



LITERARY
INTRODUCTIONS

to the BOOKS
of the BIBLE



LELAND RYKEN

*Literary Introductions
to the Books of the Bible*

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Dual Identity, Inc.

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4217-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4220-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4218-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4219-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryken, Leland, author.

Literary introductions to the books of the Bible / Leland Ryken.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4217-6 (trade paperback) — ISBN 978-1-4335-

4220-6 (ePub) — ISBN 978-1-4335-4218-3 (PDF) — ISBN 978-1-

4335-4218-3 (Mobipocket)

1. Bible as literature. I. Title.

BS535.R895 2015

220.6'6—dc23

2015013997

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For all my students and readers
who have caught a vision for
the Bible as literature

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PREFACE

This book is a literary introduction to all the books of the Bible as arranged in their canonical order. The focus is specific, namely, the literary forms that make up the shape and substance of the respective books of the Bible. This is slightly supplemented by other literary matters that are too important to omit from the discussion. With its focus on literary form, this is a companion and sequel to my *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*; more complete descriptions of the Bible's literary forms appear in that volume.

In composing this book I have drawn in general ways upon the dozen books I have authored or edited on the Bible as literature. The three from which I have taken the most are *Ryken's Bible Handbook*; *The Literary Study Bible*; and *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*.¹ I have incorporated the outlines of individual Bible books from *The Literary Study Bible*.

Why the Literary Forms of the Bible Are Important

We need to begin with a definition: the concept of *literary form* should be construed broadly as anything having to do with how the authors of the Bible expressed their content. The “how” of their communication extends from the very broad, such as the genres they used (e.g., narrative or poetry), to the small (e.g., techniques such as dramatic irony and metaphor).

Are the literary forms of the Bible sufficiently important to warrant

¹Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken, and James Wilhoit, *Ryken's Bible Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005); Leland Ryken and Philip G. Ryken, eds., *The Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); Leland Ryken, *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

a book devoted to that aspect of it? They are, for the following seven reasons.

1) In any piece of writing, there is no content without the form in which it is expressed. Without the story or poem, for example, there is no message. The content of the Bible does not exist in disembodied form; it is all embodied in a myriad of literary forms.

2) There is an important way in which an analysis of literary forms needs to come first when we interact with a biblical text. This is not a precedence of value or importance but of the order in which we master a text. If the message is embodied in a form, we first need to master the form. The “how” is the door that opens the “what” of the utterance. A summary of the message of a biblical book without a prior description of the genres and forms in which the message is packaged leaves us without a conception of the kind of book being described.

3) Paying attention to the forms of a biblical book ensures that we engage with the Bible itself. Much Bible study and published scholarship leapfrogs over the preliminary step of interacting with the text. How do we know if a given summary of ideas is correct if the basis of formulating the ideas has been removed from sight? We don’t.

4) Everything that writers put into their composition is something they regarded as important, including the literary aspects of a text. If literary matters were important to the writers of the Bible, they need to be important to us as readers.

5) All literary forms have defining traits and methods of analysis. Not heeding these “rules of the road” is a recipe for misrepresenting the content of the Bible. I regularly find myself scratching my head about what a teacher or preacher or layperson says about a Bible passage, and usually the problem arises from lack of literary analysis. Even when the interpretation is not wrong, the focus is blurred because the best available tools have not been used. As a literary scholar I regularly find myself wanting to impart essential information to expositors and teachers of the Bible. This book is my opportunity to pass on that information.

6) It is a logical inference that if the writers of the Bible “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21), then God inspired the forms in which the writers composed. The literary forms of the Bible deserve an attention commensurate with their inspiration.

7) A literary approach to the Bible is required by three time-honored evangelical principles of hermeneutics. (1) Reading a text in keeping with what we can infer about the author's intention. Whenever a biblical author entrusted his utterance to a literary genre or form, we can infer that he *intended* us to assimilate his work by using all the ordinary methods of literary interpretation. (2) Doing justice to the specificity of a text. If a text is literary in nature, paying attention to its specific qualities requires us to interact with its literary traits. (3) Assimilating and interpreting a passage in terms of the kind of writing (genre) it is. The only way to assimilate a text in terms of its literary form is to pay close attention to the form or genre.

In all this emphasis on the literary forms of the Bible, we need to resist any impulse to think that when we see these forms in the Bible we have added something to the Bible. We have not added anything. We are discovering the forms that the authors put into their works and that are demonstrably there. The only question is whether we will do anything about what the authors have placed before us. This introduction to the books of the Bible is based on the premise of doing something with its literary forms.

