

The Bible as Literature
Part 3 (of 4 parts):

"I Have Used Similitudes": The Poetry of the Bible

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This article explores some of the dynamics of biblical poetry and inquires into implications of the prevalence of poetry in the Bible for Bible teaching and preaching. Before launching into that inquiry, however, the high proportion of poetry in the Bible should be noted.

Poetry is identifiable chiefly by its being written in verse form rather than prose, and by its use of a poetic idiom. Whereas English verse depends on regular meter and rhyme, the verse form of biblical poetry is parallelism—two or more lines in which the thought and usually the grammatic structure as well are at least partly parallel. It has often been observed that this verse form survives in translation, while meter and rhyme do not.

The importance of parallelism has been overemphasized in recent scholarship on the poetry of the Bible. Verse is not the primary touchstone of poetry. If a poet has not expressed his or her content in a poetic idiom, the result is versified prose, not poetry. The essence of poetry is a reliance on concrete imagery, metaphor, simile, and other figures of speech. These can characterize prose writing as well, but the higher the incidence of such an idiom, the more claim a piece of writing has to be called poetry. Literary people sometimes speak of poetic prose—discourse that is not written in verse form but employs a high concentration of the techniques of poetic language.

Given the combined presence of parallelism and a heavy reliance on figurative language, how much of the Bible ranks as poetry? One-third of the Bible is not too high an estimate. Whole

books of the Bible are poetic: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon. A majority of Old Testament prophecy is poetic in form. Jesus is one of the most famous poets of the world. Beyond these predominantly poetic parts of the Bible, figurative language appears throughout the Bible, and whenever it does, it requires the same type of analysis given to poetry.

It is obvious then that when in Hosea 12:10 God stated, "I have ... used similitudes" (AV), the statement expresses a principle that extends to the whole Bible. Equally obvious, biblical expositors and readers must learn to feel comfortable with handling biblical poetry. But this is not generally true.

The Primacy of the Image in Biblical Poetry

As stated in an earlier article, a literary approach to the Bible is one that rests partly on an awareness of the concrete, experiential content of literature.¹ Given this criterion of concreteness of expression, there is a sense in which the Bible is not narrative, as recent scholarship has asserted, but poetry. The first principle of poetry is the primacy of the image. "Image" here means any word that names a concrete object or action. Poets think in images. This is the most basic rule of poetry.

This is not as widely recognized as it should be. When I ask students to assemble a list of the subject matter found in the Book of Psalms, the resulting list is typically abstract and theological: God, providence, trust, guilt, forgiveness, suffering, joy. Once the list is assembled, I proceed to write a second list on the board: honey, thunder, broken arms, razor, snow, dog, horse, grass, butter. The second list represents the language actually used by the writers of the Psalms, confirming my point about the primacy of the image in poetry.

In the language of current brain research, poetry is right-brain discourse. The two hemispheres of the brain perform specialized functions and respond differently to stimuli.² In general the left side of the brain responds more actively to language and abstract concepts. Its forte is analysis, reason, and logic. In keeping with this tendency toward analysis, the left hemisphere processes information sequentially and is dominant in the perception of rhythm.

¹ Leland Ryken, "'Words of Delight': The Bible as Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (January-March 1990): 8-9.

² A summary of right brain/left brain theory can be found in these sources: Sid J. Segalowitz, *Two Sides of the Brain* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983); Michael C. Corballis and Ivan L. Beale, *The Ambivalent Mind* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983); and Sally P. P. Springer and Georg Deutsch, *Left Brain, Right Brain*, rev. ed. (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1985).

The right side of the brain largely complements these functions. It responds intensely to visual and other sensory stimuli. It dominates in nonlanguage functions involving visual and spatial processes, and in seeing whole-part relationships. The right hemisphere is also more active than the left in the hearing of music (though not in analyzing it), and it dominates in the exercise of emotion and humor. It is also the part of the brain that grasps metaphor.

These distinctions also extend to people and vocations. In one test of college students, those in literature and the humanities showed right-brain dominance, with the reverse being true for more analytic science and engineering students. But within the humanities group, English majors showed more left brain preference than architecture majors, confirming the equation of verbal with the left hemisphere and visual with the right.

