unit of this chapter will show, the assertions made below should be received as untrue.

Reason #1: poetry is too difficult to understand.

Even though not all biblical poetry is equally difficult, most of it requires more analytic skill than ordinary people possess (says the person who does not value poetry highly). Here is a specimen of the difficulty:

> My soul is in the midst of lions;
> I like down amid fiery beasts—
> the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
> whose tongues are sharp swords (Ps. 57:4).

No one's soul is in the midst of lions, and there is no such thing as fiery beasts. Similarly, no one's teeth are spears and arrows, nor are their tongues sharp swords. Ordinary people simply do not operate on this wave length, according to the detractors of biblical poetry.

Reason #2: poetry is optional in a person's life, not a necessity for everyone.

Given the difficulty of poetry as a form of communication, some people regard it as optional reading and a matter of personal preference. People who love poetry and have an aptitude for it are free to choose it. Those who do not have the aptitude for it should feel no obligation to burden themselves with it, and they should not feel guilty about leaving poetry for people who relish it.

Alternatively, even if people feel obligated to have *some* contact with biblical poetry, they can be content to receive a vague feeling of elevation or peace from reading a psalm. They need not go to the effort of understanding a psalm in detail.

Reason #3: poetry is an unnatural form of discourse and therefore does not appeal to ordinary people.

Prose is the normal form of communication, while poetry is an unnatural form. Just consider the following specimen:

> I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
> my soul shall exult in my God,
> for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
> he has covered me with the robe of righteousness (Is. 61:10).

In ordinary discourse we do not say everything twice the way the poet does here. In real life we do not wear garments of salvation or a robe of righteousness. Any form of writing that deviates this far from the ordinary way of expressing ourselves is an unnatural form of writing.

Reason #4: even though people in Bible times and through the centuries could handle biblical poetry, it is beyond people today.

There is a chronological factor that discourages us from mastering biblical poetry. People today simply do not understand poetry and should not be expected to do something they find difficult. Even the practices of dynamic equivalent Bible translations acknowledge that people today should be exempt from interpreting the poetry of the Bible.

Reason #5: poetry is not worth the effort that it takes to master it.

In view of all that has been said above, poetry is more of a liability than an asset. There is plenty of other material in the Bible to keep us occupied and edified.

Examining the Claims

The claims asserted above are widely stated in Christian circles. They should not be allowed to go unchallenged. Below is an item-by-item weighing of the claims of people who wish to ignore the third of the Bible that comes to us as poetry.

Consideration #1: exactly how difficult is biblical poetry?

All literary genres (such as stories or epistles) provide us with a continuum in regard to difficulty. Stories can be simple or complicated. A passage in an epistle might be easy to read, but it is just as often hard to piece together and understand.

We can see the same principle with poetry. The passages quoted above are on the more difficult half of the continuum, with their references to teeth like arrows and a robe of righteousness. But a passage like the following is on the easier half of the poetic continuum:

The Lord is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him (Nahum 1:7).

We recognize this as poetry rather than prose, and as partly figurative instead of literal, but it is no more taxing on us than normal discourse.

In regard to the alleged difficulty of poetry, therefore, we need to be careful not to concede too much. Some poetry is decidedly difficult, but almost always a passage of difficult poetry will be immediately balanced by easier material. We also need to be forthright about the fact that the Bible is not an easy book to read but a difficult one. Surely it is a common experience that when we read a passage for daily devotions, there is much that challenges us and quite a lot that we find perplexing.

Biblical poetry is within the reach of any dedicated reader who makes a good faith effort to understand it. The more we know about how poetry works, the easier we will find it to read biblical poetry with understanding and enjoyment.

Consideration #2: why biblical poetry is not optional but required.

If we ask how we know that God intends for us to understand and enjoy poetry, the answer is that approximately a third of the Bible is poetic in form. Poetry is literally everywhere in the Bible. For starters, we can think of whole books that are wholly or largely poetic in format: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Job. Additionally, vast parts of most of the Old Testament prophetic books are poetic. Then we need to add that the books of Ecclesiastes and Revelation, though mainly printed as prose, are actually poetic in technique.

Those are the *obvious* places where we find poetry in the Bible. But imagery and figurative language abound in parts of the Bible that we do not regard as poetry. The discourses and conversations of Jesus are an example: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12 and 9:5); "you are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). Poetic language is also interspersed throughout the New Testament epistles: "at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8).

The conclusion is obvious: so much of the Bible consists of poetry that it is unthinkable to regard biblical poetry as optional in our reading diet and our menu of passages for Bible teaching. It is instructive to ponder Paul's claim that Christians are God's poem: "For we are his workmanship [Greek *poeima*, from which we get our word *poem*], created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10).

Consideration #3: exactly how unnatural is poetry?

Is poetry an unnatural form of discourse? The answer is "yes and no." We can begin with how poetry is more natural than we may think. Everyone uses figurative language during the course of a typical day. We speak of road hogs, game changers, cliff hangers, and nightmare tests, even though we know that none of these is literally true. No one has ever literally juggled a schedule or killed time, but we keep speaking in these terms anyway. We do so because it seems like a natural way to name the experiences that are in view.

Additionally, it is an interesting fact of literary history that in most ancient cultures, poetry preceded prose as an accomplished form of expression. How could that be if prose is the natural form of expression and poetry an unnatural form? We wrongly think that prose is a natural medium; it is actually a sophisticated form of expression. In everyday situations we do not speak prose (complete sentences with a subject and predicate). We speak an associative discourse comprised of single words and phrases, disjointed and incomplete sentence fragments, and arrangement by stream of consciousness instead of formal syntax (sentence structure). Prose is everyday discourse on its best behavior.

But in other ways it is true that poetry is an unnatural or extraordinary form of speaking—something out of the routine and not the way people usually express themselves. So much the better. Poetry has a quality that J. R. R. Tolkien ascribed to fantasy and fairy tales, namely, "arresting strangeness." Poetry can overcome the cliché effect of ordinary discourse. It startles us with its unusualness and forces us to analyze a statement when ordinary ways of stating the same content are overly familiar. A poem is like a still life painting of a bowl of fruit: it compels our attention when the same scene in real life makes little or no impact on us.

Consideration #4: poetry is not more difficult today than at other times in history.

There is no chronologically-based handicap for modern readers when it comes to poetry. Even contemporary songs employ the resources of poetry. Furthermore, our whole cultural situation is well known to be image oriented, and the primary element of poetry is imagery (words naming concrete objects or actions). Additionally, an age of texting has made the brief mode of discourse a common feature of everyday life, and a defining trait of poetry is that it is a more concentrated form of discourse than prose and narrative.

Consideration #5: biblical poetry is definitely worth the effort of mastering it.

There is a religious side to this claim and a literary side. The religious side is that God entrusted a third of the Bible—his revelation of himself and his ways—to poetry. No one wishes to carry a Bible with a third of its pages removed. We would not even want the Psalms to be missing.

Quite apart from this religious argument, poetry offers literary rewards that are unique to it. Of course the same is true of other literary genres. No other form of writing is an adequate substitute for poetry. Poetry combines truth and beauty in a higher concentration than other genres.

Ten Things You Should Know about Poetry

1. God expects you to understand and enjoy poetry.

   This is not the controversial claim that it may seem to be. We know that God expects us to understand and enjoy poetry because approximately a third of the Bible is poetic in form. For starters, we have poetic books like the Psalms and Song of Solomon. Then we have the prophetic books, where vast portions are expressed in poetic form. Beyond that is the book of Revelation, which is enshrined chiefly in

images and symbols. And beyond that, the epistles are saturated with images and metaphors.

2. Jesus is one of the world's most famous poets.

   Because Jesus was not a proclaimed poet, we do not think of him as one, but this is an oversight. Jesus' discourses rely heavily on a poetic idiom. Additionally, Jesus' sayings are highly aphoristic, and verbal beauty is a leading element of poetry. So if we begin with the fact that Jesus' discourses and sayings are among the most famous in the world, and then add our awareness that these utterances are heavily poetic in form, it is appropriate to think of Jesus as a famous poet.

3. Poetry requires a "slow read."

   The preceding two declarations have been designed to gain an initial sympathetic hearing for the importance of poetry in a Christian's life, and more will follow, but all of this commendation will be fruitless for those who have never acquired the ability to read poetry. The most important rule for reading poetry is simple: poetry requires us to read slowly and meditatively. This is not to deny that other techniques of reading need to be added to a reader's toolbox of reading skills for poetry, but anyone can make sense of poetry by pondering a poem and living with it for ten or fifteen minutes instead of subjecting it to the speed reading that makes up our daily lives.

4. Everyone is a poet some of the time.

   This, too, is not a revolutionary claim but rather one that is easily proven. We all speak unconscious poetry during the course of a day. We speak metaphorically of the sun rising even though we know that it does not literally rise. When someone makes a conciliatory offer, we refer to it as holding out an olive branch, knowing that no olive branch is within sight. Why do we persist in speaking metaphorically? Because at an unconscious level we sense that poetic speech conveys truth effectively, and often more effectively than literal prose.

5. Poetry is not an unnatural form of discourse.

   Poetry is not our *normal* way of speaking and writing, but it is important to maintain that it is not an *unnatural* manner of discourse. In the history of literature, poetry preceded prose as an accomplished form of writing in most cultures. Literary scholar Northrop Frye correctly asked, "How could this happen if prose were really the language of ordinary speech?" Furthermore, as Owen Barfield particularly championed, most of the words in our dictionaries started out as concrete images and metaphors. Again, this would not be the case if poetry were inherently unnatural as a way of speaking.

6. Poets speak a language all their own.

   The import of the foregoing five assertions is to make poetry seem accessible and familiar. That is an entirely accurate picture of poetry. It is accessible when we approach it in the right way. However, nothing is gained by denying the obvious fact that poetry differs from everyday prose. Poets speak in a poetic idiom. That idiom consists primarily of images and figures of speech. Poets prefer the figurative to the literal as a way of expressing the truth about life. As a result, poetry possesses the quality of arresting strangeness.

