THE LITERARY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: PROMISE AND PITFALLS

Tremper Longman, III*

Many scholars claim that we are undergoing a paradigm shift in interpretive methodology today. The predominant historical paradigm is being replaced by a literary approach to the study of the Bible. Source, form and redaction criticism are assailed as inadequate or even unnecessary tools for the study of the Biblical text. As one reads the secondary literature, one feels an almost revolutionary attitude toward traditional modes of studying the Bible—a breaking of the shackles of history and also a feeling of freedom to approach the texts as wholes again rather than a need to divide them up.[1]

On the other hand it is very easy to find words of warning from all sides of the theological spectrum:

> There is something artificial in the idea of "the Bible as literature." Or rather, it can be artificial and contrary to the perception of both most believers and most unbelievers.[2]

> Those who talk of reading the Bible as literature sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about.[3]

> Whoever turns a gospel of Christ into a novel has wounded my heart.[4]

> The persons who enjoy these writings solely because of their literary merit are essentially parasites; and we know that parasites, when they become too numerous, are pests. I could easily fulminate for a whole hour against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over "the Bible as literature."[5]

The literary approach to the study of the Bible is both an old and a new phenomenon. It is old in that many ancient examples can be evoked of Biblical scholars applying principles from broader literary studies to the study of the Bible. The Church fathers frequently applied to the elucidation of Biblical texts

---

*Tremper Longman is associate professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

[1]J. D. Crossan, " 'Ruth Amid the Alien Corn': Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in *The Biblical Mosaic* (ed. R. Polzin and E. Rothman; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 199; cf. M. Fishbane, "Recent Work on Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981) 99.

[2]K. Stendahl, "The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture," *JBL* 103 (1984) 6.

[3]C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961) 10.

[4]Written by the Romantic intellectual J. G. Herder as quoted in F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) 120.

[5]T. S. Eliot as quoted in J. Barr, "Reading the Bible as Literature," *BJRL* 56 (1973–74) 12.

tools, concepts and techniques that they had learned in the study of classical literature. To substantiate this claim one might mention Jerome's scansion of Biblical poems into iambic pentameters[6] and Augustine's negative literary evaluation of the Biblical texts over against classical literature.[7] However, the literary approach is a new phenomenon in terms of the self-consciousness and rigor with which secular literary theories and methods are being employed toward the understanding of particular Biblical texts and toward the justification of broader theories of interpretation. The roots of the resurgence of a literary approach may be found in part in the work of James Muilenburg and Louis Alonso-Schökel in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Muilenburg, for example, advocated an approach to Biblical texts that treated them as literary wholes over against the enterprise of form criticism, whose impulse was to dissect the text.[8]

But Muilenburg did not explicitly utilize literary theory in his writings. This is another characteristic of the most recent writings in the area and appears to have been introduced into Biblical studies by scholars who were attracted to French structuralism both as a theory of reading and as (and some may feel that this is a contradiction) a way to explicate texts. A large number of studies have appeared bearing titles like "A Structuralist Approach to . . ." and "A Semiotic Approach to. . . ." Recently the word "deconstruction" has appeared in the literature, showing the new influence of Jacques Derrida on Biblical interpretation.

But what precisely is the literary approach to the study of the Bible? Many answers have been given, but—put simply—the literary approach as I use the term means to recognize that the Bible displays literary characteristics and thus to treat the Bible as if it were a piece of literature. At this point I am not identifying the Bible as a work of literature. I will discuss this more carefully at a later point in the paper. My comment here is clarified by Northrup Frye, who says that the Bible "is as literary as it can well be without actually being literature."[9] It recognizes that artful verbal expression is frequently encountered in the OT and NT and therefore employs tools and concepts used to study the formal features of literature.[10] It is a method for shedding light on artistic and rhetorical characteristics of the Bible. We will examine in more detail in what way Biblical narrative is literary or artistic when we look at the last pitfall of the approach.

We will begin with an examination of the potential pitfalls of a literary approach and then argue for its promise. To avoid anticlimax in the paper I will proceed from pitfalls that are less significant to those that are of the most importance.

---

[6]Discussed in J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University, 1981) 152.

[7]Ibid., pp. 159–160.

[8]J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1–18.

[9]N. Frye, *The Great Code* (London: Ark, 1983) 62.

[10]A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), esp. chap. 4.

