

LELAND RYKEN'S LITERARY APPROACH TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: AN EVANGELICAL MODEL

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The increasing use of literary approaches in Biblical interpretation has left many evangelicals baffled. They usually take a stand either in opposition to this shift in interpretation, seeing it as another liberal intrusion, or they search for an acceptable way to integrate a literary perspective into a grammatico-historical methodology without surrendering an evangelical view of inspiration. Actually no extreme is necessary for an evangelical model or acquisition of a literary approach.

Literary approaches emphasize literary portions of the Bible and often insist that literary artifice is the Bible's primary characteristic. The popularity of literary approaches has arisen in part from the disillusionment that interpreters feel with the historical-critical method. Whereas historical methodology divides and subdivides texts for study, a literary approach seeks the unity of the text, trying to make connections with the literary nature of the canon, the book, and the immediate context.

Advocates of a literary approach to Biblical interpretation conceive of the shift away from the historical-critical method as a paradigm shift in hermeneutics. The shift in hermeneutical emphasis accompanies the current shift in western thought from the modern to the postmodern era. Cartesian dualism characterized the modern age and resulted in the mechanistic paradigms that saturated many disciplines. Literary scholars advance that the historical-critical method, a product of modernism, has failed to bring unified meaning to the Biblical text for the Christian community. They insist that the fragmentation that exists within theology proves their thesis.¹

Such scholars praise the literary approach "as an innovation in interpretation and not simply another tool comparable to source, form, or redaction criticism."² They believe that it is the only way to view Scripture as a unity. Literary critics maintain that textual unity results in literary approaches for two reasons. (1) As Northrop Frye states, the Bible "is as literary as it can be without actually being literature."³ That is, although one cannot apply all of the characteristics of secular literature to the Bible, it

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¹ M. Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 9-10

² T. Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 5

³ N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1957) 62

is certainly a literary work (2) To read the Bible as literature "is to restore the balance, to focus attention once more on the finished product"⁴ The approach is synchronic and seldom focuses on the historical development of the texts Instead literary critics emphasize the unity of the Bible in its present form

Evangelicals face the challenge of developing a Biblical hermeneutic with a literary approach that avoids two common pitfalls First, the subjective, liberal scholars generally view any narrative or literary text of Scripture as dubious in its historical reliability They often regard it as fiction and may even disregard it as in error Other subjectivists dismiss the authorial intent of the text, a perspective that spells death to Biblical hermeneutics based on historical revelation⁵ The second pitfall haunts conservative, rationalistic interpreters These scholars ignore the more literary passages of Scripture, often having no means by which to integrate the texts into a hermeneutic that calls for strict literalism in the propositional texts In the final analysis, evangelicals need "a critical use of recent literary approaches within the context of evangelical presuppositions"⁶

Leland Ryken's work offers such a paradigm, both consistent with evangelical presuppositions and useful within the framework of contemporary literary interpretation He believes that evangelicals

are witnessing a paradigm shift in how biblical scholars study and discuss the Bible This shift involves not only a growing awareness that much of the Bible is literature but also a tendency to use the methods of literary criticism when analyzing the Bible Evangelicals should participate in this movement, which holds immense promise but which to date has been dominated by nonevangelicals⁷

The present essay is an effort to examine Ryken's work in the context of recent literary approaches to Biblical interpretation and with a view toward advancing evangelical participation in this movement To facilitate my examination, I will survey Ryken's methodology alongside two other literary critics Amos Wilder and Northrop Frye Each scholar approaches the Biblical text with similar assumptions about its literary nature, but each differs in his overall view of the nature of the Biblical texts and the uses of imagery and symbolism in the Bible Finally, as a case study for interpretation the view of each author is applied toward the most literary of all Biblical books, the Apocalypse of John The scholars' differences are demonstrated in their applications to the Apocalypse

⁴ T R Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 42

⁵ K J Vanhoozer, "The Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology," *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987) 28-31

⁶ J P Newport, "The Challenge of Recent Literary Approaches to the Bible," *Beyond the Impasse? Scripture Interpretation, and Theology in Baptist Life* (ed R B James and D S Dockery, Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 64

⁷ L Ryken, "'Words of Delight': The Bible as Literature," *BSac* 147 (January-March 1990) 3