7. Poetry is a form of logic.

   One thing that poetry shares with the language of everyday discourse is that it is a form of logic. Logic depends on making accurate connections between two things. Modern poet Stephen Spender wrote a landmark essay entitled "The Making of a Poem," and in it he claimed that "the terrifying challenge" facing a poet is, "Can I think out the logic of images?" In the logic of poetry, the images in a poem need to be the right ones for embodying the experiences portrayed. The comparisons that make up so much of the poetic idiom need to be accurate comparisons. If grief over the death of a loved one is "the hour of lead," we need to be able to see the accuracy of the connection. If we place poetry into the category of logic, it seems more like familiar forms of discourse than it otherwise does.

8. Poets think in images and figures of speech.

   Poetry is a way of thinking and feeling before it is a form of speech or writing. Poets write in a poetic idiom because that is how they experience life and record it. We need to credit poets with possessing a skill and a way of seeing the world that most people lack.

9. Poetry is concentrated.

   One of the things that a poem has going for it is that it is compressed. As noted above, that does not mean that we should read a poem as quickly as possible and move on to our next activity. Instead, the compression of poetry is what requires us to read it slowly. When we do, we will be amazed at how much a poem expresses in a compact space. C. S. Lewis spoke of the line by line deliciousness that poetry possesses. It offers so much more per line than prose does. This is part of its appeal, but only if we accept the premise of slow and contemplative reading.

10. Poetry is highly artistic.

    Poets themselves claim beauty as their province. Robert Frost called a poem "a performance in words"—a performance comparable to that of an athlete or musician, to be admired as a display of skill. Victorian devotional poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said that the artistic form of a poem exists "for its own sake and interest

even over and above its interest of meaning." The corollary is that as readers we need to value the artistic beauty of poetry. As an obvious example, all biblical poetry is written in the form of parallelism in which two or more lines express similar content and grammatical form but difference words and images. This is a display of artistry, and its goal is to create beauty for our enjoyment.

Summary

Nothing is gained by denying that biblical poetry is a subject of controversy. Everything is to be lost if we capitulate to the detractors. Their unwillingness to master the poetry of the Bible is an expression of laziness. God is not honored, and people are not edified, by lazy Bible readers.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical poetry can be found in *Sweeter Than Honey, Richer Than Gold: A Guided Story of Biblical Poetry* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 9
Biblical Poetry: The Primacy of the Image

The subject of poetry in the Bible falls naturally into three segments. *Poetry* is a type of discourse or form of verbal expression. A *poem* is a composition constructed out of poetry. But the poetic way of speaking permeates nearly the entire Bible, so something also needs to be said about this part of the equation, which we can call *poetry in all of Scripture*.

This lesson deals with the first of these. Poets speak a language all their own. It is sometimes called the poetic idiom—the special way of writing and speaking that constitutes poetry. *Poems* are compositions made out of poetry. By way of analogy, poetry is like the wood out of which a table is fashioned; a poem is like the table in being something *made out of* the material.

A "Language" of Images

The basic rule of poetry is that its primary ingredient is the image, broadly defined. An image is any word that names a concrete object or action. The words *garden, windmill, running*, and *drinking* are examples of images. The composite of images in a poem, or a motif of related images like shepherd imagery in Psalm 23, goes by the name of *imagery*. By a loose application of terms, items in a poem that are strictly speaking metaphors or similes or personifications can be called images. It is of course preferable to use the precise terms, but most figures of speech function partly like images. The most important thing is that we interpret images and figures of speech fully and correctly, as explained in this lesson.

A good way to show the primacy of the image in poetry is to draw up side-by-side lists of the things that make up the content of the Psalms. What makes up the book of Psalms? What subject matter do we encounter as we read? One list looks something like this:

- the attributes of God
- goodness
- evil
- providence
- divine judgment
- repentance
- the godly life
- trust
- salvation

The most obvious characteristics of the list are (a) that the words name abstractions and (b) the list is

obviously religious in nature, naming spiritual and moral realities.

The following list is equally accurate as representative specimens of what we encounter as we read the Psalms. The list includes words like the following:

- honey (Psalm 19:10)
- butter (Psalm 55:21)
- broken arm (Psalm 37:17)
- desert owl (Psalm 102:6)
- hail (Psalm 148:8)
- marketplace (Psalm 55:11)

With the two lists before us, we need to draw some conclusions. The first list is abstract, the second one concrete. The first list strikes us as religious in association, while the second one is secular, devoid of obvious religious association.

As we continue to ponder the lists, two questions become important. First, which of the two is closer to the actual language that the poets use? The answer is that the second list captures the prevailing vocabulary of the Psalms. Secondly, would we, however, say that the Psalms are *about* the items named in the second list? No, the Psalms are not directly about butter and hail. They are about the subjects named in the first list. One principle that emerges from this is that poetry usually communicates by a process of *indirection*. In the words of American poet Robert Frost, poets say one thing and mean another. They say that God is a shepherd, but they *mean* that God provides and protects and leads his followers the way a shepherd does for his sheep.

Although biblical poets usually speak a language of images, they do not do so exclusively. They sometimes speak a language of direct statement: "The Lord is good to all, / and his mercy is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:9). Alternatively, some literary scholars allow a category called conceptual images—words that name abstract qualities instead of concrete objects.

To sum up, the moment we hear a passage of poetry read, or when we read it silently to ourselves, we recognize that it does not sound or read like everyday prose. One reason for this is the verse form in which the content is packaged, and the other is the nature of the language. Above all, the language is imagistic. The primacy of the image is the principle involved.

The Need to Experience Poetic Images in Our Imagination

We might think that "straight images" in poetry, as distinct from figurative language like metaphor and simile, do not require interpretation, but that is untrue. Even images like rock and thunder and water require interpretation.

The first activity required of us is to experience the image as vividly and concretely as possible. Poets want us to see and taste and touch and hear the things they place into their poems by way of verbal

images. The appeal of poetry is first to our imagination—our image-making and image-perceiving faculty. If biblical poets wanted us to process an abstraction, they would give us an abstraction. If they speak a language of images, they do so because they want us to picture and experience the images. This is an observational and descriptive level of activity. When we turn from observation to interpretation, three categories of responsibility emerge.

Determining the Connotations of Images

Images possess connotations in addition to their denotative meanings. The denotative meaning of a word or image is its dictionary definition. That meaning is objective, not affected by feelings or associations. A denotative definition names in neutral fashion the mode of existence of something.

For example, the image of still waters in Psalm 23:2 conveys the objective meaning of a stream or pool that is calm or stationary, as distinct from a fast-flowing stream or a lake that is in commotion because wind is stirring it up. But the connotations of still water are that it is beautiful, calming to the emotions, restful, peaceful, and captivating, inviting us to keep looking at it. An important part of interpreting poetic images is to determine their connotations or overtones of meaning.

Part of this is to place a given image into the context where it appears, realizing that its connotations depend partly on that context. As an extension of that, although we need to avoid overreading, or attributing too much connotative weight to an image, at the very least we need to ascertain whether a given image has positive or negative connotations in the passage where it appears. Usually additional connotations or associations are also present.

Exploring the Emotions that an Image Awakens

Secondly, images are affective in nature, meaning that they evoke feelings from us and awaken them within us. This can be thought of as a specific category of the connotations discussed in the preceding unit.

An essential part of interpreting poetic images is to name the feelings that an image evokes. After all, a large amount of literary commentary consists of bringing something to awareness by naming it. All literary commentary aims to enhance our experience of a text. Being aware of the feelings that are elicited from us contributes to that goal.

What feelings are awakened within us when we read that God "prepares rain for the earth" and "makes grass grow on the hills" (Psalm 147:8)? Feelings of awe, being provided for, gratitude, and relief that drought has been averted. We should not simply let the images breeze past us; we should take time to be introspective and name the feelings that arise within us.

We can profitably pause on the idea of being introspective. Poetry requires a "slow read" in which we meditate on what we read. Part of meditation is to look within ourselves and take stock of our responses. The best readers of poetry are those who can recognize and share what is happening within

their psyche and emotional being. A literary critic has aptly stated that a poet "expresses what he knows by affecting the reader; the reader knows what is expressed by being receptive to effects" (David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* [Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966], 65). With poetry, much of this effect is emotional.

The Logic of Images

In addition to determining the connotations/associations of a poetic image and the feelings that it awakens, we need to explore the logic of the image. While this becomes even more important with metaphors and similes that compare one thing to another, it also applies to the "straight image."

Logic means making an accurate connection between two things. Synonyms include suitability, fittingness, and correlation. When we analyze the logic of a straight image (not involving analogy), we need to determine what makes this particular image appropriate for the specific subject matter of the moment. Why did the poet choose this image for this subject? How do the two correlate with each other?

Consider a brief example: the first extended passage in the book of Ecclesiastes (1:4-13) is a poem on the subject of the endlessly repeated cycles of life. The specific slant that the poet takes is the lack of progress as the cycles of life repeat themselves. Given the demands of poetic logic, the poet needs to find images that capture this quality of repetition that ends where it began. Here is one of the images in the poem: "The sun rises, and the sun goes down, / and hastens to the place where it rises." What is the logic of the image? Why did the poet choose it? Because the daily circuit of the sun embodies the principle of endless repetition.

The Primacy of the Image

Other lessons in this course will explore further ingredients that make up the poetic idiom (the language poets use). But these other figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, and symbol, are images first of all. They build upon the foundational image by adding to it, but even with metaphors, similes, and symbols, we need to engage in the process of analysis outlined above. That is why in the "learning by doing exercise" that follows, you should ignore the fact that some of the images are more than a "straight image." All that has been said in this article needs to be applied to the passage assigned for analysis.