1. The first difficulty with the literary approach is that the field of secular theory and the related discipline of linguistics are divided among themselves. There is a great deal of infighting about the basic questions of literature and interpretation. Thus a number of different schools of thought seek domination in the field. The Biblical scholar faces a dilemma at this point. Students of the Bible find it difficult enough to keep abreast of their own field without keeping current with a second one. Of course it is the explosion of information in all disciplines that leads to the narrow focus of modern scholarship. The usual result is that Biblical scholars follow one particular school of thought or else one particularly prominent thinker and use that as the guide to a literary approach. Due to a desire to seem current or avant-garde it is commonly the most current theory that is adopted. Of course there is also a lag between Biblical studies and the rest of the disciplines. Francis Schaeffer described how this works in general.[11] A new philosophical approach comes on the scene. It influences art, literary theory, sociology, music and then finally Biblical studies. In any case this process may be observed here. Deconstruction is a philosophical movement identified most closely with Jacques Derrida, gaining prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s and just now making an impact on Biblical studies.

My point, however, is that the hard-and-fast-school divisions in literary theory are imported into Biblical studies with little methodological reflection. Every major movement in literary theory of the past forty years is mirrored in the work of Biblical scholars: New Criticism (Weiss, Childs),[12] Frye's archetypal approach to literature (by Frye himself and L. Ryken),[13] phenomenology (Detweiler,[14] Ricoeur), structuralist (Jobling, Polzin, McKnight),[15] Marxist (Gottwald,[16] liberation theologians), feminist (Trible, Reuther, Fiorenza),[17] deconstructionist (Crossan, Miscall).[18]

[11]F. A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968) 13–84.

[12]M. Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984); on Childs see the comments by J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 140-157.

[13]Frye, *Code*; L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

[14]R. Detweiler, *Story, Sign, and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary-Critical Methods* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[15]D. Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament (I Samuel 13–31, Numbers 11–12, I Kings 17–18)* (JSOTSup 7; Sheffield: Almond, 1978); R. M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress/Scholars, 1977); E. V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[16]N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

[17]See the collected essays in *JSOT* 22 (1982).

[18]J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1980); P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia/Chico: Fortress/Scholars, 1983).

The task of the apologist is to analyze the deep philosophical roots of each of these schools of thought. This, I believe, needs to be done. As a Biblical scholar working on method, however, I can recognize positive (though perhaps distorted) insights that each of these schools provides. I agree with John Barton when he says that "all of the methods. . .have something in them, but none of them is the 'correct' method" and when a few sentences later he states that our methods are best seen as "codifications of intuitions about the text which may occur to intelligent readers."[19]

Among the many positive contributions that may be gleaned from each of these schools of thought I would (and this is just a random list to give examples) include the New Critical insight that we must focus our interpretation on the text rather than on the author's background, the structuralist attention to literary conventions, and feminism's and Marxism's emphasis on the themes of sexual and economic justice in literature. And even deconstructionism against its will can give us an insight into the effect of the fall on language, the schism between signifier and signified.[20]

In each case the secular theory leads to a new imbalance. New Criticism rightly attacked certain forms of appealing to the author's intention for the meaning of a text, but it went too far in restricting the interpreter to the text alone—the text as artifact—leaving both author and reader out of the picture. Marxist and feminist readings (both, by the way, are reader-response theories) distort the text by having their themes be their only interpretive grids. Deconstructionists use their insight into the slippage between sign and object to attack theology or any type of literary communication.

Summarizing the first pitfall: The literary approach easily and often falls into the application of one particular and usually current literary theory to the Biblical text. Biblical scholars become structuralists; they become semioticians. The problem is that Biblical scholars—except in a very few exceptional cases—cannot maintain expertise in a second field, and therefore they fall prey to the current theoretical fashion.

My response to this is to be eclectic and to "plunder the Egyptians." My basic theoretical beliefs are Christian, and any methodological insights that fundamentally conflict with those convictions must be rejected. But, due to common grace, helpful insights may be gleaned from all fields of scholarship.

2. The second pitfall follows from the first. Literary theory is often obscurantist. Each school of thought develops its own in-language. *Actant, signifie*, narratology, interpretant, *différance*, aporia—these are only a few among the many esoterisms of the field.

