



## Reading Glasses: Literary Criticism

By Brennan Breed

Bible scholars have several different ways of studying and appreciating biblical texts. These methods are like reading glasses that allow readers to focus on specific aspects of the text.

These lenses are called “critical” methods, in the sense of the related Greek word *krino*: to judge, or to discern. So with literary criticism, for example, scholars are not criticizing the Bible or claiming it is a work of fiction—rather, they are using literary techniques to analyze how a biblical text functions by looking at characters, plot, setting, genre, and language.

With critical approaches, Bible scholars learn more about the work and make judgments about its meaning.

### Why Literary Criticism Came To Be

Until the last century, modern biblical scholars tended to be concerned with one question: What *really* happened in Israelite and Judean history? When a typical biblical scholar sat down to study the Bible, he or she would primarily ask the questions:

*Who* wrote the different books that made up the Bible?

*When* did they write them?

*What* actually happened in history at the time of writing?

These scholars were using *historical criticism*, and they were primarily interested in finding out how historically accurate the Bible was.

Other scholars had a hunch that some books of the Bible were written by several different authors and put together as one book. They wanted to know more about the original authors and to identify what sections of a book they had written; this is *source criticism*. Other scholars tried to figure out when and how biblical books were edited and put into their forms familiar to people today; this is *redaction criticism*.

Over time, however, a growing number of people wondered if the overwhelming focus on the “real history” behind the Bible was obscuring the enjoyment and study of the Bible itself. Many scholars starting in the mid-twentieth century found a new interest in reading whole books of the Bible, discussing what they meant and how they functioned as literary works. Eventually this approach found the name *literary criticism*.

## What Biblical Literary Criticism Is

Imagine how you would tell the story of your day so far: you would have to decide what was worth saying and what wasn't worth saying. You would also need to tell the story in a particular way, with a particular vantage point, with some carefully chosen information to introduce certain people and situations. You would have to make choices because you can't include everything—it would take too long to tell your story! You can also imagine that other people could tell your story a different way and still capture something true about what happened.

It's easy to see that every story can be told in many different ways and still be about the same event. Even true or historically accurate stories contain a point of view, characters, dialogue, plot, and require the author to make choices about what to include, and what to exclude. Literary critics ask about the *way* every story is told and what every story *means* by way of its narrative choices and emphases.

It is important to note that literary critics of the Bible usually think that historical and archaeological questions are important and valid. Most of the time, the tools and presuppositions of literary critics are informed by discoveries of archaeologists and hypotheses of historians. They do not generally disagree with source critics or redaction critics; they simply say that the literary questions are just as important as (if not more important than) the questions about the history behind the text. In general, literary criticism uses historical and archaeological findings as a background against which to read ancient texts, but sets aside questions about a particular biblical text's historical accuracy in order to focus on the actual language of the Bible.

As an example, think of Psalm 102. Many biblical scholars before the rise of literary criticism would ask questions such as: Who wrote this psalm? When did they write it, and what were the political, social, and religious circumstances at the time of its writing? Was the author physically sick (cf. Ps 102:5)? Who were the enemies, and what were their names (Ps 102:8)? What was the original form of this psalm, and was it ever edited? When was it included in the book of Psalms, and who is responsible for its inclusion? Why is it number 102 instead of number 103 or 101?

Literary critics do not attempt to answer these sorts of questions. When it comes to the book of Psalms, it's not hard to see why: it's nearly impossible to know who wrote Psalm 102, since the title simply says it is "a prayer of one afflicted," and most people throughout history have been afflicted at one point or another. No names are given and no specific information is included about what might be afflicting the speaker. Even more importantly, the book of Psalms has been important for Jewish and Christian communities (among others) *because* it is rather vague about historical matters. The whole book seems to have been purposefully crafted to apply to many people in various social and personal situations so that it could be used as a

prayer book. Instead of focusing on historical identifications, literary critics ask questions such as: How does this psalm work as a poem? What kinds of imagery and metaphor can we find in it? What is the characterization of the speaker, of the enemies, and of God? How does the poem's rhythm or other sonic qualities add to the meaning of the poem?

Literary critics also ask about the types of writing, or *genres*, that people used in the ancient world. For example, when we read something that begins with the words, "Once upon a time," we know we are about to hear a fairytale, and we expect certain things in the story (like monsters, dragons, maidens and magic). However, if we read something that begins with the words, "Dear Margaret," we know we're about to read a personal letter, and we expect certain things in a letter (like a salutation and an introduction). Figuring out these categories for ancient literature is a task called *form criticism*, and it is another set of "lenses" that literary critics use.

