A *COMPLETE HANDBOOK* of

# *LITERARY FORMS*

# *in the BIBLE*

LELAND RYKEN

"Coming from a world-renowned expert in the literary forms of the Bible and drawing on the expertise that can come only from a lifetime of college teaching, this marvelous new book will take its place as an essential reference work that should be in the library of everyone who seeks to study or teach the Bible in greater depth. Highly recommended."

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"Here is a reader-friendly handbook that will significantly enhance one's understanding of biblical reference materials and of the Bible itself. What a wonderful tool for pastors, laypeople, and students alike, who will now be able to benefit from Leland Ryken's wise insights and marvelous literary skills. I heartily recommend this volume."

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"A ready reference for scholars and general readers who wish to understand the Bible better and in its own terms, Ryken's handbook needs to be on every serious Bible reader's shelf and used often. A profoundly helpful resource."

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"In this essential handbook, Ryken guides us to a proper understanding of the many literary forms of Scripture. Pastors and all readers of the Bible will deepen their understanding of God's Word if they read this book cover to cover and keep it nearby for future reference."

**Tremper Longman III,** Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

"Leland Ryken's handbook is a well-conceived, concisely written, hugely helpful resource for students and teachers alike. Far from turning the Bible into 'mere' literature, Ryken draws us deeper into the authoritative and inerrant truths of the Scriptures. Just as we cannot know Christ apart from his incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth, so we cannot fully know the Bible until we understand the literary forms in which it was written."

**Louis Markos,** Professor of English, Scholar in Residence, and Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities, Houston Baptist University; author, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis*

"Our kind Father has gone to great lengths to speak to us, yet sometimes our finite minds struggle to comprehend the complexities of his Word. This book will greatly enhance your ability to understand confusing passages, as well as see deeper richness in the old, familiar stories. Ryken helps you become more skillful at interpreting the Bible and knowing how to apply it accurately. The result will be a great increase in your love and admiration for our heavenly Father, who shares his heart with us in profound poetry, striking stories, colorful dialogue, and vivid imagery. Those who love Scripture, or want to love Scripture more, should read this book!"

**Barbara Duguid,** author, *Extravagant Grace*

"This is a genuinely helpful resource for all readers of the Bible, but it is an especially excellent reference for teachers and students of the Bible as literature. Ryken's volume will help readers experience, enjoy, and understand the Bible in new ways. The breadth of entries is thorough and truly impressive. Individual entries are concise but include enough explanation and examples to successfully illustrate each literary form discussed. This book is written by an expert in literature and the Bible, and it shows."

**David V. Urban,** Associate Professor of English, Calvin College

"This uniquely useful and accessible handbook will be a favorite among the tools used by serious students of the Bible. In recent decades, attention to the literary structures of the Bible's various genres has become prominent. With all of the distractions of the modern world, study tools like this will help Christians to be imbued with the mind of Christ through his Word. I highly recommend this superb contribution to biblical studies."

**Gregory Reynolds,** Pastor, Amoskeag Presbyterian Church, Manchester, New Hampshire; author, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age*; editor, *Ordained Servant: A Journal for Church Officers*

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## *in the BIBLE*

LELAND RYKEN

::: **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

For Tim and Marie Friesema

# Introduction

The rule of end stress. Epithet. Encomium. Archetype.

What do these terms mean? How do they relate to reading and teaching the Bible? Is it even important to know what the terms mean? The answer to the last question is yes: if we know what the terms mean and how they apply to reading and teaching the Bible, we will see a great deal more in the Bible than we would otherwise.

## The Purposes of This Handbook

This handbook is designed to meet two main needs. First, it defines and illustrates terms that we regularly encounter as we read commentary on the Bible or hear it expounded. The regularity with which these terms confront us depends on the nature of our contact with such commentary and teaching. In the ordinary course of events, most Bible readers and students sometimes encounter terms that leave them baffled.

The second need that this handbook meets is even more important. It is a fact of life that we cannot use something that we do not know exists. The literary forms discussed in this handbook actually exist in the individual texts that make up the Bible. Knowing about them will uncover a great deal of the meaning that is in the texts but that remains hidden from view if we do not know about the forms and how they function.

So the second purpose of this book is to raise awareness about the Bible. If we know about a convention of storytelling known as the rule of end stress, we are much more likely to see how the

parables of Jesus function. If we know that a lament psalm has five main parts, we are more likely to discern how such a psalm is structured and how it secures its effects. If we have been informed of a general difference between Old Testament beatitudes and New Testament beatitudes, we see things much more clearly when we encounter these two types. If we know about the Gospel subtype known as the pronouncement story, we are equipped to see the connection between the event in Jesus's life that is narrated and the saying by Jesus that correlates with the event.