An illustration of the type of obscurantism that I am referring to is found in the structuralist analysis of the book of Job by Robert Polzin. Following the method of the famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, Polzin (after lengthy discussion) concludes by summarizing the message of the book of Job with the

[19]Barton, *Reading* 5.

[20]M. Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 217–237.

following mathematics-like formula: $Fx(a):Fy(b)\cong Fx(b):Fa-1(y)$.[21]

Now I am arguing not against technical terminology but against glorying in it. When new technical terms are introduced into scholarly discussion they must be carefully defined. This does not happen in most theoretical discussions.

The solution is of course not to throw out the literary approach but to seek clarity of expression. It is interesting to observe that the two books that have had the biggest impact on Biblical scholarship in the area of literary approach are Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*[22] and James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*[23] on prose and poetry respectively. Both are low on technical jargon and high in terms of help in the explication of texts.

3. The next danger is that of imposing modern western concepts and categories on ancient Semitic literature. If done, according to some critics of the literary approach, it could lead to a radical distortion of the text. On the surface of it, it looks as if the danger is real. Modern literary theory develops its concepts from its encounter with modern literature. Propp and Greimas developed their theories of the structure of folktales by analyzing Russian stories.[24] This schema has been applied to Biblical stories by many, notably by Roland Barthes.[25] Theories of Hebrew metrics are usually based on systems employed in other modern poetic traditions. The oral basis of much of Biblical literature is "uncovered" by means of comparisons with classical and Yugoslavian oral literature.[26]

The list could be lengthened considerably. This appears to be an insensitivity toward what Anthony Thiselton calls the two horizons of the act of interpretation.[27] The ancient text comes from a culture far removed in time and space from that of the modern interpreter. This must be taken into account during the act of interpretation, or the exegesis will be distorted by reading modern values and presuppositions into the ancient text.

Kugel is the biggest critic of the literary method from this perspective. He expresses his reservations theoretically in an article entitled "On the Bible and Literary Criticism"[28] and practically in his rightly much-acclaimed *The*

---

[21]Polzin, *Structuralism* 75.

[22]New York: Basic, 1981.

[23]See n. 6.

[24]V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas, 1968); A.-J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983).

[25]R. Barthes, "La lutte avec l'ange: analyse textuelle de Genèse 32.23–33," in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique*, pp. 27–40.

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

[27]A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

[28]*Prooftexts* 1 (1981) 99–104.

Idea of Biblical Poetry. Here he points out (1) that "there is no word for poetry in biblical Hebrew" and thus "to speak of 'poetry' at all in the Bible will be to impose a concept foreign to the biblical world,"[29] and (2) that no single characteristic or group of characteristics is capable of differentiating prose from poetry in the Hebrew Bible. True enough, parallelism occurs in prose and meter does not exist. Thus Kugel avoids the designation "poetry" to describe a distinct genre in the OT, preferring instead to speak of "high style."

While agreeing with Kugel to a large extent, I believe he goes too far in rejecting the generic term "poetry." If one reads a psalm and then reads a chapter of Leviticus, one can see and feel a difference. That difference may be summarized on one level by contrasting the short, terse lines of the psalm with the lengthy lines of Leviticus. There is also a heightening of certain rhetorical devices in the psalm that normally would not be found to the same magnitude in the Leviticus section: parallelism, metaphors, less restriction on the syntax, etc. In this terseness and heightened use of rhetorical devices we see a literary phenomenon related to our own poetry as distinguished from prose. Of course Kugel recognizes most of this, but he still hesitates to call the psalm poetic. His hesitation stems from the fear of distorting Biblical materials by imposing foreign literary constructs on them. But on still another level, not discussed by Kugel as far as I can remember, is the relative deviance from common speech in our two passages. Leviticus is closer to common speech patterns than the psalms passage. And if anything characterizes poetry over against prose in any literary tradition, it is that the former is further removed from common, everyday speech than the latter. True, we are still speaking of a relative difference between prose and poetry. I would not in the least deny an element of literary artifice to the prose sections of Scripture. But the difference is substantial enough to be called a generic distinction, and our modern categories of prose and poetry are the closest to the phenomenon we discover in the Bible.