The implications of this data for how people should preach and teach the Bible are immense. Evangelical preaching has largely followed the model of Paul rather than Jesus. The discourses of Jesus are predominantly concrete, poetic, anecdotal. The writings of Paul tend toward theological abstraction. Evangelical preaching and teaching are overwhelmingly oriented to the left side of the brain. They are heavily conceptual and theological in vocabulary and content. They often starve the right side of the brain. They have appealed to the minds of churchgoers. In some traditions they have also appealed to the emotions. But they have not captured the imaginations of people.

What does all this have to do with the poetry of the Bible? The prevalence of poetry in the Bible, not only in its poetic books but also by virtue of figurative language in the narrative and epistolary sections, is an open door to do justice to the whole person. The poetry of the Bible stands as proof that people can know the truth through image as well as through abstraction. The truth about godliness can be pictured as a productive tree by a stream as well as by means of logical discourse. Knowing this should influence both the selection of biblical passages for teaching or preaching and the way the passages are handled.

The Bible is filled with images as well as theological ideas. Life is a journey down a path, God is a shepherd, depression is a valley, salvation is a feast. These images, and not only doctrinal ideas, should be prominent in biblical teaching and preaching. Tracing them through the Bible is as valid an approach to doctrinal content as is systematic theology. God trusted such images to communicate the truth people need to know.

The church I attend sponsored a Sunday evening series on preaching that included films on famous preachers from history. Be-

fore showing the film on John Bunyan, a colleague stated that the sermon would not be as thoroughly an exposition of a biblical passage as one might wish. In the film, scriptwriter Denis Shaw had Bunyan preach a specimen sermon in which he expounded on a master image of the Bible. Taking as his point of departure a passage from an epistle that compares the Christian life to a race, Bunyan in effect explicated that image instead of a specific text from the Bible. He spoke about the conditions under which the race is run, the course, the goal, the actions required, and so forth. The approach was refreshing and I was left with the impression that I had in fact heard an expository sermon based on the Bible.

The language of the Bible is much more concrete and imagistic than one would guess from most sermons and from most modern translations of the Bible. It is as though the Bible itself tries to do justice to the right side of the brain, while scholars today translate the images into abstractions. A good antidote to the love of abstraction is to choose poetic parts of the Bible for teaching and preaching. But the usual tendency to impose a framework of conceptual generalizations on the passage must be resisted. Poetic images should be experienced as images first of all. Among other things more photographic commentary on the poetic parts of the Bible is needed.

Metaphoric Thinking in Biblical Poetry

If the primacy of the image is the first rule of poetry, the second is the importance of comparison. The specific forms that such comparison takes are metaphor (an implied comparison, as in "the Lord is my shepherd") and simile (an explicitly stated comparison, as in "he is like a tree planted by streams of waters"). In keeping with current practice, the term "metaphor" is used in this article to cover both.

The nature of metaphor has been the object of enormously detailed academic study during the last two decades. What has emerged from the discussion is that metaphoric thinking is more than a poetic phenomenon. Metaphoric thinking is a form of knowledge that extends to all the intellectual disciplines. It plays a key role in scientific theories and models, for example. Metaphor is used to organize, explain, and illuminate reality. For example many aspects of good teaching fall into place the moment a teacher is defined in terms of a metaphor like the travel guide.

The most impressive finding of research on metaphor in preaching is not that audiences found metaphoric statements more emotional, imaginative, and appealing than propositional statements. This could be predicted. What is truly informative is that people taking a test found metaphoric statements from sermons clearer than

propositional statements.³ For example they praised the clarity of a metaphor comparing the Christian life to surfing, whose basic principle is that one has to get out where the white water is instead of playing around on the shore.

Not every biblical expositor has the gift of discovering metaphors, but every one has an obligation to deal responsibly with those found in the Bible. What hermeneutical principles underlie a proper handling of the metaphors and similes of the Bible?

Correspondence is the essential ingredient of a metaphor. A brief comment in Aristotle's *Poetics* remains the basic text: "to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances."⁴ Metaphors are bifocal utterances that require looking at two levels of meaning. They are a form of logic in the sense that the comparison between A and B can be validated by ordinary means of logic or observation.