A handbook that merely defines terms is of very limited usefulness. This handbook goes beyond mere definition to include (1) illustrations that clarify the definitions, (2) analysis of the ingredients that make up a given form or genre, (3) methods of analysis that are possible if we are aware of the traits of a given form, and (4) a selective indication of where the form can be found in the Bible. No attempt is made to be exhaustive; often the label itself is all a reader needs in order to get analytic mileage out of an entry. Numerous entries in this handbook receive a full treatment in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

A related point is that while many of the forms that appear in this handbook are complex or technical and therefore require lengthy discussion, others are self-evident and may even seem not to merit entries. But it is important to include these latter terms because they are, in fact, literary forms and techniques. For example, the term *repetition* hardly needs definition, but throughout history it has been a standard category of rhetoric and literature, so we need to see it in the list of literary forms of the Bible.

This handbook is intended to provide practical help to the general Bible reader as well as to scholars who teach the Bible. At every point, a practical test has been applied by the author of this handbook, who included only terms that are in his "active vocabulary" as a teacher of the Bible for general audiences. One large area of specialized terms that was thereby ruled out was the

complex group of classical rhetorical genres (e.g., judicial rhetoric, epideictic rhetoric, deliberative rhetoric, antistasis, hypophora, and dozens of others).

### The Nature of This Handbook

This handbook is an alphabetically arranged listing of the literary forms that appear in the Bible and that are regularly used by biblical and literary scholars. The concept of literary form is a broad one, and the paragraphs that follow unpack the multiplicity of meanings that characterize the term *literary form*. It is useful to note at the outset that the handbook itself shows what is meant by the label *literary form*. For many readers, that might suffice. For others, though, the following anatomy of things that are covered in this handbook will prove useful.

We should begin by noting that the concept of literary form as a whole concerns the *how* of an utterance as distinct from the *what*. Later in this introduction, I will assert that those two cannot be separated. But here at the outset, it is useful to give the concept of literary form a broad definition: literary form is anything pertaining to *how* a passage expresses its content. Under that umbrella, we can note the following specific categories:

1. *Literary terms.* At the broadest level, this handbook follows the model of reference books that are plentiful in the field of English and American literature. These reference books are called dictionaries or handbooks of literary terms. All terms from these handbooks that apply to the Bible appear in this handbook. It turns out that the overlap between the conventional literary handbooks and a handbook of literary forms in the Bible is smaller than one might expect.

2. *Genres.* The word *genre* refers to a type or kind of writing. Narrative (story) and poetry are the largest genres. But both of these have dozens of subgenres, such as rescue story, murder story, love poem, or hymn. This handbook is based on the premise that all genres automatically fall into the category of literary forms,

and over half of the entries in this handbook fall into the category of genres.

3. *Literary techniques*. In quite a different vein, literary and biblical scholars regularly speak of the techniques that an author has used. For example, storytellers almost invariably mingle two ways of telling a story—summarized narrative and dramatized action. We need to understand those two terms before we are likely to see them in a story. Poets often employ the technique of theme-and-variation within a poem; we need to have this technique defined before we can see it at work in a poem.

4. *Motifs*. The literary term *motif* is the most flexible of all such terms, and it is correspondingly difficult to pin down. Motif is different from genre. A dictionary definition of *motif* is simply "pattern." Usually a pattern is present in many literary passages or texts. For example, meeting one's future spouse at a well is a motif that appears in multiple stories in the Bible. Writers of Wisdom Literature regularly use the motif of the two ways (the contrasting paths of good and evil). In the Gospel of John, there are nine instances when a person misunderstands a statement that Jesus utters, making the misunderstood statement a motif in John's Gospel.

5. *Archetypes and type scenes*. Motifs merge imperceptibly with the categories of archetypes and type scenes. An archetype is a plot motif (e.g., crime and punishment), character type (e.g., the trickster), or image/symbol (e.g., light and darkness) that recurs throughout literature and life. Archetypal plot motifs appear in this handbook because they constitute a type of story, but character types appear sparingly and symbols not at all because they do not easily fit the category of literary forms. A type scene consists of a set of ingredients that converge in a certain story pattern. For example, the type scene of encountering God on a mountain consists of (1) a summons from God, (2) a journey from an outlying place to the mountain that has been stipulated, and (3) an encounter with

God after the person has arrived at the top of the mountain. Such a type scene (or story pattern) fits the definition of a literary form.

6. *Figures of speech.* Figurative language is comprised of such categories as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and paradox. These categories naturally find a home in all handbooks of literary terms, being forms by which poets express their content.