I have struggled with this issue particularly in the area of genre theory. My dissertation was on fifteen Akkadian texts that I described as fictional autobiographies, and since many would not date the beginning of autobiography until Rousseau in the seventeenth century I needed to justify my genre identification.[30] I had to admit that there is not universal generic similarity. New genres develop; old ones die out.[31] In addition, certain cultures utilize some genres and neglect others. For example, in the ancient world there is nothing comparable to the modern novel. In the same way, twentieth-century American literature contains few if any omens. Nevertheless, though a culture-free genre system does not exist, the native literary classification of each culture (or lack of it, as in the case of prose-poetry in Hebrew) need not be adopted (uncritically) in order to identify the genres of that culture.

The separation of etic and emic approaches to literature deals with these

---

[29]Kugel, *Idea* 69.

[30]T. Longman, III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (forthcoming from Eisenbrauns).

[31]A. Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," *New Literary History* 2 (1970/71) 199-216.

cultural determinants in literary classification.[32] The emic seeks native designations and classification of literature. The advantage of this method is that the researcher gains insight into the native consciousness of a particular text and also the relationship between that text and others bearing the same designation. The etic view of literature imposes a non-native grid or classification scheme on the texts in order to categorize them. While there is always the danger of distorting understanding of the texts by imposing foreign standards on them, it must be pointed out that the Israelite scribes were not concerned with a precise and self-conscious generic classification of their literature. Both were innovations of the Greeks. While the Biblical authors identified a few different forms of speech—song ($šîr$), proverb ($mā šāl$), and so on—and these provide helpful keys to research, they are not systematic or rigorous in their categorization (nor would one expect it of them).

4. The next pitfall is the danger of moving completely away from any concept of authorial intent and determinant meaning of a text. Here we are moving in a very sticky theoretical area. Paradoxically enough, I will later emphasize the other pole—that the literary approach focuses our attention more on the text than on the author during the act of interpretation. I believe that these two poles are harmonizable.

But first let us deal with the danger of moving away completely from any concept of the author in interpretation. If there is anything that unites secular theory since the advent of New Criticism in the middle of this century it is the denial of the author. Traditional criticism invested a lot of stock in the author. S. Bermann describes the attitude of traditional criticism:

> If we read histories, biographies, and Keats's own letters with enough scholarly patience and skill, we could be confident of "getting the poem right," "understanding it," "interpreting its truth."

Thus it is pivotal to know that Keats wrote his sonnet "Bright Star" with its themes of love and death as he was caring for his brother Tom who was dying of tuberculosis (and infecting John) and also that he was sobered by his mortality in his passion for Fanny. "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Lovliness and the hour of my death, O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute."[33]

We have all heard the arguments against such approaches—and they are powerful. How is it possible to reconstruct an author's intention in a literary work, since he may not even have been conscious of it himself? The poet often is his own worst interpreter. How can we get back into the mind of the poet?

---

[32]K. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), chap. 2; V. Poythress, "Analysing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions," *SJT* 32 (1979) 319-331. The emic/etic distinction was first proposed in linguistics, where it was used to distinguish native understanding of language from modern linguists' analyses. Pike was the first to generalize the distinction into a principle that could be used in the study of any aspect of culture. V. Poythress further refined the concept. For the tendency of taking linguistic categories and applying them to other disciplines see J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981).

[33]S. Bermann, "Revolution in Literary Criticism," *Princeton Alumni Weekly* (November 21, 1984) 10.

This problem is obviously heightened in the study of an ancient text.

It was the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s who moved away from authorial intent, a view formalized by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their description of the "intentional fallacy" and their concomitant focus on the text alone as verbal icon.[34] The intentional fallacy, as defined by Abrams,

> claimed that whether the author has expressly stated what his intention was in writing a poem, or whether it is merely inferred from what we know about his life and opinions, his intention is irrelevant to the literary critic, because meaning and value reside within the text of the finished, free-standing, and public work of literature itself.[35]

There is here an obvious shift away from the author that continued and heightened as we move from New Criticism to structuralism and to deconstruction. The emphasis has been redirected. Literature is an act of communication that may be described as a dynamic between poet-poem-audience, or between author-text-reader. Attention has been drawn by New Criticism and structuralism primarily to the text, and by reader-response theories (including those of Iser and Fish, feminism and Marxism) to the reader and his constitutive participation in the formation of meaning in the literary act.