What demands does the bifocal nature of metaphor impose on a reader or expositor? The first is to identify and experience the literal level of a metaphor. Metaphors are images or pictures first of all. Their impact depends on letting the literal level sink into one's consciousness before carrying over the meaning to a figurative or second level. If this is not done, the whole point of speaking in metaphor evaporates.

Much biblical commentary is unhelpful at the level of identifying the literal picture. Here are specimen passages from commentaries interpreting a metaphor that occurs seven times in the Psalms—the image of raising up a horn: God's "nearness and presence convey to the people of God both assurance of salvation and new vitality (this is the meaning of the image of the 'exalting of the horn')." ⁵ This is "figurative for granting victory or bestowing prosperity." ⁶ "Among His people His glory is redemptive love, in raising up a *horn* for them, *i.e.*, a strong deliverer." ⁷ "Horn here symbolizes strong one, that is, king." ⁸

The commentators' whole energy is poured into telling what the metaphor of the horn means or symbolizes. Not one of these sources

³ Michael P. Hilcomb, "An Examination of the Use of Metaphor in Preaching" (MDiv thesis, Bethel Theological Seminary, 1982), pp. 116-17.

⁴ Aristotle *Poetics* XXII.

⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 838.

⁶ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, 3 vols., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 3:355.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 451 (italics his)

⁸ New International Version of the Bible note on Psalm 148:14.

tells what kind of horn the psalmists were talking about at a literal level. Information about that comes from a series of pictures in an issue of the *National Geographic* that shows animals defending themselves by means of their horns.

Some bold new photographic commentaries on the Bible are needed, especially on the poetry of the Bible. I make extensive use of slides when teaching the poetry of the Bible. When the literal picture of a metaphor is grasped, the utterance is experienced in more than verbal ways. This is one of the powers of metaphor: it paradoxically uses words to express meanings that go beyond the verbal level. People have feelings and experiences surrounding green pastures or still waters or home that cannot be wholly expressed in words. These are part of the meaning of the images and comparisons that appear in biblical poetry—proof that people assimilate the truth with the right side of the brain as well as the left. Biblical readers and expositors need to find ways to enhance their ability to assimilate biblical truth in such a way.

Interpreting metaphoric statements in the Bible begins by experiencing the literal level of the comparison. The second task is interpretation, which consists of carrying over the meaning(s) from level A to level B. The very word "metaphor" speaks volumes in this regard. It is based on the Greek words *μετά* and *φέρειν* meaning "to carry over." To undertake such interpretation is to accept the poet's implied invitation to discover the meaning of an utterance. Whenever a biblical poet speaks in metaphor or simile, he entrusts to the reader the task of completing the process of communication. He leaves it up to the reader to discover how A is like B.

When expositors begin to make the transfer of meaning from one sphere to the other, they will almost certainly find that the meanings are multiple. To picture God as a father, or to think of God's providence as a fortress, for example, at once invites people to see a multiplicity of correspondences. Several things are learned about the godly person, not just one thing, when he or she is compared to a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season (Ps. 1:3). Again, what types of restoration are contained in the picture of sheep cresting in an oasis at midday (23:2)? The answer is, as many as the types of restoration that believers experience.

It might seem that a literary approach to the Bible is on a collision course with the biblical scholar's concern for controls on interpretation. To some small extent this may be true. The more literary a text is, the more likely it is to retain the complexity and multiplicity and many-sidedness of actual experience. A literary text is more open to misinterpretation than an expository text. Its strategy is first to portray human experience, and everyone knows how many-sided real life is. Yet cults frequently quote the propositional parts

of the Bible, and not the literary parts, in support of their aberrations. So it would be wrong to suppose that even the most expository and nonliterary texts are free from being misinterpreted.