7. *Rhetorical devices.* Especially in the ancient world, written and spoken discourses followed well-defined rules for what needed to be included, and in what order. This handbook has incorporated such technical terms sparingly, but some of them are universal and therefore useful for any Bible reader. For example, what the ancients called *inclusio* consists of bracketing a passage with the same statement. Literary scholars are more inclined to call it envelope structure. Psalm 8 is structured on this rhetorical device, with identical opening and closing verses.

8. *Stylistic traits.* There is also a cluster of terms that name features of style that do not fall into the categories listed above. They are important and need to be defined. For example, when speakers or poets employ what is called the "high or exalted style," it is virtually inevitable that epithets (titles for people or things) will be part of the utterance. Thus, in Solomon's public prayer at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6), the epithet "O Lord, God of Israel" appears repeatedly. At the other end of the literary continuum, when writers fill their text with concrete references to everyday experience, we speak of the style as falling into the category of literary realism or plain style.

9. *Formulas.* It is customary for biblical and literary critics to speak of a literary formula, and sometimes this is simply the best term to use. For example, when the prophet Amos repeatedly says in his oracles against the nations (Amos 1), "for three transgressions . . . and for four," he is using a number formula. Similarly, when biblical prophets predict coming judgment against a nation or group, they regularly employ the "woe formula": "Woe to . . ." This handbook adduces examples of formulas sparingly, but we

should note in passing that one scholar has found approximately 175 examples of formulas just in the Psalms (of the type "incline your ear to me, O Lord" or "blessed be the Lord").

### Are Modern Literary Terms Valid for the Bible?

A certain antiquarian mindset wishes to limit the analytic terms that we use when interacting with the Bible to those that were present in the historical eras when various parts of the Bible were written. The charge is that the use of modern terminology is an anomaly. Four considerations refute this claim.

First, no scholarly study of the Bible in any discipline limits itself to the terminology that was current in Bible times. A modern student of Hebrew and Greek grammar and language uses terms that the writers of the Bible did not use. Scholars who study the historical nature of the Bible use the best terms available to a modern historian. Theologians do not limit themselves to the theological terms found in the Bible; for example, the Bible does not use such familiar modern terminology as *salvation history*, *covenant theology*, and *soteriology*. Biblical scholars regularly use modern terms that would baffle the biblical writers—terms such as *hermeneutics*, *exegesis*, *authorial intention*, and *speech-act theory*.

Second, the reason scholars in these disciplines do not limit themselves to the analytic tools that were present in the biblical world is that the new terms are useful and essential. Every responsible scholar—in fact, any person of ability in any sphere—uses the best tools that are available for a task. If we use only the terms, methods, and analytic tools that were available to the biblical authors and their original audiences, our analysis is rudimentary and impoverished. Conversely, our familiar modern terms and methods of analysis unlock the biblical text.

Third, there is a pragmatic test: if modern terms and tools of analysis *work*, of course we should use them. To speak of plot conflict as an ingredient in stories is simply to name what is present in a story. To speak of the archetypes of the Bible is to name

forms that are present. If we declare the concepts of plot conflict and archetypes invalid because biblical writers did not use these terms, we are left with gaping holes in our understanding of the Bible and our ability to unfold its meaning to others.

Finally, modern literary terms and analytic tools are ways of talking about what is actually present in the biblical text. They do not add anything to the text and they do not distort anything. Such forms as travel story, controlling image pattern, and dramatic irony are already present in the text. If we are denied the terms by which to name and discuss them, we are in effect "bound and gagged" in our interaction with the Bible: we know that certain literary forms are present in the text, but we are arbitrarily denied the opportunity to express them.

### What This Handbook Is *Not*

It is useful to clarify that this handbook is not a dictionary of the images and symbols of the Bible. Such dictionaries are plentiful, most notably *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. There is a limited sense in which an individual symbol such as light or water can be said to embody the meaning of an author, and as such meets the criterion of *how* a passage expresses its content. Nonetheless, this is such a stretch of the definition as to be beyond the purview of this handbook.

### Why the Literary Forms of the Bible Are Important

Something needs to be said in conclusion about the importance of literary forms in regard to the Bible. There is a prevailing indifference to this subject, and this needs to be challenged. The indifference is based on the unstated premise that the literary forms of the Bible are "merely the vehicle" for the really important thing—the content. In this line of thinking, the literary forms of the Bible are *only the forms* in which the content comes to us.

But the order of words is incorrect in that formulation. The literary forms of the Bible are not "only the form" in which the

content is packaged. They are rather *the only form* in which the content is expressed. All content in a piece of writing is communicated *through form*. Without the form, no content exists. Form is meaning. Meaning is embodied in form. It is an illusion to think that the Bible possesses a content apart from its forms.