Learning by Doing Exercise

> The four tasks required of us when interacting with a poetic image are (1) experiencing the image as accurately and vividly as possible, (2) determining the connotations and associations of the image, (3) naming the feelings that are awakened by the images, and (4) exploring the logic of the image. Below is a specimen (Amos 6:4, 6) that will allow you to perform these tasks. The subject is the lifestyle of the wealthy class in the society of Amos.

Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory
    and stretch themselves out on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock
    and calves from the midst of the stall…,
who drink wine in bowls
    and anoint themselves with the finest oils.

The images fall into the categories of body posture, furniture, wine, and cosmetics.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical poetry can be found in *Sweeter Than Honey, Richer Than Gold: A Guided Story of Biblical Poetry* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).

Lesson 10
Biblical Poetry: Metaphor, Simile, Symbol

This lesson deals with three poetic elements that draw upon the principle of comparison or analogy. We will speak of the two halves of the comparison as level A and level B. Every poetic comparison begins at level A. Level A is a poetic image. We need to experience and interpret this poetic image before turning to the comparison that the poet draws between that image and the actual subject of the passage.

Defining Terms

A metaphor is an implied comparison between two things. It avoids the formula *like* or *as* and is therefore a bolder statement than simile. The poet's prayer to God to "keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3) is a metaphor. A simile uses the explicit formula *like* or *as*: "your children will be like olive shoots around your table" (Psalm 128:3).

A symbol is an image that has a literal meaning and one or more other meanings in addition to this literal meaning. Double meaning is at the heart of a symbol. When we read that "light shines in the darkness for the upright" (Psalm 112:4), we first need to picture physical light and analyze its properties. Then we reflect on what it means that light shines for the upright, since the literal or usual meaning of lighting shining on a person cannot be what is on the poet's mind. So we start to ponder what light symbolizes or stands for in this context. It symbolizes the blessing of God on the righteous.

Handbooks of literary terms do not ordinarily link symbol with metaphor and simile, but it is helpful to do so. All three first give us level A (an image) and then draw a connection to level B. In all three instances, comparison or analogy is at work.

Underlying Principles

We will deal with metaphors, similes, and symbols better if we understand the principles that govern them. Seven principles are at work.

Correspondence

These three figures of speech draw a connection between two things, and in order to draw that connection, the poet and the reader need to see a correspondence. The Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed (and posterity has agreed) that "the greatest thing by far" in composing poetry is the gift for metaphor, and then he noted that "to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances."

What is the effect when a poet draws our attention to a correspondence between two things? It is actually ingenious: the poet uses one area of human experience to illuminate or shed light on another

area. We see important things about God's provision for his followers if we begin by observing how a shepherd cares for his sheep during a typical day. The poet's analogies are a way of seeing something more clearly, and there can be no doubt that poets have a particular knack for doing it. Poets speak this way in their poems because they view reality that way. At least during the act of composition, they think in images and comparisons.

Bifocal statements

Metaphor, simile, and symbol are bifocal statements. They require us to look at two things—the actual subject, and the thing to which that subject is compared. In Psalm 91:1, the experience of living in close relation to God is compared to dwelling in a shelter and abiding under a shadow. Or we could reverse that statement. As we read Psalm 91:1, we first encounter the things to which living close to God are compared—living in a house and being protected from excess heat by a tree or something else that provides a shadow or shade. Then we move to the actual subject of the verse.

In either case, to think of this as a bifocal statement is very useful. We need to be aware of looking at two things as we assimilate a metaphor, simile, or symbol.

The principle of equation

Through the ages, literary scholars have struggled to find helpful terms by which to name the two halves of poetic comparisons. Our best procedure is simply to speak of level A and level B. Together these can be viewed as an equation between two things that are said to be equal (or the same). Level A is a poetic image, and in itself it possesses a literal identity. At level A, a shepherd is a shepherd. Level B is figurative rather than literal. Despite this discrepancy between literal and figurative, the two are treated as two halves of an equation. We can well picture an equal sign [=] between them.

Carrying over of meaning

Our essential task when interpreting these three figures of speech will be clarified if we know the etymology of the word *metaphor*. This English word is based on two Greek words—*meta* and *pherein*. The first of these means "over," and the second means "to carry." The task of interpreting a poetic analogy is to *carry over* the meanings of level A to level B.

Consider the simple metaphor "the tongue is a fire" (James 3:6). What are the literal, physical properties of fire? That is where interpretation of a metaphor needs to begin, and we should note in passing that we don't need a seminary education to perform it. Poetry is the speech of the common person. Fire is destructive. It is painful in its effects. Once it gets started, it quickly gets out of control. It spreads.

Having determined the qualities that characterizes fire (level A), we need to *carry over* those meanings to the actual subject of the passage, namely, human speech. As the metaphor of speech as fire shows, it is a rare metaphor, simile, or symbol that has only one intended meaning. Poetry is a concentrated form of expression in which the poet often says multiple things at the same time.

A form of logic

Modern poet Stephen Spender wrote an essay titled "The Making of a Poem" in which he claimed that "the terrifying challenge" facing a poet is, "Can I think out the logic of images?" Logic means making an accurate connection between two things. The accuracy of a metaphor, simile, or symbol can be tested by ordinary criteria of logic. If speech is like fire, we can prove that assertion through observation and analysis. If the challenge facing the poet is to think out the logic of images, the same is true for readers.

Indirection

The best way to get a handle on this concept is to consider a statement made by American poet Robert Frost. Frost said that metaphor (and by extension simile and symbol) is a way of "saying one thing and meaning another." Poets compare something in life to something else that it is literally not. They *say* that the name of the Lord is a strong tower" (Proverbs 18:10), but they *mean* that God is a strong protector with whom we can feel safe.

This means that poetry is often fictional and fantastic in nature. It asserts things that are not literally true.

An invitation to discover meaning

It will be obvious by now that metaphor, simile, and symbol are always an invitation from the poet to the reader to discover the meaning of a statement. There is no way to soften that statement. Poets simply put a comparison in front of us. They do not tell us what to do with it. It is up to us to discover the meaning, that is, determine how A is like B. Nothing is gained by complaining about this or claiming that the task is beyond us. Instead we need to accept the invitation and challenge. Once we commit ourselves to the task, we will find it invigorating to discover the meanings of poetic analogies and comparisons.

Most study Bibles and commentaries are guilty of a great abdication in this regard. They bypass the process of allowing us to experience level A of a poetic image and are quick to impose their preferred interpretation on it. Consider a metaphor that occurs more than half a dozen times in the Psalms, namely, God's raising up a horn (that is, the horn of an animal) for his people. Here is a sampling of commentary from study Bibles and commentaries: "the term 'horn' scarcely needs comment, with its evident implications of strength;" "'horn' signifies might and power;" "figurative for granting victory or bestowing prosperity;" "'horn' here symbolizes strong one, that is, king."

These comments tell us nothing about the horn (level A), even though the first task in interpreting a metaphor is to experience the literal image as vividly as possible. Additionally, by hand delivering the preferred interpretation, we are left feeling that only the experts can perform the task of interpretation. And by limiting the carry-over to just one meaning, the interpretations mislead us and deprive us of the full meaning of the metaphor.

We need to stop allowing supposed experts remove our opportunity to discover the meanings of poetic

analogies. The literary approach is the common reader's friend.

Poets use analogies because it is their preferred mode of communication. When they compare God's acts on behalf of his people to raising up a horn, they expect the properties of a horn to register with us. If they wanted to say "God is strong and powerful," they would have said it. We need to take biblical poetry seriously, and on the ordinary poetic terms.

An Illustration

Dealing with metaphors, similes, and symbols does not require specialized skills. Instead it requires a commitment to spend enough time with a passage of poetry. If we take time to perform the tasks that this lesson has outlined, we can do what needs to be done with biblical poetry. We need to start with actual life, because that is where poets start. They reach into the stuff of daily life for their images. Then they see connections between those images and the subjects on which they write. Then they place their comparisons before us and invite us to discover the meanings.

Twenty times in the Old Testament the Promised Land toward which the fledgling nation of Israel was headed is called a land that "flows with milk and honey" (e.g., Numbers 13:27). This can be called either a metaphor or symbol. We need to begin with the image itself. Milk was staple in the ancient world (where bread was viewed similarly). Milk represented what was necessary to sustain life. Honey was valued for its sweetness and ranked as a luxury.

Building on these literal qualities of milk and honey, we can begin to see what they represent or symbolize, namely, the utilitarian side of life and the nonutilitarian side (that which is more than necessary). A principle of completeness enters the picture, with both the necessary and merely pleasurable covered. As we continue to ponder these two images and their symbolic meanings, we experience them as an image of the good life, with an accompanying feeling of contentment. But the Promised Land did not simply *possess* these two foods with their symbolic meanings; it *flowed* with them, symbolizing that they were present in abundance, or full measure.

Learning by Doing Exercise

To put the material covered in this lesson into practice, you don't need an extensive body of material. What you need instead is a small quantity of poetry on which you spend the necessary amount of time to unpack all of the meanings. You don't need a lot poetry in order to test your skills; you need a relative abundance of time. The passages printed below will meet your needs. Before analyzing them, give the foregoing lesson a quick review.

Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,
from the throng of evildoers,
Who whet their tongues like swords,
Who aim bitter words like arrows (Psalm 64:2-3).

[The wicked] eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
Which shines brighter and brighter until full day (Proverbs 4:17-18).

Like a bird that strays from its nest
is a man who strays from his home (Proverbs 27:8).

Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head" (Ecclesiastes 9:8).
[What do white garments and oil on one's head symbolize?]

Lesson 11
Biblical Poetry: Additional Figures of Speech

This lesson, along with the previous two, is concerned with *poetry* as a form of discourse. The next lessons will deal with *poems*—compositions made out of poetry. The word *additional* in the title of this lesson signals that it will cover the remaining figures of speech that make up the poetic idiom (the language poets use) in addition to the ones covered in the preceding two lessons. The order in which these further figures of speech appear in this lesson is arbitrary.