There has been one major voice of dissent to this trend. E. D. Hirsch[36] posits an author-centered interpretive method. The goal is to arrive at the author's intent. This, he believes, provides an anchor of determinant meaning in the sea of relativity unleashed by other theories.

I will not comment on this pitfall until later. Let me simply say here that Hirsch provides a needed counterbalance to the trend in secular theory—although he is considered to be something strange by his fellow literary critics.

5. The last pitfall is indeed the one about which I have the most concern. Along with the move away from the author in contemporary theory one can also note the tendency to deny or severely limit any referential function to literature. "The poet affirmeth nothing," states Philip Sidney. Frank Lentricchia follows the history of literary theory for the last forty years along the theme of the denial of any external reference for literature.[37] Literature is not an insight into the world but a limitless semiotic play.

Perhaps this modern tendency goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign. He argued that a sign is composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. But there is no natural connection between the two. Rather, the relationship is arbitrary—that is, conventional. One can see this with words. For example, according to Saussure the fact that different languages have dif-

---

[34]W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," reprinted in *The Verbal Icon* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1954) 3–18.

[35]M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) 83.

[36]E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University Press, 1976).

[37]F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University Press, 1980).

ferent words for "horse" indicates that the relationship is arbitrary and determined by custom. According to Saussure and the semiotic tradition that emanates from his writings, the sign does not point to an object out there in reality. It is not the relationship between a word and a thing. After all, it might point to a nonexistent or metaphorical horse, and thus the sign unites an acoustical image with a concept rather than a word with a thing.[38]

In any case the rupture between the literary and the referential is there in modern literary theory. And, as one might expect, the recognition of the literary characteristics of the Bible has led on the part of some scholars to an equation of the Bible and literature. There follows an acceptance of the view that literary texts do not refer to anything outside of themselves. In particular they do not make reference to history. This leads on the part of some to a complete or substantial denial of an historical approach to the text. Most often this takes the form of a denial or denigration of traditional historical-critical methods. Source and form criticism particularly are attacked. The following quotations may be taken as representative not of all who adopt the literary approach but of some:

> Above all, we must keep in mind that narrative is a *form of representation*. Abraham in Genesis is not a real person any more than the painting of an apple is real fruit.[39]

> Once the unity of the story is experienced, one is able to participate in the world of the story. Although the author of the Gospel of Mark certainly used sources rooted in the historical events surrounding the life of Jesus, the final text is a literary creation with an autonomous integrity, just as Leonardo's portrait of the Mona Lisa exists independently as a vision of life apart from any resemblance or nonresemblance to the person who posed for it or as a play of Shakespeare has integrity apart from reference to the historical characters depicted there. Thus, Mark's narrative contains a closed and self-sufficient world with its own integrity. . . .When viewed as a literary acheivement the statements in Mark's narrative, rather than being a representation of historical events, refer to the people, places, and events *in the story*.[40]

> As long as readers require the gospel to be a window to the ministry of Jesus before they will see truth in it, accepting the gospel will mean believing that the story it tells corresponds exactly to what actually happened during Jesus' ministry. When the gospel is viewed as a mirror, though of course not a mirror in which we see only ourselves, its meaning can be found on this side of it, that is, between text and reader, in the experience of reading the text, and belief in the gospel can mean openness to the ways it calls readers to interact with it, with life, and with their own world.[41]

The last writer further states: "The real issue is whether 'his story' can be true

---

[38]Ibid., p. 118.

[39]Berlin, *Poetics* 13.

[40]D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 3–4.

[41]R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 236–237.

if it is not history."[42] For him the answer is yes.

Similar evaluation may be seen in the hermeneutics of Hans Frei, who feels that the major error in both traditional critical and conservative exegesis is the loss of the understanding that Biblical narrative is history-like and not true history with an ostentive, or external, reference.[43] Further, Alter's brilliant analysis of OT narrative is coupled with the assumption that the nature of the narrative is "historicized fiction" or "fictional history."[44]

The result of this approach is a turning away from historical investigation of the text as impossible or irrelevant. The traditional methods of historical criticism are abandoned or radically modified or given secondary consideration. Concern to discover the original *Sitz im Leben* or to discuss the tradition history of a text languishes among this new breed of scholar. This worries traditional critical scholarship, so that we find among recent titles ones like that of Leander Keck: "Will the Historical-Critical Method Survive?"[45] Now to see historical criticism on the brink of destruction is something that is more likely to bring expressions of joy than of terror to the face of most evangelicals. But of course the danger cuts two ways. Both traditional criticism and evangelicalism have a high stake in the question of history.