I. AMOS WILDER: THE BIBLE AS UNIQUE LITERATURE

A genre is the literary form or type that is used to convey meaning in a work of literature. By examining the genre, a critic should be able to understand a work in relation to other works. Wrapped in the genre, therefore, is the interpreter's expectation as he or she approaches the text. Nevertheless generic theory is problematic, for few genres are universally recognized or interpreted in the same way.⁸

For Wilder, the Bible's distinctiveness as literature lies in its generic uniqueness, which is demonstrated when it is compared with classical literature. He proposes that the Biblical forms cannot be differentiated from their content. The forms are inherently tied to their settings. Having evolved from the oral traditions that give them their content, the Biblical texts are written in peculiar literary forms and expose the unique experiences of the people of that time. Therefore Biblical texts cannot be studied in the same way as other literature.⁹ How does one recognize the difference? The distinguishing mark of Christian literature, Wilder claims, "is the divine action and covenant-dialogue."¹⁰

Furthermore the difficulty of studying the Biblical genres demonstrates their uniqueness. In fact, even designating the works of the Bible as "literature" is unsatisfactory and misleading. Wilder believes that the "usual tools for rhetorical genres and forms are at home in the classical and humanist traditions" but are inadequate when applied to the Biblical texts.¹¹

Wilder maintains that the dynamic character of the Bible is in its "mythical" nature. The Biblical writers employed mythological legacies to speak to their context. In this way the Bible gives a "total world representation," and cosmological, anthropological and theological aspects are carried throughout the wholeness of the text.¹² Therefore Wilder insists "that literalistic interpretation of the early Christian imagery should be challenged."¹³ He recognizes, however, that his view raises questions regarding the historicity and factuality of the Biblical texts. He responds that the truth of the texts

is linked with the outlook of the evangelists and the Early Church. Leaving aside the mistake of literalizing them, we should be at pains to put ourselves in the place of the writer and the first readers¹⁴

⁸ See J P Newport, "Representative Historical and Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *Faith and Mission* 3 (Spring 1986) 35, D E Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre," *Semeia* 36 (1986) 66, E D Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven Yale University, 1967) 72-73

⁹ A Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York Harper, 1964) 16-17, see also Wright, *Theology* 48-49

¹⁰ Wilder, *Language* 24

¹¹ *Ibid* 36, see also *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths Essays on Imagination in the Scripture* (ed J Breech, Philadelphia Fortress, 1982) 28-33

¹² Wilder, *Language* 128

¹³ *Ibid* 130

¹⁴ *Ibid* 131

Wilder believes that this transference is accomplished by asking, "How were these images understood then?"

Wilder posits that the answer may often be found in the literary archetypes. For Wilder, archetypes, as universal symbols, unite a society and provide human self-understanding. Such self-understanding cannot be achieved by analytic theology but must be conveyed through the imagery of art. Therefore he gives social significance to symbols and archetypes and determines that the important factor is the kind of symbol utilized to mediate illusion or reality. The verifiability of the reality is secondary.¹⁵

Wilder applies his program to the Revelation of John by calling for an approach that reaches beyond the common western categories and is more in keeping with the apocalyptic material of the age in which it was written. For instance, Jewish apocalyptic has roots in "pre-Israelite motifs and a generic mythology of chaos and order."¹⁶ Although modern humanity may find the symbols and motifs of apocalyptic literature to be outrageous, this genre spoke effectively to the people of the first century. The apocalyptic writer intends to unify the community of believers. As with every genre, apocalyptic brings speech to act and ontological happening to speech, by dramatizing "the group hierophany in a situation of broken continuities."¹⁷ Efforts to employ the term "apocalyptic" in the contemporary context, to contemporary events, demonstrates that the relationship of modern apocalyptic to its ancient counterpart is "ambiguous." The product is the use of Biblical symbols in an eclectic way.¹⁸

II. NORTHPROP FRYE: THE BIBLE AS A SYSTEM

Morgan and Barton declare that the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957 marked "the start of a renewed interest in literary history and theory in North America."¹⁹ In a subsequent work²⁰ Frye views the Bible as a self-enclosed system, woven together with language, myth, typology and metaphor to create a meaningful whole.²¹ Frye, then, is a classic structuralist who views literature as a system.²² He believes that questions of fact or truth are subordinate to the literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake. The individual text acts not only as its own world but also as a larger literary reality.²³

¹⁵ A Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature* (Cambridge Harvard University, 1958) 31, 47, *The Bible and the Literary Critic* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1991) 177

¹⁶ A Wilder, "The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic," *Int* 25 (October 1971) 441