The multiplicity that literary critics find in biblical texts is likely to be at the level of human experience. For example the meanings that one attributes to the psalmist's metaphor comparing slander to swords are likely to depend on an interpreter's experience with swords and slander. In a sense the literary parts of the Bible will yield their meanings to the degree to which a reader's experience of life equips him or her to meet the text. It is in this regard that a Jewish scholar's theory of foolproof composition seems useful. Sternberg explains this theory:

By foolproof composition I mean that the Bible is difficult to read, easy to underread and overread and misread, but virtually impossible to ... counterread.... The essentials are made transparent to all comers: the story line, the world order, the value system. The old and new controversies among exegetes, spreading to every possible topic, must not blind us (as it usually does them) to the measure of agreement in this regard.⁹

Applying this to biblical poetry, even when a given expositor or member of a Bible study group finds slightly too many or too few correspondences between the two halves of a biblical metaphor, the basic meaning of a passage remains intact.

The "Fictional" Element in Biblical Poetry

A third principle of poetry (including biblical poetry) is its "fictional" (i.e., metaphorical) and even "fantastic" nature. Poets are always busy playing the game of make-believe, asserting what is not literally true.

At a semantic level, for example, a metaphor is not *literally* true. Omitting the formula "like" or "as," it makes an assertion that is false at a factual level. God is not literally a rock, for example. The opening verse of Psalm 1 states that the godly person "walks not in the counsel of the wicked" and does not sit "in the seat of scoffers" (RSV). Wicked people do not literally walk down a path called "the counsel of the wicked." Nor do they have legislatures that issue handbooks of evil behavior called "the counsel of the wicked." People who are in a cynical mood do not take turns sitting in a chair with a sign over it that reads "the seat of scoffers." Metaphoric statements, while not true literally, are means of *conveying* literal truth in a striking way.

⁹ Meier Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 50-51.

The same is true of other figures of speech that biblical poets employ. Hyperbole, for example, always exaggerates the literal truth of a situation: "My tears have been my food day and night" (Ps. 42:3); "By my God I can leap over a wall" (Ps. 18:29); "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29, RSV). Equally "fantastic" is the poet's use of apostrophe, in which he addresses someone or something absent as though it were present and capable of responding: "Lift up your heads, O gates" (Ps. 24:7); "Away from me, all you who do evil" (Ps. 6:8, NIV). Personifications are yet another example: "Their tongue struts through the earth" (Ps. 73:9, RSV); "Let the rivers clap their hands" (Ps. 98:8).

This element inherent in all poetry becomes openly fantastic in the visionary or apocalyptic sections of the Bible. Here we are transported to a world where a river can overflow a nation (Isa. 8:5-8), where a branch can build a temple (Zech. 6:12), and where a great red dragon with seven heads and 10 horns can sweep down a third of the stars of heaven with his tail (Rev. 12:3-4).

It is with good reason that the world has evolved the phrase "poetic license." There are several lessons to be learned from the metaphorical nature of biblical poetry. Chief among them is the need for a moratorium on the cliché that "we always interpret the Bible literally." No one interprets poetic license literally. Even the staunchest literalist does not believe that Jesus is really a door, or that following Him literally involves building a house on a rock. Why then do expositors mislead the public by advertising a principle they do not in fact practice? What is meant by that misleading statement is that evangelicals believe that the historical narratives of the Bible record the facts of events that really occurred. Evangelicals also believe that the Bible includes figures of speech, especially in its poetry.

The presence of metaphor in the Bible should also lead believers to respect these modes as a vehicle for expressing and assimilating truth. In the Bible God used the imaginary to express reality. God gave people capacity for imagination and creativity for a purpose. Francis A. Schaeffer was right when he said that "the Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars."¹⁰

How Poems Work

Thus far this article has discussed poetry, a distinctive type of discourse. To handle the poetic parts of the Bible competently one also needs to know something about poems-self-contained works

¹⁰ *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 61.

that employ poetic language. This has to do with how poems are unified and structured.

The basic principle is theme and variation. A working assumption must be that a poem is about one thing. It might be an idea, an emotion, a mood, or a human situation (such as the psalmist's response to his crisis in the lament psalms). This theme must be formulated in broad terms that sufficiently cover the entire poem. For most readers of the Bible, an individual psalm is a collection of isolated fragments instead of a unified whole.