The danger summarily stated and already illustrated in the quotations above is this. According to Wellek and Warren the distinguishing characteristics of literature are "fictionality," "invention" and "imagination."[46] To identify Genesis as a work of literature pure and simple is to move it out of the realm of history. This seems to be the tendency of some if not much of the literary approach to the study of the OT.

But there is an easy way out of this, hinted at earlier with our citation from Frye. Genesis is not really literature, or at least it is not literature in this sense, or—better—it is more than literature. A second quotation from Frye is relevant here: "The Bible possesses literary qualities but is not itself reducible to a work of literature."[47]

On the one hand, Genesis is not reducible to a work of fiction. On the other hand, we are justified and required to apply a literary approach because it possesses literary qualities. Another distinguishing characteristic of literature is that it is self-consciously structured and expressed. As the Russian formalists put it, language is "foregrounded." There is literary artifice in the parallelism between the first three days of creation and the last three (as framework hypothesis has pointed out—whether this parallelism is mirroring the actual sequence of God's creative acts is a moot point here). There is artifice in the

---

[42]Ibid.

[43]H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

[44]R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

[45]An article in *Orientation by Disorientation* (ed. R. A. Spencer; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980) 115-127.

[46]R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1942) 26.

[47]Frye, *Code* xiv.

symmetrical structures of the flood story (as pointed out by Wenham) and the Babel story (as pointed out by Fokkelmann)—or, to go a little more afield, the Solomon narrative (as pointed out by Dillard).[48]

The point is that we do not have "objective," "neutral," "unshaped" reporting of events. Of course this is impossible anyway, since there is no such thing as a brute fact (as C. Van Til has argued). An uninterpreted historical report is not even conceivable.

But it must be admitted that Genesis, for example, is not attempting to be as close as possible to a dispassionate reporting of events. Rather, we have proclamation—with the result that the history is shaped to differing degrees. The point is that the Biblical narrators are concerned not only to tell us facts but also to guide our perspective of and responses to those events.

So OT prose narrative may be described as selective, structured, emphasized and interpreted stories. The author/narrator controls the way we view the events. Thus plot analysis, narrator studies, character studies, point-of-view analysis, examination of plot retardation devices, etc., may be helpful (though definitely partial) approaches toward the understanding of a text.

The question of historical truth boils down to the question of who ultimately is guiding us in our interpretation of these events. If men alone, then artifice may be deceptive; if God, then it may not. To recognize this is to recognize that a literary analysis of an historical book is not incompatible with a high view of the historicity of the text—even one like my own, which affirms the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture in the area of history.

Let me insert an aside here. I do not want to give the mistaken impression that I am historicizing all of Scripture at this point. I believe that the generic intention of each book and section of book needs to be analyzed before attributing an historical reference to the book.

From the side of theory, appeal may be made to those who argue that literature is an act of communication between the writer and the reader that functions in more than one way. Besides a poetic function the text may also have a referential function, according to Roman Jakobson's communication model of literary discourse.[49] Of course the poetic function may become so dominant that the referential function ceases to exist, so that truly "the poet affirmeth nothing" to the opposite pole when there is a concerted effort to rid the text of self-referential language (i.e. metaphor)—an impossible goal—like in scientific discourse. I see the Biblical text for the most part somewhere in between.

Thus while we must recognize the potential pitfalls of a literary approach we see that they are avoidable. Positively, though, what value is there in a literary approach? Why bother developing such an approach and applying it to the text?

---

[48]G.J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1978) 336–348; J. P. Fokkelmann, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen/Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1978) 11 ff.; R. B. Dillard, "The Literary Structure of the Chronicler's Solomon Narrative," *JSOT* 30 (1984) 85–93.

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

I have already hinted at the answer a number of times: While not to be reduced to literature pure and simple, the Bible is amenable to literary analysis. Indeed, some of the most illuminating work on the Hebrew Bible in the past decade has been from a literary point of view, often done by literary scholars. Biblical scholars do not always make the most sensitive readers, particularly traditional critics. C. S. Lewis states:

> Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. . . .These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.[50]

But in what ways or why is a literary approach beneficial? I would like to list just a few.