Did God inspire the literary forms of the Bible? It is a logical inference from what we know about the inspiration of the Bible that God did inspire the forms. According to 2 Peter 1:21, the authors of the Bible "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." If God inspired the writers of the Bible to write as they did, it is a logical inference that the forms in which the authors expressed themselves were part of that inspiration. The literary forms of the Bible deserve an attention that is commensurate with their inspiration by God.

The most obvious lesson that this handbook reveals is that the Bible is much more infused with literary forms and techniques than we realize. In fact, I predict that anyone who browses in this book for ten minutes will be shocked by the extent to which literary forms and techniques are present in the Bible. This sophistication of literary technique must signal some degree of self-conscious artistry on the part of the writers, as well as the writers' having been initiated into the forms and techniques of literature that were part of the common possession of authors in Bible times. All of this literary and rhetorical presence in the Bible cannot have been accidental. The authors of the Bible did not invent all of the forms covered in this handbook every time they sat down to compose. The forms were part of a storehouse that was available to authors.

# A

## ABUNDANCE, STORY OF

A narrative genre (type of story) in which the main action focuses on the unusual fullness or even excess of something. *Images* of abundance are found throughout the Bible, and within that multiplicity is a group of *stories* that embody the principle of abundance. In the Bible, abundance can be either physical or spiritual. The creation story (Genesis 1) is the first story of abundance in the Bible, as the sheer quantity of detail, the energy of action, and the vocabulary of *every* and *multiply* lend an atmosphere of abundance to the story. This abundance continues in the story of life in Paradise (Genesis 2), where God "made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (v. 9), and where Adam and Eve were given "every tree of the garden" from which to eat (v. 16). The story of Abraham is the story of a man who would become "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (v. 3), and who would have descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16), the stars in the sky, and the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17). Stories of abundance were a favorite of Jesus—he told parables of a hundredfold harvest, a mustard seed that becomes a tree reaching into heaven, and stewards who double their master's investment while he is on a trip.

In addition to full-fledged stories of abundance such as those noted above, there is a subgenre of "shorthand" stories of abun-

dance in which we are given only a glimpse or plot summary of a larger story. When Jesus told his disciples that those who leave possessions and family for his sake "will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29), he gestured toward a larger story of abundance. In a similar way, when Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), he painted a miniature picture of the whole story of abundance that the life of faith entails. Some of the promises in the Bible are cast in the form of stories of abundance: "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap" (Luke 6:38).

The general effect of the stories of abundance in the Bible is to alert us to the nature of God (who is a God of abundance) and his desire to bless his people. This genre also expresses an essential feature of God's spiritual kingdom, which is an abundant kingdom. By way of contrast, an anthology of English or American literature does not yield an immediate list of stories of abundance.

## ACROSTIC

An Old Testament poem in which the successive units begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in consecutive order. The units might be lines, verses, or clusters of verses. In Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, and 145, the first words of the unfolding verses begin with letters from the Hebrew alphabet in sequential order. The encomium in praise of the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31:10–31 follows the same principle. Psalm 37 consists of twenty-one stanzas (mainly, but not wholly, pairs of verses) arranged according to the sequence of the Hebrew alphabet, while in Psalm 111, each line (rather than each verse) begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. The most elaborate acrostic poem in the Bible is Psalm 119. The poem is comprised of twenty-two eight-verse units. The units unfold according to the Hebrew alphabet, but in addition, all eight verses within each unit begin with the letter that the unit as a cluster highlights.

Of course, this feature of the original text does not survive in translation, but as English readers we can admire the degree of conscious artistry that we know that the poet imposed on the material. An acrostic is an instance of literary form contributing to the artistry and beauty of an utterance. Additionally, there is a sense of completeness when the entire alphabet appears (along the lines of our "A-to-Z" formula), as well as a sense of orderliness that results when the letters of the alphabet appear in consecutive order. The scheme may also have served a mnemonic ("remembering") function in an oral culture.

## ADVENTURE STORY

A story that specializes in the extraordinary—something beyond the routine. The word *adventure* is synonymous with excitement. To attain this excitement, adventure stories are built out of stock ingredients, such as the following: variety of action; remoteness of settings; marvelous or supernatural events, settings, and characters; danger and suspense; heightened conflict; and spectacular feats. This set of ingredients, in turn, often depends on such plot staples as storms, disguises, shipwrecks, battles, journeys through dangerous landscapes, chases, hiding, arrests, and escapes (including narrow escapes).