Having identified the "umbrella" for the entire poem, the second task is to lay out the poem into its constituent parts. These are the variations on the theme. The basis for dividing one section from another will be one of three things: changes in imagery; in idea or topic, or in emotion.

Applying the scheme of theme and variation works wonders with poems. It is the necessary framework for tracing the progression of a poem. It allows an expositor or reader to follow the actual path of a poet's utterance and to experience that utterance as a unified and coherent whole. It solves the problem of knowing what to "do" with a psalm when using it as the basis of a sermon or Bible study. When people read or analyze a psalm, they should begin with the premise that they are sharing the thought process of the poet from beginning to end. The whole poem is the meaning. The model must be resisted that treats the poem as a bag into which the expositor dips to illustrate three points. Readers and expositors must trace an ongoing arc of thought and feeling.

In contrast to such an "organic" view of a poem, the usual handling of biblical poems is too conceptual, too mechanical, too selective. People get the impression that expositors have translated the poem, with all its concrete details and progressive development, into a static outline of theological ideas. Expositors need instead to think in terms of reenacting a drama that took place within the poet's mind. It also helps to approach a poem with the assumption of the poet's self-conscious composition, which means that the poet carefully constructed the parts of the poem to fit together and flow from one part to the next. In passing it may be noted that the framework of theme and variation works equally well with nonnarrative prose passages, such as paragraphs in an epistle.

Implications for Preaching and Teaching

The thesis of this series of articles is that the Bible is mainly literary in form and that this should govern how Christians treat the Bible in their reading, teaching, and preaching. This is another way of saying they should aggressively choose the literary parts of

the Bible for exposition, and should approach them with the ordinary tools of literary criticism.

Whereas ordinary writing is transparent, pointing beyond itself to a body of information, a work of literature invites readers to enter a whole imagined world and to get inside it. The whole story, the whole poem, the whole vision is the meaning. Therefore the whole story, poem, or vision needs to be experienced. Reliving the text is the first task of the expositor. Many of the meanings embodied in a literary text get communicated indirectly and in mysterious ways. Literature can be trusted to convey its meanings by literary means. The corollary is that expositors must be willing to talk about aspects of a text that may seem on the surface to be far removed from anything "spiritual."

In view of this, a concluding plea is that preachers rethink what constitutes a three-part sermon. What it means to most preachers is to list three propositions, to impose that framework of generalizations on a biblical text, and to reach into the text to support the generalizations. Much evangelical preaching is so topical, moreover, that excursions into the text are bypassed almost completely. An entirely different version of a three-part sermon is proposed in the following paragraphs.

Part one is to interact with the text itself in terms of its literary genre. If the whole story or the whole poem is the meaning, then it is entirely legitimate to interact with the passage fully as a complete entity. By "text" is meant the whole story or poem, not a single verse. I am at a loss to understand how the single isolated verse could ever have become the customary basis for a sermon. This pernicious convention of contemporary preaching must go. Preachers need to live inside the "world" of a complete passage, in the process talking about matters that seem far removed from any spiritual principles but that are part of the total impact of a passage. This interaction with the passage might take as much as half the time allotted to a sermon.

Part two of the proposed three-part sermonic approach is stating the themes or principles that emerge from the passage. Stating these principles will not take long. The process of entering fully into the world of the passage will have prepared the way. The principles, when stated, will come as a moment of insight that illumines or explains the meaning of the passage. They will cast a retrospective interpretive light on the passage. The third part of the sermonic pattern consists of application of the principles. The principles deduced from a text and their application to the lives of people have more impact if they are isolated by themselves instead of being intermixed with the analysis of the text.

This proposed three-part scheme allows a biblical passage to

communicate first by literary means. It resists the usual tendency to substitute three abstract generalizations for the passage. The power of Scripture rests partly in the forms in which it speaks. Those forms are prevailingly literary. Biblical passages must be allowed to speak in their own voice, to unfold according to their own inner dynamics.

The idea that the Bible is in large part literary in nature is more than the latest fad among scholars, though it is certainly that too. A literary approach to the Bible can positively influence and even revolutionize how people read the Bible, how they teach it, and how they preach from it.

Editor's Note

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