Among poetry such as the psalms, for example, form critics distinguish between lament psalms, thanksgiving psalms, praise psalms, and didactic psalms. Among narratives such as the book of Genesis or the New Testament Gospels, form critics distinguish between genealogies, miracle stories, call stories, vision reports, controversy stories, parables, and discourses (or speeches). Form criticism can be a very helpful tool; knowing that a story is a parable will certainly change our expectations about how to understand it!

### **Literary Criticism and Biblical Narratives**

Literary critics do much more than just categorize writings by genres. When literary critics are working with narratives, they also ask about a biblical story's plot, or the sequence of events that the story relates. This is called *narrative criticism*, which like form criticism, is a subset of literary criticism. Even though source critics have parceled out the book of Genesis into four (or more) different original documents, each demanding to be read separately from the others, literary critics can ask questions about the overall plot of the book of Genesis as it moves from the origin of the world (Gen 1-11) to the origin of the Israelites (Gen 12-50).

Even though redaction critics have noted that the compilation of the book of Genesis required the insertion of brief introductions (such as Gen 5:1a), literary critics suggest that a reader can even make sense of a story told piecemeal by several authors. For example, a question about plot may be the following: how does the plot of Genesis switch from a universal focus and shift to follow a particular family in chapters 11-12? Is it done abruptly or smoothly, straightforwardly or with dramatic irony, linearly or with flashbacks or flash-forwards? Do some parts of the plot move quickly, while others move slowly? Most importantly, why does the author present the story in this particular manner? How would it be different otherwise?

Other elements of narrative criticism involve asking questions about:

- *characters* (are they static or dynamic, active or passive?)
- *setting* (when and where is it set, and does the setting change during the story?)
- *tone* (is the author being sarcastic, or funny, or angry, or sad?)
- *style* (is the author formal or casual, intimate or detached, verbose or concise?)
- *point of view* (is the narrator omniscient, or a character in the story?)
- *imagery* (what symbols, metaphors, or sensory experiences can you see?)
- *themes* (what motifs reoccur in the story, or what is the 'point' of the story?)

By considering these different categories, literary critics seek to understand how each particular narrative is constructed, how it hangs together to create larger narrative units, and to explore the way narrative arcs present themes and create meanings.

### **Literary Criticism and Biblical Poetry**

Literary critics ask somewhat different questions about Hebrew and Greek poetry as opposed to narrative. Hebrew poetry (like Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, much of Job and the prophetic books) and some Jewish Greek poetry (like the Wisdom of Solomon and Luke 1:46-55) is based on *parallelism*, or the close relationship between pairs or triplets of poetic lines.

For example, consider the first two lines of Psalm 3 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): "O LORD, how many are my foes!/ Many are rising against me." On a cursory examination, these two lines seem to say the exact same thing (namely, that the speaker has a lot of enemies), but a closer look teases out a more complex relationship. In particular, the first line laments that the speaker's foes are so numerous, while the second line repeats the word "many" but changes the word "foes" for the participial construction "(those ones who) *are rising* against me." In the first line, the narrator calls them a name, but in the second line, you can see them living up to that name. Changing a noun for a verbal form renders the foes' active evil presence that much more full in the poem. Such subtle shifts are the hallmark of Hebrew poetry; literary critics take the time to carefully dissect the parallel lines in order to see more clearly how these poems work. Moreover, poetic analysis asks many questions about a poem's use of:

- *imagery* (what sensations, including sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, does the author evoke with the words of the poem?)
- *metaphor* (when the author describes an object in terms of something else, what does the implicit comparison of the two unlike objects do to the poem?)
- *symbolism* (what ideas or themes are represented by concrete objects?)

It is much more difficult to note a Hebrew or Greek poem's use of sound devices such as *alliteration*, *assonance*, *consonance*, *rhyme*, and *rhythm* when the poem is read in translation, because English cannot replicate these patterns.

Literary approaches to the Bible are not just for literary critics. You already use some of these techniques when you read a book, a poem, a short story or when you listen to music lyrics. By reading the Bible with literary "lenses," you can begin to explore the way biblical texts create sensations, give us new ways to see common things, and offer meaning to our world.

---

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>