We ordinarily encounter adventure stories in works of fiction. The result is that our immediate tendency is to assume that the genre of adventure story is irrelevant to the Bible, which records events that really happened. But this response is unwarranted. Because of the heavy incidence of the marvelous and supernatural in the Bible, the biblical stories continuously fall into the genre of the adventure story. The adventure stories of the Bible differ from fictional adventure stories by virtue of having actually happened. The world of the Bible is one in which streams stop flowing, the earth opens up to swallow evil people, food miraculously appears, and a boy with a slingshot kills a giant in armor. Settings that were familiar to the original audience are remote in time and place for

modern readers, making the events seem adventurous. Most stories in the Bible have some affinity with the genre of the adventure story. Their factual nature should not be allowed to obscure that they are made up of the familiar ingredients of adventure stories.

### A FORTIORI

A rhetorical device and form of logical argument based on a comparison of two things. The name comes from a Latin phrase that literally means "from the stronger" and can more loosely be understood as meaning "how much more so." The logical relationship between the two items under comparison is that if the first is true, then the second is "all the more" true. What is true of the first item is true of the second for a similar but even stronger reason. The *a fortiori* formula appears in the discourses of Jesus and in the Epistles: "If God so clothes the grass, . . . how much more will he clothe you" (Luke 12:28); "not one [sparrow] is forgotten before God; . . . you are of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6–7); "if the blood of goats and bulls . . . sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ . . ." (Heb. 9:13–14).

### ALLEGORY

A work of literature, usually a story, in which many of the details have a corresponding "other" level of meaning. This technique is akin to symbolism in the sense that a detail in the text stands for something else. A symbol, however, is a freestanding, individual unit, whereas allegory implies a continuous and coherent string of second meanings. Jesus's parables are allegories in which numerous (and sometimes most) details in the stories stand for other things. Jesus himself interpreted every detail in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9) as having an allegorical "other" meaning (vv. 18–23), except for the sower. An allegorical story requires a reader to figure out the symbolic or "other" level of meaning.

The nature of allegory has been rendered complex because of an abuse called *allegorizing a text*. This should not be confused with

*interpreting an allegorical text*. To interpret an allegorical text is to attach secondary meanings to a text that the author designed to be an allegory. To allegorize a text implies foisting a second level of meaning on details that the author did not intend to be allegorical. Virtually any text can be allegorized, but that does not make the process legitimate.

There are not many allegorical texts in the Bible. Parables are the chief repository. Jesus's discourse about the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18) is an autobiographical allegory in which Jesus told the story of his atoning life and death by means of a story of a shepherd and his sheep. Many of the visions in the Prophetic Books have the quality of allegory. For example, the account in Zechariah 5 of a flying scroll that destroys houses and of a woman sitting inside a measure container that two women remove to a distant land is an allegorical passage about God's judgment against evil and his removal of evil from his people. The vision of a dragon (Satan) who attempts to destroy the son (Christ) of a woman (Israel) but who is prevented from doing so (Revelation 12) is an allegorical story of Satan's inability to destroy Christ's redemptive mission during his earthly life.

The interpretive principle to keep in mind is that an allegorical story has inherent properties (an inner logic) that requires us to view it as an allegory. Chief among these is that the story does not make complete sense at a literal level, thereby prompting us to look for an allegorical level of meaning. In the absence of such an inner logic, we need to resist all attempts to impose a second level of meaning on a text—allegorizing the text, in other words.

## ALLUSION

A reference to literature or history. With an allusion, an author consciously refers to a written text from the past or to a historical event. This means that we should not use the terms *allusion* or *alludes to* so loosely as to cover all instances when an author refers to something. Sometimes an author actually quotes from an ear-

lier text, but usually the link is obvious without quoting. When in Psalm 114 the poet speaks of how "Israel went out from Egypt" and the "sea looked and fled" (vv. 1, 3), he alludes to the exodus and to the passage through the Red Sea on dry land.

## ANAPHORA

A category from classical rhetoric that denotes repetition of a word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or poetic lines. For example, the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12) all begin with the formula "Blessed are . . ." Verses 3–5 of Psalm 103 contain a sequence of five successive lines beginning with the pronoun *who* ("who forgives all your iniquity, / who heals all your diseases," etc.). Anaphora is common in formalized or "high-style" prose passages (such as the Beatitudes in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount or the encomium on love in 1 Corinthians 13) and in poetry. To speak of anaphora as "parallel clauses" is equally accurate.