The Preference of Poets for the Nonliteral

An incipient fictional element is already evident in metaphor, simile, and symbol. We can see this in the way in which these figures of speech compare a subject to something that it is literally *not*. The poet calls God his rock, but at a literal level that is a fiction. To symbolize the abundance that awaited the Israelites in the Promised Land, Old Testament authors said that it flowed with milk and honey, which was literally untrue.

This mild form of the fantastic in metaphor, simile, and symbol is intensified with the figures of speech covered in this lesson. With this new round of poetic devices, we can speak of the poets' preference for the fictional and the fantastic. With these figures of speech, the poets are playing a verbal game of make-believe. This does not mean that the actual subject matter about which they write in this imaginative mode does not exist or is anything less than real. The question rather is *how* the poets write about these realities. The answer is that they write about them using the resources of fantasy. The world has coined the phrase *poetic license* to signal this trait of poetry.

A further thing that needs to be said is that these figures of speech appear throughout the Bible, not simply in the poetic parts. All of these figurative devices show up in the epistles and narrative parts of the Bible. They appear in abundance in the discourses of Jesus and book of Revelation. Whenever we come upon one of the items discussed in this article, we need to apply the rules of interpretation that I will delineate.

The commentary on the respective figures of speech in the following discussion will cover three aspects of them: [1] a definition of each figure of speech; [2] an explanation of what is required of a reader when dealing with each figure of speech; [3] a bit of analysis of the effect of each figure of speech, or what poets are attempting to achieve when they use these figures of speech.

Paradox

Paradox is an apparent contradiction that upon analysis can be seen to express truth. The important factor is that the contradiction is only *apparent*. With a paradox, the apparent contradiction can be

resolved. This is in contrast to oxymoron, which is a genuine contradiction that cannot be resolved. Here are three examples of paradox, accompanied by analysis that resolves the contradiction:

- "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it" (Luke 17:33). Jesus is here speaking about spiritual reality. To lose one's life is to relinquish human control of it and to surrender it to God; to "keep" one's life is to attain eternal life in Jesus. In the other half of the equation, to preserve one's life by not surrendering it to God will result in spiritual death and eternal damnation, which is the meaning of "losing,"
- "The mercy of the wicked is cruel" (Proverbs 12:10b). How can mercy be cruel? A paradox puts the burden on the reader to figure out how a paradox expresses truth. Two possibilities exist for this seeming impossibility: (1) even the best deeds of an evil person result in harm for the people and animals under their control; (2) the seemingly good or merciful deeds of an evil person are actually evil and cruel sooner or later.
- "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 1210). Paul here asserts that when he is physically weak, he is spiritually strong because he relies on God more intimately when he is physically weak.

It is obvious from these examples and their analysis that the task of a reader is first to identify the literal meaning of the paradoxical statement. What does it mean to preserve life and to lose it? What are mercy and cruelty in the proverb quoted above? Having identified the contradiction in this way, we need to resolve the apparent contradiction (as seen in the analysis above). Paradox is a form of riddle: it does not make immediate sense and therefore teases us into figuring out what it means.

Why do authors and speakers use paradox? There is certainly a risk that a reader or hearer will not "get" it. The advantage of paradox is twofold: (1) it jolts us and grabs our attention and thereby overcomes the complacency that we attach to statements that express a truth that is overly familiar and therefore lifeless; (2) it forces a reader or listener to become active in the process of communication that is going on. Paradox overcomes the cliché effect of overly familiar statements, even when they are true.

Metonymy

This is no doubt an awkward word, but it is a figure of speech used regularly in the Bible, so we need to master it. Metonymy consists of naming something by something else with which it is closely associated. In Paul's explanation of the sacrament of communion, he uses the formulation that we "drink the cup" of wine or juice (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not literally drink the cup but the liquid that is in the cup. It is no wonder that it has become customary to speak of metonymy as "substitute naming."

What does metonymy require of us as readers? We need to recognize or identify it for what it is, and then ponder its meaning. Again we can see that (a) poetry requires that we be active rather than passive as readers, and (b) that poets often speak nonliterally. Why would someone use substitute naming? It is attention getting and memorable. It also achieves the literary criterion of being concrete and vivid. If the prophet Nathan predicted to David that "the sword shall never depart from your

house" (2 Samuel 12:10), the concretion *sword* packs a punch that the abstraction *violence* does not.

Synecdoche

This word makes *metonymy* seem easy! Synecdoche uses part of something to signify the whole thing. For example, when we pray that God will "give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), we are praying that God will provide everything that we need to sustain our physical life. When we read regarding the wicked person that "his mouth is filled with . . . oppression" (Psalm 10:7), we understand that it is the whole person, and not a specific body part, that oppresses his victims.

As with every figure of speech, we need to begin by recognizing and identifying it as the figure of speech that it is. Simply to read the words and not analyze the exact nature of what the author has declared is to be unthinking. We need to be thoughtful readers of the Bible. Then we need to explore the logic that is present. Why did the author choose the particular "part" to represent the whole? Poetry is a form of logic, so we need to analyze the logic of statements. Why did Jesus use bread to stand for all of what we need to sustain physical life?

Why use a part to represent the whole? It grabs our attention. It leads us to be an active rather than passive reader or hearer. As we explore the logic of why this particular "part" was used to represent the whole, new insights emerge.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is conscious exaggeration. It is part of the "make believe" impulse that poets and speakers love to cultivate. Jesus was particularly inclined to use hyperbole (so much so that the author of *The Humor of Christ* coined the adjective *giantesque* to name this feature of Jesus discourse). Hyperbole is not literally true, yet it expresses truth. That is true of poetry generally.

What effect is most characteristic of hyperbole? Usually it expresses emotional truth. When do we ourselves used hyperbole (such as "I nearly died from boredom")? We use it when we feel strongly about something. In Deuteronomy 1:28 we read the report of the fearful spies that the enemies' "cities are great and fortified up to heaven." The catalog of God's acts of protection in Psalm 91 include the hyperbolic statement that "a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you" (verse 7).

The first thing we need to do as readers is to identify such statements as hyperbolic rather than literal. By all means, we need to avoid perpetuating the cliché that circulates in some Christian circles that "we interpret the Bible literally." Once we have correctly identified a hyperbole, we need to ponder why the poet or speaker used it. Usually hyperbole is a way of expressing strong feeling. Why would a poet or speaker use hyperbole? To overcome the cliché effect of saying the same truth literally, and secondly to do justice to the strength of feeling that an author or speaker feels about the subject under discussion.

Personification

Personification attributes human traits or body parts to something nonhuman. In other words, in personification something nonhuman is presented as though it were a person. With personification, human thoughts, feelings, or physical features are attributed to something nonhuman. The range of things that are personified in the Bible is huge, as the following specimens hint:

- A city: "God is in the midst of her [Jerusalem]; she shall not be moved" (Psalm 46:5).
- Body parts: "their tongue struts through the earth" (Psalm 73:9).
- Spiritual entities: "sin is crouching at the door" (Genesis 4:7).
- Abstractions: "righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).
- Emotions: "weeping may tarry for the night" [weeping as an overnight house guest] (Psalm 30:5).
- Forces of nature [the largest category]: "the meadows clothe themselves with flocks" (Psalm 65:13).

There is no limit to what the poets of the Bible might personify.

Why do the poets and other authors of the Bible, and Jesus in his discourses, use personification? First, it is attention getting. Second, it asserts kinship between people and the phenomenon being discussed, and to acknowledge this kinship is part of the meaning of a statement. Third, sometimes a group or diffuse phenomenon is given the quality of a unified phenomenon by means of personification, and we suddenly view that phenomenon in a different light. Epidemic illness in a neighborhood suddenly takes on a different identity when it is pictured as a solitary and malicious stalker: "the pestilence that stalks in darkness" (Psalm 91:6). In Psalm 46:5, the city of Jerusalem emerges in our thinking as a single unified entity when it is pictured as a woman.

What does personification require of us as Bible readers? We need to identify a given instance as a personification, and then reflect on what meanings are communicated by this bit of fiction.

Apostrophe

Apostrophe consists of a direct address to someone or something that is literally absent but treated as though it were present and capable of hearing and responding. If the address is to something nonhuman, it is at the same time an example of personification. Psalm 148 presents a string of apostrophes; here is just one of them: "Praise [God], sun and moon, / praise him, all you shining stars" (verse 3).

Apostrophe almost always expresses strong feeling. In fact, it is a tipoff that the poet or speaker feels strongly about the subject under discussion. Certainly it is yet another example of the poet's love of the nonliteral and fanciful.

What do we need to do as readers when we come upon an apostrophe? We need to identify and name

it as an apostrophe, and then be moved by the utterance as the author was when composing the statement. In general, apostrophe is a signal of strong feeling.

Allusion

The first thing to note about allusion is that it begins with an a and should never be confused with *illusion*. An allusion is a reference to an event from history or a past work of literature. Poets or speakers allude [the verb form] to something that is a point of reference that people will recognize. If an allusion were not part of common knowledge, it would be wasted.

An allusion is a demanding figure of speech for readers, who need to be familiar with the event or work of literature to which the author alludes. When the author of Hebrews writes that "by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days" (Hebrews 11:30), we need to know about the Israelites' conquest of Jericho when they entered the Promised Land. The allusion will make most sense if we know the exact details of the historical event or literary passage. Often we need to make multiple carryovers from the event or literary work to which allusion is made and the subject that is under discussion.

Whenever we do not know the event or passage to which an author alludes, we need to do the research required to make us knowledgeable. When Jesus buttressed his defense of what he had done on the Sabbath with the allusion to "what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, . . . how he entered the house of God . . . and ate the bread of the Presence" (Mark 2:25-26), it is our responsibility to look up the event recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

Often poets use allusion as a means of achieving compression. Simply by saying that "by the word of the Lord the heavens were made" (Psalm 33:6), the poet taps into our knowledge and love of the entire creation story of Genesis 1.