¹⁷ *Ibid* 447

¹⁸ *Ibid* 450 Cf *Theopoetic Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1976) 10

¹⁹ R Morgan and J Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford Oxford University, 1988) 218

²⁰ Frye, *The Great Code*

²¹ Wright, *Theology* 56

²² See Longman, *Approaches* 27-37

²³ K J Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed D A Carson and J D Woodbridge, Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1986) 71

One should not, Frye believes, be concerned with the extent to which the Biblical world-text corresponds to reality as though this indicated the truth of the text. Literalistic readings of a text should be avoided. The literal basis for Biblical meaning does not lie outside of the text.²⁴ Frye believes that scholars miss the point when they dwell on whether a Biblical event is historical. He contends that only as myth does much of the Bible, including the crucifixion of Christ, have the power "to confront us with our moral bankruptcy."²⁵ For this reason Frye respects the Bible as the shaper of the symbols of modern western literature.

Nevertheless Frye denies that recognizing the mythical element underlying a genre of literature, such as a narrative, entails a disavowal of the truth of the text. In so doing one simply acknowledges the formal devices by which meaning is achieved. Frye uses as an example the U-shaped narrative of the life of Jesus, which, he argues, repeats the pattern of the history of Israel. Such a patterning is a statement about Jesus' significance and not an account of what actually happened.²⁶

Archetypes also figure prominently in the thought of Frye. He defines an archetype as "a typical or recurring image."²⁷ Archetypes, as a type of symbol, form the communicative element of literature that unifies the human literary experience. Frye denies that the fixture of historical content to the symbol is relevant to the meaning of the symbol. Instead, what is important is the use of the archetypal image as a conventional association for the common understanding and communication within humanity. He asserts that the idea of Christ represents such an image.²⁸

Frye describes the Apocalypse of John as a "mosaic of allusions to the Old Testament."²⁹ The visions of the author are visions of the true meaning of the Scriptures. The symbols of the destruction of the order of nature are

the destruction of the way of seeing that order that keeps man confined to the world of time and history as we know them. This destruction is what the Scripture is intended to achieve.³⁰

Furthermore Frye argues that there are two keys to understanding the Apocalypse. (1) It gives a panoramic vision of "marvels placed in a near future and just before the end of time." In this respect the reader participates in the vision passively because it is objective to the reader. Therefore (2) the Apocalypse "is essentially a projection of the subjective 'knowledge of good and evil' acquired at the fall."³¹ Finally, Frye instructs the interpreter that "the Bible deliberately blocks off the sense of the referential from itself: it is not a book pointing to a historical presence outside it, but

²⁴ Frye, *Code* 56.

²⁵ N. Frye, "The Expanding World of Metaphor," *JAAR* 53 (December 1985) 593.

²⁶ Frye, *Code* 169-178; see Wright, *Theology* 54.

²⁷ Frye, *Anatomy* 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 99, 100-102, 141.

²⁹ Frye, *Code* 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 136.

³¹ *Ibid.*

a book that identifies itself with that presence."³² In turn the reader is invited to identify himself or herself with the book in a reader-oriented, esthetic experience. The apocalyptic vision plays a key role in this hermeneutical circle. Frye declares that

the reader completes the visionary operation of the Bible by throwing out the subjective fallacy along with the objective one. The apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared.³³

III. LELAND RYKEN: LITERARY TEXTS AS TRUTH

Leland Ryken strongly disagrees with Wilder's viewpoint that the Bible's distinctiveness means that it cannot be studied with the tools of modern literary analysis. Furthermore he rejects the notion that all focus should be laid upon the identification of the structures of the Biblical text with no regard to its background or context.³⁴ In his view the Bible is literary by the same criteria applied to any other canon of literature. Therefore Ryken believes that one should begin by "placing biblical literature in the familiar framework of Western literature" and then observing "where and how biblical literature breaks out of this framework."³⁵ Doing so does not deny the uniqueness of the Biblical genres—primarily the genres of gospel, acts, epistle and apocalypse found in the NT. Each genre tends to be more literary than expository. The uniqueness, however, lies in the content and theological claims of the Biblical books rather than in the forms.³⁶

Ryken states that the Bible is inherently literary in both form and content. Nevertheless the Bible, and the NT in particular, mingles history, theological exposition, and literature. What, then, characterizes a literary approach to Biblical interpretation?