## ANNUNCIATION STORY

A story in which an angel or human agent announces to a barren woman that she will become pregnant and bear a child. A set of ingredients converges in an annunciation story in a way that fits the category "type scene": a barren woman is visited by an angel or receives an oracle via a human agent (such as Eli to Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:17); during this encounter, an announcement is delivered to the woman that she will conceive a child; the woman responds with faith and rejoicing; she conceives and gives birth to a baby; and the child of promise (a son) is extraordinary, set apart for unusual service to God and others. Examples of annunciation stories in the Bible are those of Sarah and her son Isaac; Manoah's wife and her son Samson; Hannah and her son Samuel; Elizabeth (via her husband Zechariah) and her son John; and Mary and her son Jesus (the climax toward which the predecessors point). Annunciation stories in the Bible feature an element of supernatural or

miraculous intervention by God into human history and testify to his power and providential control of people's lives.

## ANTAGONIST

A character or force in a story that stands opposed to the protagonist. The protagonist is the "first struggler" in a story—the person whom we as readers accompany as the story unfolds. The antagonist is in conflict with the protagonist. In most cases, we sympathize with the protagonist(s) and dislike the antagonist(s), but this is not a fixed rule. For example, Jonah is the ignominious protagonist of the book that bears his name, and his antagonist is God. Most antagonists are characters external to the protagonist, but a tendency within the protagonist can serve as an antagonist. In the story of Cain, for example, Cain is in conflict with his own evil impulses (Gen. 4:5–16), which God pictures as a personified evil when he confronts Cain before the murder of Abel (v. 7).

## ANTHROPOMORPHISM

A portrayal of deity in human form. References to God's hand or foot, or to his changing his mind, are examples of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is a figure of speech and must be understood as nonliteral. In primitive religions, anthropomorphism often signals a belief about what the gods are literally like, but the writers of the Bible make it clear that they know that God is a supernatural and spiritual being. They are not primitives but poets with metaphoric imaginations.

## ANTIHERO

A literary protagonist who lacks the conventional qualities of a hero. Because an antihero fills the role of protagonist within a story but does not live up to the expectations of a hero, we immediately feel a dissonance. The term *antihero* comes from modern literature; in that context, the antihero embodies the nihilism and negations of the modern age. We need to dissociate the biblical

antihero from all such connotations. In place of them, the biblical antihero embodies important spiritual principles.

The starting point for seeing this is Paul's statement that God did not choose many who "were wise according to worldly standards, not many . . . powerful, not many . . . of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world" (1 Cor. 1:26–27). The biblical narratives give us many examples. Gideon is the most fully drawn antihero of the Bible—a reluctant hero who tried to disqualify himself when God called him to lead his nation (Judges 6). When offered the conventional reward for military success, kingship, Gideon declined on the ground that God is the true deliverer (Judg. 8:23). Similarly, in Paul's autobiographical vignettes in the Epistles, he portrayed himself as weak and unimpressive (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:10; 12:7–10). In the songs of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and Mary (Luke 1:46–55), God is pictured as "deheroizing" the exalted figures in society and elevating those without heroic claims. The apotheosis of the antihero comes in Isaiah 53, where the suffering servant is praised for acts and qualities that consistently run counter to those that characterize the heroes of the world (including those portrayed in most literature). Biblical antiheroes show the degree to which the values of the Bible stand opposed to the success ethic that has captured the allegiance of the human race through the ages.

## ANTITHETIC PARALLELISM

Two lines of poetry in which the second line states the truth of the first line in a contrasting way. For example, "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, / but the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps. 1:6). When the coordinating conjunction *but* is absent, the contrast is more subtle; we might need to ponder the text before we see the contrast between the two lines: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; / profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Prov. 27:6). Multiple contrasts are expressed in those two lines—wounds vs. kisses (representing criticism vs. flattery), friend vs. enemy, and (implied) the

constructive intention ("faithful") of the friend's criticism vs. the deceptive flattery represented by the "profuse" gestures of good will from an enemy.

**APHORISM** (adjective form: *aphoristic*)

A concise, memorable statement. *Aphorism* is synonymous with such terms as *saying*, *proverb*, and *epigram*. The Bible is continuously aphoristic, though this quality is lost in colloquial translations that do not retain the succinctness of the original authors. The most conclusive proofs of the aphoristic quality of the Bible are (1) the ease with which we remember its terse sayings and (2) the fact that the Bible always gets the most space in collections of famous sayings in the English language (as in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*).

**APOCALYPSE/APOCALYPTIC WRITING**

A genre that is difficult to define, partly because it merges with the overlapping genres of visionary writing, prophecy, and eschatological visions of the future.

We can begin by placing apocalyptic writing within its larger genres. The umbrella genre is fantasy—literature in which many of the events, characters, and settings are nonempirical; that is, they do not exist in our world. Biblical fantasy portrays real events and characters, but not in a literal way. A large province within fantasy is visionary writing, which envisions an alternative to the world in which we live (see VISIONARY WRITING). Apocalyptic writing is a subgenre within visionary writing. The Greek word for "apocalypse" means "unveiling or revelation," and apocalyptic literature chiefly unveils a world beyond and other than our own.