Merism

Merism is extremely prevalent in the Bible but only rarely found in English and American poetry. It consists of naming opposites with the understanding that everything between those extremes is also included in the statement. When the poet addresses God in prayer with the statement, "You know when I sit down and when I rise up" (Psalm 139:2), he is saying that God knows everything he does.

We need to identify a merism when we read one or we will misinterpret what is being said. It is not only the opposites that are named but the totality. God is acquainted with more than the times of our sitting down and standing up.

Why do poets use merism? It is a way of being vivid: naming the acts sitting down and rising up is concrete and visual, while the abstraction "everything" is vague and lifeless. Additionally, a merism is a creative way of expressing truth, overcoming the cliché effect of a thought, and additionally it sticks in the memory.

Taking Stock

For people unfamiliar with poetry, mastering the figures of speech covered in this lesson might seem impossible. It is not impossible. Studies show that people can master bodies of data that are important to them. If you are committed to knowing and reading the Bible, what is covered in this article needs to be considered important. These figures of speech permeate the entire Bible. That proves that God expects you to understand and enjoy poetry. What seems difficult now can become familiar and easy if you put the information of this article into regular practice.

Leaning by Doing Exercise

The best way to apply the information of this lesson is not to tackle a whole psalm (for example) but to work your way through the following list of examples. There is one example of each of the figures of speech covered in this lesson. Your task is to identify each one and then engage in the activities that this article outlined as the ones that the respective figures of speech require.

1. "The sun shall not strike you by day, / nor the moon by night" (Psalm 121:6).
2. "Be warned, O rulers of the earth" (Psalm 2:10).
3. "You are all together beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you" (Song of Solomon 4:7).
4. "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10).
5. "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; . . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; . . . as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (2 Corinthians 6:8-10).
6. "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9).
7. "By the sweat of your face / you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:19).
8. Give thanks "to him who divided the Red Sea in two" (Psalm 136:13).

Lesson 12
How Poems in the Bible Work

When we speak of a poem, we nearly always mean a lyric poem, and this is the assumption of this lesson. A lyric poem is a carefully unified poem with a beginning, middle, and end. An oracle in a prophetic book and a chapter in the book of Proverbs are as thoroughly poetic as a psalm, but we do not call such passages a poem. Most of the lyric poems in the Bible are contained in the book of Psalms, and that is a good model to have in mind as this lesson unfolds.

The Content of a Lyric Poem

Before we analyze the *form* of a poem, we need to consider its content. By the very fact that a poem falls into the broader category of literature, we know right from the start that its subject matter is human experience. The subject of literature is human experience. We need to start with this "bedrock" premise when we read a poem, regardless of how remote the poetic way of speaking may seem to be from everyday life. If we are looking for identifiable human experience in a poem, we will find it. If we do not consciously look for it, we might very well miss it.

Poetry is the most concentrated and multilayered type of discourse. One aspect of this is that the images and figures of speech in a poem continuously put us in contact with human experiences beyond the actual subject of a poem. This is a bonus of poetry. The subject of Psalm 23 is God's provision in the lives of those who follow him, but because of the shepherd metaphor that operates throughout the poem, we vicariously live many human experiences having to do with nature and shepherding.

When we turn to the more specific subject of a poem, two categories of lyric poems emerge. Some poems are meditative or reflective. This means that they give us the thought process of the speaker in the poem. They are oriented toward ideas, and a good way to make sense of such a poem is to operate on the premise that the speaker in the poem is sharing more and more of his thought process, or more and more ideas related to the central theme.

The other category is the affective or emotional lyric poem. It takes the feelings of the poet or speaker as its subject. Here the poet shares more and more of his feelings with us. The label *mood piece* fits many affective poems.

How to Determine the Unity of a Poem

A poem is not a collection of verses, even though our Bibles print poems in the form of individual verses. Poems are carefully constructed, unified wholes. This unity is of several types.

First, poems have thematic or ideational unity. This means that upon analysis we can identify one or

more ideas that govern the entire poem. For purposes of teaching a poem, it is important to slant the teaching session around a chosen "big idea," even if it represents a choice of one from among other good alternatives.

Psalm 1 possesses a clear unity of theme or central idea, but two good options exist as ways of viewing the central theme. One is that the poem is about the two ways—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. It works equally well to view Psalm 1 as being about the blessedness of the godly person. In this formulation, the references to the wicked serve as a foil—a contrast that heightens the main idea of the blessedness of the godly person.

Often the unity is not only an idea but also a *motif* or a central pattern. The theme or main idea of Psalm 23 is God's provision or providence, but the poem is actually constructed around something more concrete and literary, namely, the provisions that a shepherd arranges for his sheep during the course of a typical day. The *theme* of Psalm 121 (the "traveler's psalm") is the ability of God to protect a traveler, but this "big idea" is not the thing that unifies the poem at its literal level. The unifying *motif* is the *catalog* or list of God's acts of provision. While it is useful at a certain point to extract a unifying idea or theme, we are taken closer to the text of the poem when we identify the motif or pattern that unifies it. The poem is constructed around a motif or pattern, which is what we should primarily use when interacting with the text. After we have worked with the text and wish to summarize what the poem says about the Christian life, we need to formulate an idea that governs the poem.

The carry away from this brief discussion is that poems are carefully unified by one or more themes or ideas, and in addition by one or more motifs. The controlling *idea* of Psalm 84, a worship psalm, is the joy of worshiping God in the temple, and the *motif* around which the details of the poem are constructed is a catalog (list) of the details that made up the poet's experience of traveling to the temple and worshiping God at it.

It takes time and mental energy to formulate a statement of "big idea" and unifying motif in a poem, but no experience of a poem is adequate without taking the time and expending the mental energy required to perform the task, which is actually a pleasurable task.

The Sequential Structure of a Poem: Beginning and Conclusion

Part of the careful crafting of a poem is the way in which the material is arranged as a sequence. The universal paradigm of a carefully constructed poem is a three-part structure consisting of beginning, middle, and end. That is a simple scheme, but it is not simplistic. In fact, seeing how these three elements are present requires our very best powers of analysis.

The opening of a poem is nearly always an obvious beginning, and usually it can be trusted to announce the content and nature of the poem that will follow. In our familiar poems from English and America literature, we ordinarily have a title to "clue us in," but with a little ingenuity we can supply our own titles for poems in the Bible (and in fact study Bibles sometimes perform that function). It is important that we scrutinize the opening verse or two of a poem in the Bible to form an early impression of the nature of the poem we are in the process of reading. After we have mastered the poem more fully, we

can usually sharpen the focus beyond this first impression.

The ways in which a poem can signal what is to follow are multiple; the important thing is that a sense of beginning is established, as the following specimens show:

- "Fret not yourself because of evildoers" (Psalm 37:1).
- "Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause / against an ungodly people" (Psalm 43:1).
- "Shout for joy to God, all the earth" (Psalm 66:1).
- "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, / which cannot be moved, but abides forever" (Psalm 125:1).
- "Behold, you are beautiful my love, / behold, you are beautiful" (Song of Solomon 4:1).

Poets are travel guides through their compositions. With a carefully crafted poem, the opening is equivalent to the poet's giving us preliminary information about the site we are going to visit, and then opening the gate to the site.

Fast-forwarding to the conclusion of a poem, it is obvious that poems do not simply end. They are rounded off with a note of closure and resolution. Whereas the opening of a biblical poem is usually slanted toward the specific subject of the poem, the conclusion is generalized. A typical ending in the Psalms is a brief prayer or wish. Often the conclusion is conventional and formulaic, semi-detachable from the specific psalm in which it appears and appropriate to any number of other psalms. Here is a sampling of conclusions to psalms:

- "Shout for joy, all you upright in heart" (Psalm 32:11).
- "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, / from everlasting to everlasting! / Amen and Amen" (Psalm 41:13).
- "Let all the upright in heart exult" (Psalm 64:10).
- "May the Lord bless you from Zion, / he who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 134:3).

The conclusion of a typical biblical poem brings the journey back to the ground after the flights that have occurred in the middle. Speaking metaphorically, at the end we step off the airplane. The conclusion provides a note of closure. The pleasure of the conclusion of biblical poems is the feeling of having reached an appointed end. Things are complete as designed.

The Sequential Structure of a Poem: The Middle

The first movement of a poem is introductory. After the subject or theme has been introduced, we are presented with the development. The simplest form of development is called repetitive form or repetitive structure and consists of repetition of the main idea in different words or images. Only short poems are constructed on this simple principle of repetition, but we need to be prepared to label a poem repetitive if that is what it is.

Most poems have a progressive rather than repetitive structure, and a leading task of mastering a poem is to determine its structure as it unfolds from beginning to end. Our starting premise is that every poem is comprised of successive units. These need to be identified and labeled correctly. It is entirely appropriate to think of this as outlining the poem. To outline a poem is to impose a unity on it, so we can add this to our repertoire of ways in which a poem is unified (as discussed earlier). Poems do not advertise their division into units. It is a task that the reader needs to perform. This requires time and mental concentration.

If a poem in the Bible is carefully organized, it follows the format of theme and variation. The theme is either an idea or a motif (as discussed earlier). The individual units are variations on this central theme or motif. Once we have determined the unifying theme or motif, it is important to label the variations in such a way as to keep the unifying theme or motif in constant view.

We can take the familiar Psalm 1 for illustration. For our purposes here, we will choose the option that the unifying theme is the blessedness of the godly person. In dividing a poem into its units, we can often be either more detailed or less detailed. Dividing Psalm 1 into three movements strikes a middle course. Verses 1-2 introduce us to the godly person with a description of that person's acts of avoidance (verse 1) and positive acts (verse 2). Verses 3-4 further describe the godly person, with emphasis on how the godly person is rewarded for spiritual virtue, with the wicked introduced as a foil (a contrast that sets off or highlights the main motif of the godly person). The final two stanzas shift the focus to the future and declare an eternal reward for the godly person, with the wicked again brought in as a foil. Everything in the poem can be tied to the central theme of the blessedness of the godly person.