For Ryken a literary hermeneutic is "alive to the images and experiential concreteness" of the Bible.³⁷ Literature is used for communication when the author has a burden of meaning greater than himself and presents that meaning through images of experience. The reader is invited to enter the world of imagination and learn what truth is being communicated about life. Therefore in order to learn the truth that is present one must approach the text aware of its genre and method of communication. A literary approach to the Bible

resists the impulse to reduce literary texts to abstract propositions or to move beyond the text to the history behind it. This means a willingness to accept the text on its own terms and to concentrate on reliving the experi-

³² Ibid 137

³³ Ibid 138

³⁴ L. Ryken, *Words of Life A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1987) 14, "Literary Criticism of the Bible Some Fallacies," *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed K R R Gros Louis, Nashville Abingdon, 1974) 30-31

³⁵ Ryken, "Literary" 32

³⁶ Ryken, *Words of Life* 15

³⁷ Ibid 23

ences that are presented. A literary approach assumes that much of the meaning is communicated by means of characters, events, and images³⁸

The literary approach, however, does not supplant the historico-grammatical method. It complements it. Ryken affirms that "biblical literature is firmly embedded in historical reality"³⁹ Furthermore, he preserves a place for Biblical literature within the complete framework of theological significance. For Ryken, the historical nature of Biblical literature results in a virtual absence of fiction and authorial embellishment. Instead, the creativity of the Biblical authors lies in their conscious artistry, found in their selection of material according to unifying themes and with a sense of artistic proportion.⁴⁰

Ryken defines archetypes in a way similar to that of Wilder and Frye, affirming the universal importance of these literary images. He writes "An archetype is a symbol, character type, or plot motif that has recurred throughout literature."⁴¹ He explains the prevalence of archetypes by their relevance:

Archetypes occur throughout literature because they are also pervasive in life. These master images are the building blocks of the literary imagination—the forms to which the imagination gravitates when it organizes reality and human experience.⁴²

Furthermore, archetypes fall into a dialectical pattern of opposites. For instance, they may appear in patterns of ideal and unideal experience, or wish and nightmare.⁴³ Within such opposites lies the universal appeal of literature.

Ryken refers to the book of Revelation as an "anthology or compendium of literary genres."⁴⁴ Although the convergence of forms is unique, the forms themselves are familiar to literary criticism. For example, the book may be viewed as a story told as a series of visions instead of in a smooth narrative flow. Its linear sequence supports this view. Furthermore, the framework of the book has affinities with drama, and the form of epistle is used as a portal into the content of the book. Next, in both content and style, the book exhibits the qualities of an epic. Revelation is most often placed in the family of apocalyptic literature, showing commonalities with other apocalyptic literature of its day.⁴⁵ For Ryken, the book's symbolism is its most definitive trait as apocalyptic literature.

Ryken believes, however, that though the mode of presentation in Revelation is symbolic, the book nevertheless describes historical events that actually happen. "The question," Ryken clarifies, "is not whether the events

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ L. Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 19–20.

⁴¹ Ibid. 22.

⁴² Ryken, "Words of Delight" 26.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ryken, *Words of Life* 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 135–141, "Words of Delight" 141–143.

are historical but whether they are described *literally*.⁴⁶ In other words, the problem is not whether the events will happen but how they will happen.

Ryken applies this interpretive guide to Rev 12:1–2: “And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth” (NASB). According to Ryken, once the interpreter recognizes that the child represents Christ and pictures the incarnation, he or she can see that the passage does not literally describe the events surrounding Christ’s birth. Instead, “*it calls those circumstances to mind*.”⁴⁷ Ryken sees this as an interpretive key for entering the Apocalypse. He believes that one should approach any passage in Revelation with the question: “Of what theological fact or event in salvation history does this passage seem to be a symbolic version?”⁴⁸ Therefore the overall conflict of the woman and the dragon pictured in 12:1–17 speaks to the imagery of childhood within all people, and the beasts are symbolic counterfeits of Christ, exhibiting the qualities of the antichrists of which Jesus warned in the Olivet discourse.

IV. CONCLUSION

Literary critics are correct in their contention that the Bible should be viewed as a whole, not born of detached commentaries and interpolations. A literary approach upholds the integrity of the text, although it is by no means inherently kind to the Bible as an authoritative book. Furthermore literary approaches to interpretation remind us that pictures speak to the imagination and therefore can teach many things that analytical statements of fact cannot. The fusion of the two forms of communication in Scripture indicates God’s awareness of the way by which we come to know reality and thereby supports an evangelical view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Also, stressing the orientation of humanity toward community and the ability of symbols to speak meaningfully within a community should refresh evangelicals in the value of art and the role of the imagination in humanity’s desire to understand God’s activity among his people in history.