Apocalyptic writing is characterized by the following ingredients: supernatural agents in the cast of characters (angels and demons, for example); miraculous events; otherworldly settings for the action (usually heaven); strange or fantastic animals (such as

dragons); animal symbolism; color symbolism; number symbolism (such numbers as three, seven, ten, and twelve are understood to have specific meanings); cataclysmic destruction of nature and the earth; a cosmic stage for the action (for example, the entire earth, including its sea and sky); and forces of nature, such as storms, wind, or the sea, as agents in the story.

Apocalyptic writing includes a strong element of denunciation and judgment of the present evil world system, along with a prediction of its end and pictures of an alternative world to the evil one that we know. The world that we enter in apocalyptic writing is dualistic, clearly divided between forces of good and evil, which are engaged in an ongoing conflict.

All of the foregoing traits create a strong sense of otherness and strangeness as we read. This fits in well with the idea that apocalypse is an unveiling of a reality beyond the earthly. Disorientation is part of the strategy of apocalyptic writing, which is subversive of the human tendency to think that the visible world as we see it at the present moment is all that exists. The transformation of the present earthly reality is a leading motif.

The ingredients noted above are presented in a distinctive structure. Apocalyptic writing is not packaged in a smooth narrative flow. The characteristic unit is a brief snapshot or vignette. The snapshots are often presented as dreams or visions, arranged as either a successive pageant or as a kaleidoscope of constantly changing moments.

Apocalyptic writing can describe either what will happen throughout history or at the very end of history, and it can deliver a message of either doom or salvation. The second half of the book of Daniel and the New Testament book of Revelation might be considered the touchstones of apocalyptic writing in the Bible. But the genre actually appears in many places, including Jesus's Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24 and Mark 13) and eschatological passages in the Epistles. Vast parts of the Old Testament Prophetic Books consist of exactly this kind of material.

# E

## ECHO

A rhetorical form in which something that has been introduced into a work is echoed later in the work, either once or multiple times. Echo can be viewed as a specific form of the more general principle of repetition. An example of the technique of echo within a poem occurs in Psalm 84, where the poet introduces the domestic motif of the temple being a "home" in verse 3, then incorporates later references to "those who dwell in [God's] house" (v. 4) and to being "a doorkeeper in the house of my God" (v. 10). In Psalm 1, the image of the assembly in verse 1 is echoed in verse 5, with references to a judgment hall and "congregation." An example of echo within a story occurs in the book of Ruth. In the nighttime encounter on the threshing floor, Ruth requested that Boaz "spread [his] wings over" her (3:9). This echoes an earlier comment that Boaz made, describing Ruth as having taken refuge "under [God's] wings" (2:12).

The concept of echoing extends across books throughout the biblical canon, and not just within individual poems or stories. When Sarah proposed that Abraham produce a child through her servant Hagar, we read that Abraham "listened to the voice of [Sarah]" (Gen. 16:2). This echoes the terminology that we find in the story of the fall, where we read that Adam "listened to the voice of [his] wife" (Gen. 3:17). In the story of Ruth, Boaz commended Ruth for having "left your father and mother and your

native land and [come] to a people that you did not know before" (2:11). This echoes God's call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

The technique of echo holds huge interpretive implications. At the simplest level, it is part of the artistry of a work, showing the care with which a poet (for example) works out the unity and coherence of that work. But often rich meanings are hidden in the echo. In the book of Ruth, for example, when Boaz spoke of Ruth finding refuge under God's "wings" (2:12), he had no inkling of the role that he would play in giving Ruth refuge beneath his own "wings" (3:9). The fact that the author of Genesis chose to use the same formula of listening to the voice of one's wife for the story of the fall and the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar predisposes us negatively toward the decision. By means of the terminology that Boaz used to commend Ruth for leaving her native land for a land that she did not know before, Ruth becomes a latter-day Abraham in our minds—a hero of faith as Abraham was.

Of course, a further dimension of echo exists in the vast interlocking network of references that makes up the Bible as a whole. Hundreds of details are echoed throughout the Bible, all combining to form the story of salvation history. If we include this network of references, probably no rhetorical form is more important in the Bible than echo.

## ELEGY

A funeral poem written on the occasion of the death of a person known to the poet and (usually) close to the poet. Through the ages, certain stock motifs have made their appearance in elegies: references to the circumstances of death; praising or eulogizing of the deceased; recollection of past friendship; and lament or grief over the loss. The only poem in the Bible that includes all of these conventions is the elegy David composed on the occasion of the death of his friend Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19–27). In a variation on the

basic pattern, the book of Lamentations consists of five elegies on the metaphoric death of the city of Jerusalem.