At this point we need to sound a caution. While many lyric poems in the Bible are as strongly unified as the poems that make it into an anthology of English or American literature, many are totally miscellaneous. The first thing we need to do with these poems is resist the tidy outlines that we find in study Bibles or Bible handbooks. We need to be true to what we actually see before us in the text. But we also need to resist going to the opposite extreme. No matter how fragmented a poem might be, we can nonetheless say that the individual units give us a *process of thinking* on a subject. What unifies such a poem is the poet or speaker in the poem: everything in the poem represents that person's process of thinking or feeling. Modern literature has given us the term "stream of consciousness" for a poem that jumps abruptly from one idea or feeling to another. Such a poem presents the *flow* of what went on in the mind of the poet/speaker. The point of unity is not a central idea or motif but the consciousness of the speaker in the poem.

As we leave this unit on the organization by theme-and-variation in the middle part of the poem, we need to bring the preceding unit on how poems begin and end back into view. The overall structure of a lyric poem is a three-part lyric structure consisting of introduction or beginning, middle or development, and conclusion.

Contrast as an Organizing Principle

Thus far we have covered two types of unity and structure in a poem—a central idea or motif that is an overarching point of unity, and the sequential unfolding of the poem. A third organizing principle in most poems is contrast. It is a rare poem in which we cannot discern one or more contrasts, either for the poem as a whole or in local places in the poem. This is the poetic equivalent of plot conflict in a story.

For example, Psalm 1 is organized as a sustained contrast between two paths, representing two ways of life and two types of people. This overriding contrast produces localized contrasts—between the lifestyles of the godly and wicked in verses 1-2, between the fruitfulness that characterizes the godly (verse 3) and the worthlessness of the wicked (verse 4), and between standing and not standing acquitted by God in verses 5-6.

Not every poem is based on the principle of contrast, but we always need to be thinking in terms of contrast as an organizing principle in a poem. For example, Psalm 23 is not as obviously based on contrast as Psalm 1 is, but upon analysis we can see that the contentment and safety that the sheep experience as a result of the shepherd's provision are implicitly contrasted to threats to the wellbeing of the sheep—potential attacks from predators, the possibility of slipping off the safe paths and falling into a ravine, the drought of summer and accompanying lack of grass and water, and injuries that need to be anointed in the sheepfold at the end of the day.

Psalm 121 is similar. On the surface it is built on the catalog of God's acts of protection of the pilgrim on the journey to Jerusalem. But the acts of protection *imply* contrasting threats from which the traveler needs to be protected, chiefly dangerous terrain and sunstroke. We need to be *looking for* an element of contrast in a poem but avoid forcing a poem into that mold if contrast is not present.

Summary

Poems in the Bible are not unorganized collections of verses. They are carefully constructed and unified wholes. We have not adequately understood a poem without analyzing its unity and structure. Educational research has found that without organizing frameworks into which to fit details, people have a very inadequate grasp of a body of data. This applies to our experiences of poems.

Three primary elements constitute the organizing framework for a poem. They are a central idea and/or motif (or multiple ideas and motifs), a sequential structure consisting of introduction, middle, and conclusion, and contrast. Additionally, the units that make up the middle of a poem can be organized according to the paradigm of theme and variation.

Learning by Doing Exercise

Psalm 46 is a good poem with which to test your mastery of the material presented in this article. Even when the general idea remains the same throughout a poem, if the imagery or frame of reference changes, that becomes the basis for dividing the material into its own unit. Here is the text:

1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

7 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

10 "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"

11 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Lesson 13
How to Explicate a Biblical Poem

Explication is the literary term for a close reading of a text, especially a poem. The dictionary defines explication as "explanation," and this is also an accurate account of an explication of a poem. There are right and wrong ways to explicate a poem. The methodology presented in this lesson has a proven track record. Before we get to the methodology of explicating a poem, it will be useful to prepare the way with the following assertions.

First, explication must be preceded by analysis or spadework, but it is not synonymous with it. The spadework that precedes composing an explication is outlined in lessons 9-11 of this course. Lesson 12, dealing with unity and structure, also covers part of the analysis that precedes composing an explication. Conducting analysis of these features of a poem is like a detective visiting a crime scene and collecting individual pieces of data.

An explication takes the data that emerges from spadework or piecemeal analysis and puts that data into an organized format. Ordinarily an explication is designed for presentation to an audience, though it can also be composed for personal benefit. At the explication stage, the explicator is like a trial lawyer presenting evidence in organized fashion to a jury. Composing an explication of a poem is the most complete mastery that we can achieve with a poem. Even though an explication is not the same as piecemeal analysis, it needs to be preceded by such analysis.

Second, an explication must be systematic instead of random. It must follow a prescribed format (to be discussed below). It cannot be a miscellaneous collection of insights into a poem. The reader or audience of an explication needs to know what is happening, and in what order. The organizing principle of an explication is that it moves from the large to the small. It begins with the broadest things that can be said about the poem, and then fits the individual details into this superstructure.

Third, after providing the big picture, an explicator must conduct a sequential reading of the poem from beginning to end, unit by unit. An explication enacts the ideal reading experience, which unfolds in sequence from the beginning of the poem to its conclusion.

Finally, an explication must not only be systematic and organized according to a prescribed format—it must also be thorough and complete. Every aspect of the poem must be analyzed and commented on.

Explicating a poem is not "tearing the poem apart." It is the opposite: it is putting the poem together. It consists of following the process that the poet underwent when composing the poem. To explicate a poem is to re-compose it, following the cues provided by the poem itself. Things fall into place for an explicator the same way they fell into place for the poet. The poet made a series of discoveries while composing, and readers make the same discoveries. Additionally, it is useful to think of explication as *bringing to awareness* aspects of the poem or responses that would otherwise remain dormant. Naming the feelings that an image evokes is a legitimate type of bringing to awareness.

Step 1: Content Core

An explication begins by stating the broadest possible things that can be said about a poem. Another way of saying this is that an explication begins by stating the things that a reader would most benefit from knowing right at the outset. Here are the things that make up this content core (though if one or two do not apply to a given poem, obviously nothing can be said about them):

1. What the poem is about. This might be a topic, such as godly living in Psalm 1, or an experience, such as a thunderstorm in Psalm 29 and worshiping God in the temple in Psalm 84.

2. Theme. A statement of theme is what the poem says *about* the topic or experience that has been identified (#1, above). Psalm 1 asserts that the godly person is blessed. Psalm 29 asserts that God is the one who controls or orchestrates the thunderstorm and is worthy of praise for that reason.

3. An external occasion that gave rise to the poem and is therefore a helpful context into which to place the poem. A poem that is occasioned by an external event is called an occasional poem. Not every poem is an occasional poem, but many poems are. Psalm 1 does not arise from a specific occasion, but Psalms 29 (the "song of the thunderstorm") and Psalm 84 (a worship psalm) are. If we know the occasion, nearly everything in a poem falls into place when we identify the context and show how it shapes the poem.

4. Many poems imply a situation *within* the poem. Noting this either to ourselves or an audience is very useful. If the speaker in a poem addresses God directly, the situation at work in the poem is that of prayer. Psalm 23 is built around the implied situation of the daily routine of a shepherd as he leads his flock out from the sheepfold and then back to it. A lament psalm makes reference to a specific crisis in the life of the speaker that we can piece together from the poem.

5. Inasmuch as an awareness of genre programs our encounter with a text, it is obviously useful to note the genre(s) into which a poem falls as part of the initial overview. Nearly all poems fall into the genre of lyric, so that is worth noting. But most poems in the Bible fall into more specific genres as well—lament psalm, praise psalm, nature poem, love poem, worship psalm, and others. In addition to identifying a genre, it is helpful to say just a little more about how the conventions of the genre can guide our encounter with the poem.

The purpose of laying out the content core of a poem is to provide a framework within which to proceed to more specific features of the poem. The content core *enables* whatever more we do in our exploration of a poem. We need to know these preliminary features of the poem before we can proceed well.

Step 2: Sequential Structure

The next logical thing to do with a poem is identify its sequential structure. This is still operating at a very broad level, providing a framework within which eventually to fit more specific details.

A good preliminary assumption is that a poem will fall into some form of three-part lyric structure consisting of introduction, middle or development, and conclusion. Often these will be important to note, but with the so-called fixed forms in the book of Psalms, other structural schemes overshadow the more general three-part structure. For example, lament psalms have five ingredients. These five elements are the most natural way to lay out the structure of a lament psalm. In a variation on that, praise psalms have three main elements, and these turn out to be versions of three-part lyric structure—introductory call to praise, conducting of the praise, and conclusion phrased in terms appropriate to a praise psalm.

Next we need to outline the poem being analyzed. Every poem has its own topical and imagistic structure. As we outline a poem, we need to do justice to what is actually present in the poem. The framework of theme and variation can be very useful in this regard. Having identified the unifying theme or motif that governs the poem, we can phrase our labels for individual units in keeping with this theme or motif. A typical format is "the poet's first variation on the theme of _____ is _____ ." Then, "the next variation is _____ ." And so forth.

We should pause to note that we need to use good sense in not being unduly general in our outline of a poem and, on the other side, unduly detailed. For example, the following outline for Psalm 1 does not justice to the specificity of the text: a two-part structure consisting of the blessedness of the godly (verses 1-3) and the misery of the wicked (verses 4-6). But breaking the poem into six parts matching the six verses or even individual lines or pairs of lines exceeds most people's tolerance for detail. Additionally, the purpose of an outline of a poem's sequential structure is to impose a unity on the poem, and if an outline has too many parts, this goal is thwarted.