In Ryken and Wilder one finds viable ingredients for a Biblical hermeneutic that incorporates an appropriate view of literary artifice. Wilder provides a notable assessment of the influence of imagination on the Biblical material. He makes a valid effort to see the relationship of the texts to the divine, and he is correct that archetypes are to find their roots in the common origin of humanity. Furthermore he takes a step toward viewing texts as actions that, one must reasonably conclude, cannot be separated

⁴⁶ Ryken, *Words of Life* 141 (italics his)

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 142 (italics his)

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 143 Cf *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1984)

from their agents.⁴⁹ Symbols serve as canisters for historical content. In the Bible they function as inspired ways to communicate revealed truth, so they cannot be dismembered from the agent whose action produced them. One cannot, however, concede with Wilder that the historicity of the content of the Biblical symbols is negligible. In fact, the historicity of the event is the entire point for a literary hermeneutic. The literary form bears the content of history, which is the primary concern of the Biblical interpreter.

Likewise Frye's dismissal of the historicity of the events behind the text must also be rejected. One must oppose his lack of concern with the correspondence of the Biblical world-text to reality. His structuralism recedes into a reader-oriented subjectivism that is equally unacceptable and should be rejected by evangelicals forming a responsible postmodern hermeneutic.

With Ryken, therefore, one can affirm that literary artifice in the Bible functions alongside propositional and didactic texts as another form that conveys historical content. Indeed, this viewpoint is the best one for maintaining that the literary texts of Scripture are as inspired as the propositional texts. Theological meaning is simply being communicated in different forms. With which does one more readily identify: "Love thy neighbor as thyself," or "A certain man was going down to Jericho. . . .?"

This is not, however, to accept Ryken's methodology without qualification. As an advocate of a synchronic approach, Ryken refuses to engage in a scrutiny of the development or background of a text. He does not believe that one can be sure of the degree of conscious or unconscious artistry on the part of the Biblical writers.⁵⁰ Although his high regard for the Biblical text harmonizes with evangelical assumptions, his position allows room for the skeptic to question the degree of divine involvement in inspiration. He leaves himself without a strong stance on the authoritative content of the literary passages. With Ryken, therefore, one can affirm the need to stress the content of the literary portions of Scripture, but one must go a step further and affirm one ultimate Source for the inspiration of all portions of Scripture.

On this particular point the reflections of K. Vanhoozer are instructive. He contends that the authority of Scripture is multifaceted, and Scripture is infallible in its "illocutionary intent" as well as in its assertions. Therefore in the case of, for instance, the Psalms, God uses human "expressives," a literary artifice that communicates "something of the nature of human response when confronted with the majesty and character of God."⁵¹ The "expressives" are therefore normative responses because they speak about the One who provoked them.

⁴⁹ Vanhoozer, "Lamp" 52-55 Cf R Lundin, A C Thiselton and C Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1985) The importance of viewing the text as the action of a responsible agent has its roots in the later work of Wittgenstein Cf J H Gill, *On Knowing God* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1981) 110

⁵⁰ Ryken, *Literature* 22

⁵¹ Vanhoozer, "Semantics" 94

Further, Vanhoozer believes that the problem of truth or falsity is supplanted by the affirmation of Biblical authority. In this he is correct. A parable, which many scholars interpret as a fictional discourse, is in fact inspired in its content. Only scholars who incorrectly disregard fiction as error can fail to see the revelatory content of this artistic form.

Evangelicals underestimate the need to participate in the context of postmodern theological discussions. Literary approaches to hermeneutics represent one area—but just one area—that demands comprehensive evangelical responses. Perhaps in the works of Ryken such a comprehensive model is under way, but much more work needs to be done as nonevangelicals rush into the fray for theological dialogue with every conceivable replacement for modernist paradigms, usually at the expense of orthodox distinctives. After all, as Thomas Oden rightly points out, of all groups, evangelicals, born of Enlightenment rationalism through the heritage of fundamentalism, are the most truly postmodern.⁵²

⁵² This paper is a revision of an essay presented in 1991 to a hermeneutics seminar at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I am grateful to John P. Newport and the other seminar members for their helpful comments on that essay.