But the presence of elegy in the Bible does not end with these instances. The adjectival form *elegiac* means "having the quality or tone of an elegy." This label is regularly applied to works that express a sorrowful mood or that are permeated by a sense of irretrievable loss. With this concept in mind, we can see that vast parts of the Old Testament Prophetic Books have an elegiac ingredient in them.

## EMBLEMATIC BLAZON

A love poem that praises ("emblazons" or "blazons forth") the attractiveness of the beloved by listing his or her physical traits and comparing them to objects in nature or other areas of life. A poem ranks as a straight blazon if it catalogs the beautiful features of the beloved. It becomes an *emblematic* blazon when the poet uses extravagant metaphors or "emblems," to which the features of the beloved are compared. The label by which this genre is known comes from the love poetry of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but the genre itself goes all the way back to the Song of Solomon and other ancient love poetry.

The Song of Solomon is the Bible's repository of emblematic blazons. This collection of love poems contains four full-fledged emblematic blazons—three of them praising the woman (4:1–7; 6:4–7; 7:1–5) and one the man (5:10–16). But there are numerous additional passages in the Song of Solomon that use the same technique of praising the superiority of the beloved by comparing her or him to objects in nature. In chapter 1, for example, the woman is compared to "a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (v. 9) and the man to a bag of perfume (v. 13).

The emblematic blazon is the very touchstone of poetic refinement and a high point of the rhetoric of romantic compliment. For it to emerge this way in our thinking, we need to follow the right interpretive rules for this genre. We can understand those rules by considering a specimen passage. Here are five comparisons that

the male speaker makes in Song of Solomon 4:1–3: eyes like doves; hair like a flock of goats leaping on the slopes of Gilead; teeth like a flock of ewes that have come up from washing; lips like a scarlet thread; and cheeks like the halves of a pomegranate. The first rule of interpretation is that the comparisons are (1) not literal and (2) not primarily visual and often not visual at all.

The primary principle in the comparisons is the superlative quality of the beloved's features—the "best of the best" principle. The comparisons express the value that the speaker sees in his beloved, not a visual correspondence. For example, goat hair produced the most valuable cloth in Bible times, and the color scarlet had associations with royalty. Additionally, the comparisons capture certain qualities of the beloved's features—the gentleness of doves as a feature of the beloved's eyes; the whiteness of sheep newly washed as an image of the attractive whiteness of her teeth; and the halves of a pomegranate as an expression of the nicely rounded shape of her cheeks. The writer who uses an emblematic blazon is not painting a picture of the beloved (aside from our general awareness that he is praising the beloved's physical appearance). Instead, he is associating her physical features with conventional standards of value and with certain qualities that are embodied in the objects to which the beloved's features are compared.

The emblematic blazon is a high point of extravagant poetry. In fact, much of our attention flows to the ingenuity of the poet's comparisons and not to the physical features of the beloved. The form is considered ridiculous and embarrassing by readers and interpreters who do not follow the right rules of interpretation. The individual comparisons that make up an emblematic blazon need to be analyzed according to the rules of interpretation noted above. Figuring out the points of connection in the individual comparisons is a pleasurable exercise. The disparagement of the poetic technique of the Song of Solomon among some Christians and from some pulpits is dishonoring to the Bible as God's Word.

See also BLAZON.

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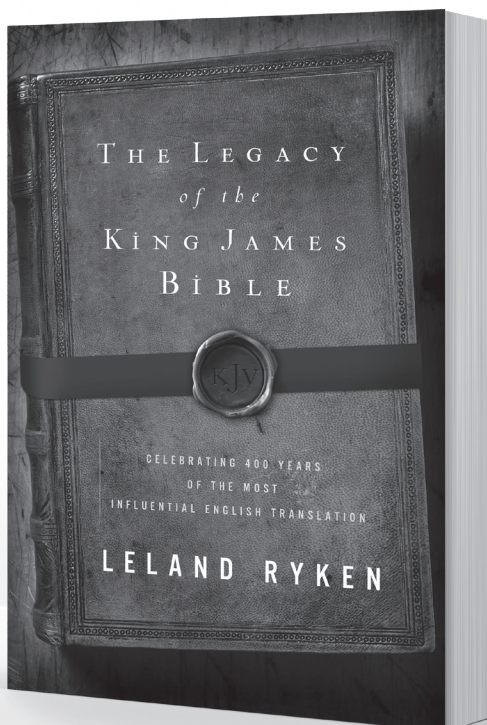


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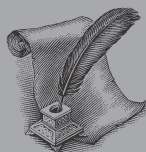
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