Step 3: Contrast as a Structural Principle

Most poems are organized on a principle of contrast. At the broadest level, one or more contrasts might organize an entire poem. For example, most lament psalms are structured as a combat between the bullying enemies and their innocent victims (either the speaker or a helpless group in society). Again, Psalm 1 is structured throughout on the contrast between the godly and the wicked.

Often an overriding conflict produces a whole network of smaller contrasts in localized parts of the poem. Psalm 1 is a particularly good example. But even if the principle of contrast is not worked out systematically like this, we should be on the lookout for contrast as an element of poems in individual parts as well as the whole. Psalm 33 is a typical praise psalm that consists mainly of a catalog of God's praiseworthy attributes and acts, but intermittently the poet takes time out to assert that God "brings the counsel of the nations to nothing" (combat motif, verse 10) and to contrast the security of people who trust in God with those who trust in a king's army or a war horse (verses 16-17). Working with contrasts is part of a poet's DNA, so it needs to be on our radar screen as readers and explicators.

Step 4: Poetic Texture

All of the foregoing considerations deal with the large, overarching frameworks of a poem. The actual meaning of a poem is embodied in what is called the poetic texture—the individual images and figures of speech. To speak of structure and texture is to use an architectural metaphor. The structure is like the walls of a building. The texture is the details that are put on the walls.

Keeping in mind that an explication needs to enact the ideal reading experience, analysis of poetic texture consists of reliving the text from beginning to end. This element of explication takes by far the most space and time. The way to proceed is to start at the beginning of a poem and march through it unit by unit, doing all the analysis that a given unit requires before moving on to the next unit. The task starts by identifying the elements of poetic texture such as image, metaphor, and such like, but mere labeling is of very minor use. The important thing is to unpack the meanings of each item of poetic texture, in the manner prescribed in lessons 10-12 of this course.

Learning by Doing Exercise

On the basis of the foregoing "how to do it" discussion, you should try your hand with a major biblical poem, Psalm 73. If determining the structure seems overwhelming to you, feel free to take a look at the appendix below.

Appendix: Structure of Psalm 73

1	Truly God is good to the upright,	The goal at which the speaker arrived; a victory speech at the finish line; a prologue to prevent misunderstanding.
2	to those who are pure in heart.	
3	But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,	A preview of the crisis.
4	my steps had well nigh slipped.	
5	For I was envious of the arrogant	
6	when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.	
7	For they have no pangs;	A portrait of the wicked; a catalog of the appeals of what seem to be the benefits of worldliness. Two specific topics get covered--the prosperity of the wicked and the resulting behavior that is engendered by that prosperity. In view of what the speaker eventually discovers, this unit portrays a grand misperception and illusion.
8	their bodies are sound and sleek.	
9	They are not in trouble as other men are;	
10	they are not stricken like other men.	
11	Therefore pride is their necklace;	
12	violence covers them as a garment.	
13	Their eyes swell out with fatness,	
14	their hearts overflow with follies.	
15	They scoff and speak with malice;	

16	loftily they threaten oppression.	
17	They set their mouths against the heavens,	
18	and their tongue struts through the earth.	
19	Therefore the people turn and praise them,	The prosperous wicked as viewed by the world; conclusions of the Gallop poll
20	and find no fault in them.	
21	And they say, “How can God know?	
22	Is there knowledge in the Most High?”	
23	Behold, these are the wicked;	Summary.
24	always at ease, they increase in riches.	
25	All in vain have I kept my heart clean	The prosperous wicked as viewed by the speaker; a section of self-pity, discontent, self-accusation; a statement of what seem to be the disadvantages of living a godly life.
26	and washed my hands in innocence.	
27	For all the day long I have been stricken,	
28	and chastened every morning.	
29	If I had said, “I will speak thus,”	
30	I would have been untrue to the generation of your children.	
31	But when I thought how to understand this,	
32	it seemed to me a wearisome task,	
33	until I went into the sanctuary of God;	The turnaround; the speaker's moment of epiphany or insight.
34	then I perceived their end.	
35	Truly you set them in slippery places;	A second portrait of the wicked = the temporary nature of their prosperity; an explanation of why the speaker changed his mind, governed by a mood of discovery; an exposé of the prosperous wicked described earlier; judgment by land, water, and air.
36	you make them fall to ruin.	
37	How they are destroyed in a moment,	
38	swept away utterly by terrors!	
39	They are like a dream when one awakes,	
40	on awaking you despise their phantoms.	
41	When my soul was embittered,	Retrospective on the speaker’s discontent, governed by a mood of confession.
42	when I was pricked in heart,	
43	I was stupid and ignorant,	
44	I was like a beast toward you.	
45	Nevertheless I am continually with you;	A second view of godliness; the speaker’s alternative to what he had earlier envied; a confession of faith; a section of discovery in which the speaker learns or relearns things about God and himself; another measure of success; exposure of misplaced hope earlier in the poem; the afterglow; a spiritual inventory.
46	you hold my right hand.	
47	You guide me with your counsel,	
48	and afterward you will receive me to glory.	
49	Whom have I in heaven but you?	
50	And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you.	
51	My flesh and my heart may fail,	
52	but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.	
53	For lo, those who are far from you shall perish;	Summary of the two-fold movement and theme of the poem.
54	you put an end to those who are false to you.	
55	But for me it is good to be near God;	
56	I have made the Lord God my refuge,	
57	that I may tell of all your works.	

Further notes on the poem's structure. The psalm has an obvious problem-solution format. The first half narrates an almost-fatal crisis of faith; the second half delineates the speaker's renewal of faith. The first half focuses on present, tangible, and earthly matters; in the second half the focus shifts to the future, the spiritual, and the heavenly. Correspondingly, the preponderance of sensory imagery occurs in the first half, while the second half, though not devoid of imagery, tends more toward abstraction. There is a pronoun shift from *they*, *their*, and *them* to *you*. **Underlying contrasts:** the wicked vs. the godly; earthly success vs. spiritual values; materialism vs. godliness; the temporary vs. the permanent; error vs. truth; doubt vs. faith, illusion vs. reality, apparent reality vs. ultimate reality.

Lesson 14
Specific Poetic Genres in the Bible

Most lyric poems in the Bible fall into more specific genres as well. All of the considerations that apply to poems in general and to lyric poems apply to poems that fall into the specific subtypes covered in this lesson. The material presented below is not a substitute for ordinary analysis of biblical poems; it is an additional overlay that needs to be applied. The two places in an explication where this additional overlay is most likely to make an appearance are (1) the opening comments covering content core and (2) the sequential structure of the poem. In regard to the second of these, often the framework noted for the specific genres discussed below provides the best way to lay out the sequential structure of the poem.

Lament Psalm

The psalmists use the label *complaint* to identify this genre. This fixed form within the Psalter consists of five elements: (1) an invocation or cry to God, often accompanied by exalted epithets for God and sometimes already incorporating an element of petition; (2) the lament or complaint, consisting of a definition or description of the crisis that occasions the poem and underlies it; (3) petition or supplication, outlining what the speaker requests God to do in response to the direful situation; (4) a statement of confidence in God; (5) a vow to praise God. These elements may appear in any sequence (though most laments begin with a cry to God) and may occur more than once in a poem. Additionally, sometimes one of the elements is omitted or merely implied.

All lament psalms are occasional poems, arising from a specific event in the poet's life or community. Ascertaining the specific occasion (usually implied within the poem itself) helps to explain the logic at work within the poem. The presence of a statement of confidence in God and vow to praise God means that a lament psalm contains a reversal or recantation, as the opening claims that the situation is hopeless or God unresponsive are declared to be untrue after all. The key ingredient in a lament psalm is the portrait of the evil that needs to be countered; the portrait is usually painted in heightened and hyperbolic terms, and by means of vivid imagery and metaphors. The poet is fired by a spirit of outrage, and the form itself obviously belongs to the category of protest literature.

Praise Psalm, or Psalm of Praise

This is a psalm that praises God, specifically. A psalm that praises a human person (e.g., Psalms 1, 15, and 112) is called an encomium. A praise psalm is a fixed form that has three main ingredients—a formal call to praise, the actual conducting of the praise, and a note of closure or resolution that rounds out of the poem at its end. This three-part format is actually a specific version of three-part lyric form. A full-fledged call to praise, in turn, also includes three elements: one or more commands to praise; naming the audience who is commanded to praise God; naming the mode of praise (such as

song, lyre, harp). Further traits of a praise psalm include the following:

- The overall logic of the praise psalm is to (a) ascribe praise to God and (b) assemble evidence regarding why God is worthy of praise. Often the word *for* stands between the call to praise and the catalog of praiseworthy acts and attributes, leading some scholars to speak of the body of the praise as the "motivatory section" of the psalm.
- In this regard, it is useful to know that the word *praise* originally meant to *appraise*, or set a value on something. From this came the meaning of commending the worth of someone or something. Praise is a response to the worthiness of someone or something. In the praise psalms, this worthy subject is God.
- The central technique in most praise psalms is the catalog of God's praiseworthy acts and attributes; a much less frequently used format is the portrait of God. The centrality of the catalog means that determining the individual units that make up the structure of the catalog is likely to be a main part of the analysis that we conduct with a praise psalm.
- The poet can praise God either for his actions or his attributes (character).
- Additionally, the writers of praise psalms sometimes praise God for specific acts (declarative praise), and at other times for repeated or habitual acts (descriptive praise).
- In the psalms of praise, God's praiseworthy acts occur in three primary arenas—nature or creation, history, and the personal life of a believer.
- Within those arenas, the most common actions for which God is praised are acts of providence, redemption or salvation or forgiveness, creation of the world, and preservation of physical life (either through provision or rescue/deliverance).
- Sometimes the writer of a praise psalm uses generalization, and sometimes specific examples (usually the two alternate back and forth in a poem).
- Allusion (reference to past history) looms large as a technique because the impulse is to praise God for acts he has performed.
- Sometimes the poet praises God for personal blessings, and at other times the focus is public or communal.