1. It assists us in coming to an understanding of the conventions of Biblical storytelling. Alter affirms that

> every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.[51]

The literary text is an act of communication from writer to reader. The text is the message. For it to work—that is, communicate—the sender and receiver have to speak the same language. The writer through the use of conventional forms sends signals to the reader to tell him how he is to take the message. We all know such obvious generic signals as "Once upon a time" and "A novel by. . . ." Poetry is recognizable by all the white space on the page.

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

Now in ordinary reading much of this happens automatically. We passively let the narrator shape our interpretation of the event he is reporting to us, we make an unconscious genre identification, etc. But when we interpret the text it is important to make these explicit. This is doubly so since the Bible is an ancient text and the conventions employed are often not ones we are used to.

Let me conclude this point with an observation: Much of the Bible is literature in the sense of story. Why is that the case? Why did God not reveal to us his mighty acts in history in the form of a *Cambridge Ancient History*—or, better, why is the Bible not in the form of a systematic theology? The ultimate answer to this is to appeal to God's wisdom, but I still wish to suggest two positive functions of the literary form of the Bible. (1) Defamiliarization and

---

[50]C. S. Lewis, *Fern-Seed and Elephants* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975) 106, 111.

[51]R. Alter, "A Response to Critics," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 113–117.

distanciation are concepts discussed by Russian formalists who describe the function of art as "the renewal of perception, the seeing of the world suddenly in a new light, in a new and unforeseen way."[52] To cast truth in the form of a story—to present it in an artistic fashion—leads the reader/hearer to pay closer attention to it, to be shocked to reconsider what might otherwise easily become a truism. A proverb is a good, focused example. Which speaks more powerfully: "Speak righteously" or "The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom, but the perverted tongue will be cut out" (Prov 10:31)? Which communicates more vividly: the statement "Love your neighbor as yourself" or the story of the Good Samaritan? (2) Literature appeals to the whole man, it involves our whole being—intellect, will, emotions—to a greater extent than, say, the Westminster Confession.

2. A literary approach draws our attention to whole texts. We have a tendency even as evangelicals to atomize the text, to focus our attention on a word or a few verses. Traditional critical scholarship has the same problem for a different reason: Form and source criticism lead it to disbelieve that the whole text is original. The literary approach asks the question of the force of the whole.

This is why so many evangelical scholars have seen the literary approach as serving an apologetic function. If it can be shown that the Joseph narrative, the flood narrative (Wenham), the rise-of-the-monarchy section (1 Samuel 8-12, Eslinger), the book of Judges (Gooding) all are examples of literary wholes, then cannot we dispense with source criticism?[53]

3. Work in literary criticism helps us to understand the reading process. Our focus must be on the text. But, in the words of Geoffrey Strickland: "All that we say or think about a particular utterance or piece of writing presupposes an assumption on our part, correct or otherwise, concerning the intention of the speaker or writer."[54] However, we must also recognize the role of the reader and his predisposition as he approaches the text. Now I do not want to advocate the view of some reader-response theorists that the reader actually creates the meaning of the text. Rather, the text imposes restrictions on possible interpretations. But the reader's background and his interests will lead him to attend to certain parts of the Bible's message more than other parts and more than other people. It is in this connection that I would want to introduce the relevance of contextualization and multiperspectival approaches to the text. This is also the place to situate the value of what might be called ideological readers even when they are unbalanced. Feminists and liberation theologians read the Bible with focused glasses that often lead to distortion, but they do

---

[52]F. Jameson, *Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: University Press, 1972) 52.

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

[54]G. Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism? Thoughts on How we Read* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981) 36.

bring out important issues and themes that other less interested readers miss.

But the point in this section is that reading involves the interaction of the writer with the reader through the text, so that any theory that concentrates on one of the three to the exclusion of the others may be distorted.

More could be said about the promise and benefits of a literary approach. But in the final analysis the proof is in the pudding. Does the approach lead to illuminating exegesis? The answer is "Yes," and it is demonstrated in such insightful analyses as those of R. Alter, D. J. A. Clines, C. Conroy, A. Berlin, R. A. Culpepper, D. Gunn and others.

Already we are all more or less consciously or subconsciously aesthetic critics. The work I am doing is to make it more conscious than subconscious and thereby also make it (hopefully) more accurate—that is, more true to the text.