Worship Psalm (also known as Song of Zion)

A worship psalm is defined by its subject matter, namely, worshiping God in the temple in Jerusalem. The overall logic of a worship psalm is that it awakens longing for worship and expresses the joy of engaging in that worship. Worship psalms are occasional poems that take their origin in the worship of God in the temple. Because of this, the physical sense of place is prominent in worship psalms. Praise of the city of Jerusalem is a common motif, as the city itself unleashes the wellsprings of emotion. It is customary for the poet to rehearse the physical details of the temple experience. As a result, the worship psalms are replete with "snapshots" of what it was like to worship God in the temple.

Accompanying these snapshots are pervasive exclamations that allow us to vicariously experience the feelings that pulsed through the Old Testament worshiper. Since pilgrimages to Jerusalem were a

required part of the worship experience, the pilgrimage motif is also a common ingredient in the songs of Zion; in fact, Psalms 120-134 are "songs of ascent," that is, pilgrim psalms that were sung or chanted or reflected on during the journey "up" to Jerusalem to worship in the temple.

Nature Poem and Nature Poetry

A nature poem is identifiable by its subject matter, namely, some aspect of external nature. Nature poems typically share the following traits: the poet praises nature for its beauty, power, and provision; the poet describes nature in evocative word-pictures that awaken our own experiences of nature; the poet personifies aspects of nature to show kinship between people and nature. The overall logic that governs a nature psalm is the twofold purpose of expressing and awakening our sense of the glory of (a) nature and (b) the God of nature. The nature poetry of the world at large does the first of those only, whereas the nature psalms continuously deflect the praise upward from nature to God. Additionally, much of what we find in the nature psalms will fall into place if we are aware of the twofold context out of which the poets wrote: (a) they belonged to a nation of farmers in which nearly everyone lived close to the soil and the weather, and (b) they had a thoroughgoing doctrine of creation that asserted that God had created everything that exists.

Although nature finds its way indirectly into dozens of psalms, there are five nature poems in the Psalter—Psalms 8, 19, 29 ("the song of the thunderstorm"), 104, and 148. Mention should also be made of the Song of Solomon, which overflows with nature poetry and uses a common strategy of love poets to describe nature in idealized terms, on the understanding that as our sentiment for the beauty of nature is aroused that sentiment becomes transmuted into romantic sentiment as well. Additionally, Jesus's discourse against anxiety in Matthew 6:25-34 can be regarded as a nature poem (cast into the form of a prose poem).

Love Poem

A love poem expresses the feelings of a person in love. That is simply the umbrella; a host of individual motifs make up the genre of love poetry. The four main strategies that love poets employ are the following:

- Direct praise of the beloved: "Behold, you are beautiful, my love; / behold, you are beautiful" (Song 1:15); "as an apple tree among the trees of the forest, / so is my beloved among the young men" (Song 2:3).
- Expressing the emotions of love: "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song 2:16), expressing the contentment that accompanies mutual love; "I am sick with love" (Song 2:5), expressing how overwhelmed with passion a person in love feels.
- Depiction of the love relationship, defining or celebrating it: "I am my beloved's, / and his desire is for me" (Song 7:10), defining the relationship as one of mutual affection; "love is strong as death" (Song 8:6), a statement that appears in a verse whose subject is the permanence of true love.

- Depicting typical moments in a romance or courtship—a narrative approach: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2), capturing a tingling kiss; the groom's arrival for the wedding (Song 3:6-11); going for a walk in nature (Song 7:11-13).

Cutting across these motifs or subgenres are certain conventions that characterize all love poetry. Staples of love poetry include hyperbole (exaggerated claims about the beloved or the love) that express emotional truth rather than literal truth; the search for superlatives (as the beloved is compared to things of supreme value and is declared to be the absolute best that exists); the extravagant use of metaphors and similes as the poet searches for analogies that will do justice to the beloved or the romantic relationship; and epithets or titles for the beloved (including "pet names"). The rhetoric of compliment is prominent. Love poetry situates the love in an idealized setting, usually a pastoral or garden setting (an ideally flowery and fruitful landscape). Love poetry usually records the sentiments of courtship rather than marriage, though there are of course exceptions.

Some specific subtypes within the general category of love poetry include the following. In a pastoral invitation to love, the speaker invites the beloved to go for a walk in nature; this is actually a metaphoric invitation to the life of mutual love and may have the force of a proposal to marriage (see Song of Solomon 2:10-15 and 7:11-13 for examples). In a blazon, the speaker catalogs and praises either the beautiful bodily features of the beloved or the virtues of the beloved. If there are references to a wedding, the love poem becomes an epithalamion. The dream vision makes a somewhat regular appearance; for example, in the Song of Solomon the woman fantasizes or "daydreams" about the groom's arrival for the wedding (2:8-27), about what it will be like to have Solomon accepted in her family (3:1-4), and about being temporarily separated from her beloved (5:2-7). Lyrics that express the personal feelings of a speaker are also common (e.g., Song of Solomon 2:3-7 and 4:9-11).

Encomium

An encomium is a poem or prose piece that praises either an abstract quality or a general character type. A set of conventional ingredients makes up an encomium:

- Introduction of the subject that will be praised. This may include a brief definition of the subject (e.g., the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1), or a semi-formal introduction (e.g., "An excellent wife who can find?" in Proverbs 31:10).
- The distinguished and ancient ancestry of the subject (praise "by what kind he came of," as Renaissance handbooks termed it).
- A catalog or description of the praiseworthy acts and qualities of the subject.
- The indispensable or superior nature of the subject. This superiority might include a description of the rewards that accompany the quality or person being praised, and it is often asserted by means of contrast to something inferior.
- A conclusion that urges the reader to emulate the subject.

Not every encomium includes all of these elements. On the other hand, if we know the list, we can sometimes see that a given ingredient is present. For example, it is possible to read Psalm 1 simply

as a contrast between the righteous and the wicked, but if we know about the superiority motif of the encomium, we can see that the contrast actually praises the superiority of the righteous person.

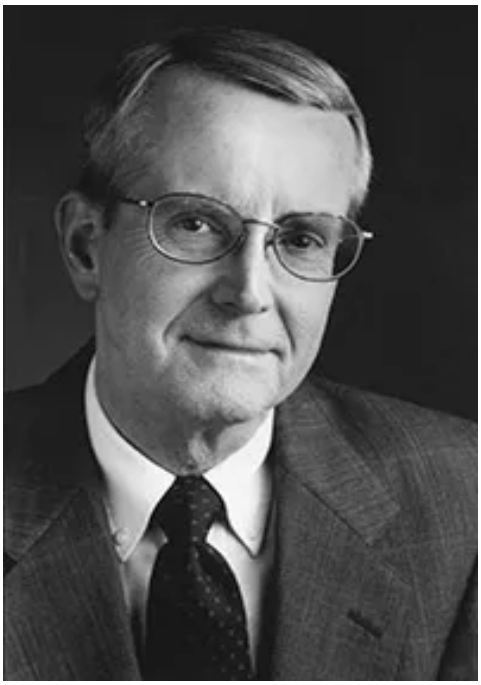
Additionally, once we have the grid in place, we can detect modifications of the basic format. For example, Psalm 112 is an encomium in praise of "the man who fears the Lord" (v. 1). Instead of painting a picture of this person's distinguished ancestry, the poet describes the family lineage that will flow from the subject of the poem (v. 2). Again, the encomium in praise of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 begins with a call to emulate (vv. 1-3) instead of ending with it. Psalms 1 and 15 do not include a call to emulate, but they paint such an attractive picture of the persons praised that they move a reader to *want* to emulate the subject of the poem.

The canon of encomia in the Bible is an elite circle of great works. Encomia in praise of abstract qualities are Proverbs 3:13-20 and Proverbs 8 on wisdom, 1 Corinthians 13:1-14:1 on love, and Hebrews 11:1-12:2 on faith. Encomia that praise general character types are Psalms 1 and 112 on the godly person, Psalm 15 on the holy person, and Proverbs 31:10-31 on the virtuous wife. Psalm 119, which praises God's law, is too long to be considered a typical encomium, but it contains all the ingredients of an encomium—definitions of the subject, descriptions of it, praise of its qualities and effects, its superiority and indispensable nature, its divine origin, and numerous commands to follow it. Several of the Christ hymns in the New Testament are also encomia because they incorporate the standard features of the genre: John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11; and Colossians 1:15-20.

Further Reading

All of the following items have been authored by Leland Ryken. A comprehensive coverage of biblical poetry can be found in *Sweeter Than Honey, Richer Than Gold: A Guided Story of Biblical Poetry* (Weaver Books, 2015; now published by Lexham Press). Additionally, all of the forms covered in this chapter receive entries in *A Complete Guide to the Literary Forms in the Bible* (Crossway, 2041).

There are also relevant chapters in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984) and *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker, 1987).



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Experience: Professor of English Emeritus, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

Dr. Ryken's interests include teaching the Bible, Bible translation, photography, travel, and research in England. Dr. Ryken has taught at Wheaton College for forty-three years and has published three dozen books. He served as literary stylist for the English Standard Version Bible and has authored or edited over sixty books, including *The Word of God in English* and *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*.

Education

- B.A. from Central University of Iowa
- Ph.D. from University of Oregon

Professional Affiliations

- Milton Society of America
- Evangelical Theological Society
- Conference on Christianity and Literature

Research

- Bible translation theory and practice
- English Puritanism
- Puritan context of Milton's poetry
- Bible as literature
- Intersections of literature and Christianity

Publications

- *The Apocalyptic Vision in "Paradise Lost"*
- *The Literature of the Bible*
- *Triumphs of the Imagination*
- *The Christian Imagination* (editor)
- *Milton and Scriptural Tradition* (co-editor)
- *How to Read the Bible as Literature*
- *The New Testament in Literary Criticism* (editor)
- *Windows to the World: Literature in Christian Perspective*
- *The Legacy of the King James Bible*
- *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*
- *Understanding English Bible Translation*