Format of This Book

For each book of the Bible you will find a common format:

- An orienting section that states the broadest possible things that can be asserted about the book of the Bible under discussion.
- Generalizations about the book as a book. This overview is based on the premise that what we call a “book” has an identity; it is in fact itself a genre that needs to be explored.
- Where relevant, topics that are unique to the book of the Bible under discussion, including problems or obstacles that need to be acknowledged and solutions provided.
- A chart that outlines the book and provides helpful labels for the book. No principle of literary analysis is more important than grasping a book as a whole at a single glance.

- Separate units on all the major literary genres, forms, and techniques that make up its shape and substance. You will not find explications of biblical texts, but rather analytic grids.
- A summarizing segment called “Literary Form and Religious Vision,” which includes four units:
 1. A list of the book’s inferred literary intentions.
 2. A summary of what the book’s literary forms silhouette with heightened clarity. Underlying this component is an important piece of literary theory that T. S. Eliot encapsulated when he wrote, “It is the function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it.” The literary forms that make up a biblical book are the order that the author has imposed upon the materials of life. But we are intended to look not only *at* this literary construct but *through* it to life.
 3. A unit that gives literary tips for reading the book. These are literary tips in the sense that they name avenues for approaching a text with an eye on its literary dimension. Even nonliterary texts can be read in a way that utilizes literary methods of reading and interpreting.
 4. A compendium of quotations from literary commentators.

THE BIBLE AS A WHOLE

The broadest literary thing that we can say about the Bible is that it is a book. Originally it was something other than a book, consisting of the spoken word (an oral text) or writing on clay tablets and scrolls. But for us, the format of the Bible is a book. This implies more than we may initially think. A book is a unified entity that we can hold in our hands. It is whole and complete in itself. It is portable in a way that other formats are not. We can turn from one part of a book to another part, with the result that a certain coherence comes to characterize the Bible, even to the point of printed cross-references.

If we ask what *kind* of book the Bible is, the answer is that it is an anthology—a collection of diverse works written by separate authors. We can make immediate literary sense of the Bible if we think of its external form (though not its content and worldview) as being similar to an anthology of English or American literature. The very name *Bible* (Greek *biblia*) tells us that the Bible is an anthology, inasmuch as the word means “little books.” An anthology of “little books” can appropriately be thought of as a small library.

An anthology implies multiple authorship, and the individual books in the Bible were written by at least three dozen authors. Usually (though not always) the authors included in an anthology come from the same nation or ethnic group and geographic area, and we can see this principle at work in the Bible. All but one of the authors were Jewish (with the exception being Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts; some scholars believe that Luke, too, was Jewish).

The geographic setting for all the Bible books is the area around the Mediterranean Sea. Most anthologies are made up of multiple genres, and the Bible shows a particularly large range of genres. As a literary anthology, the Bible is comprehensive: its authors together write about all of life, viewed from a religious perspective. Literary anthologies usually contain works written over a long span of time; the Bible was composed over approximately two thousand years. Finally, anthologies have a discernible principle of organization, and with the Bible this is so complex that it deserves its own section in this chapter.

The Organization of the Bible

Overall, we can say that the Bible has a narrative unity, even though it includes many nonnarrative parts. The essence of a story is that it is a sequence of events having a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of the Bible's story is literally the beginning—God's creation of the world as narrated in Genesis 1–2. The end of the story is literally the end—the end of human history as narrated in the book of Revelation. The middle is the story of human history as it unfolds under the providential and redemptive oversight of God.

The overall shape of the story of the Bible is a U in which events begin in perfection, descend into tragedy and evil, and rise to a happy ending with the defeat of evil and the triumph of good. Literary scholars call this plot structure a “comedy,” and they agree that the literary genre that best fits the Christian message is that of literary comedy (as just described). The turning point of human history as narrated in the Bible is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of literary comedy as built around a eucatastrophe (a “good catastrophe”) is relevant here: the death of Jesus was a terrible event and total miscarriage of justice, but it was the means by which God accomplished the redemption of the human race. It was a good catastrophe.

Many individual human stories make up the plotline of the Bible, but there is one overarching story or metanarrative that encompasses these individual stories. The central character or protagonist of this story is God. He is the one in control, and the “big story” of the Bible is what God does in human history and beyond it. God's main actions fall into the categories of creation, providence (oversight of events),

judgment, and redemption or salvation. The most common label for this story is “salvation history.” The setting for the action is total reality, including heaven, earth, and hell. The timeline is eternity, followed by history, followed by eternity. In the Bible, human history is bracketed by eternity.

Although the story of what God does is the primary action in the Bible, it is not the only one, and we should not disparage or minimize the other storylines. If the story of the Bible is an account of what God does, it is also a story of what people do. A second storyline of the Bible is thus the human race’s testimony to its own experience. In the Bible this takes the form of the authors telling us what many people did during their time on earth. What people preeminently do in the Bible is choose for or against God and his commands, so we can speak of the drama of the soul’s choice being a third storyline. The great spiritual and moral conflict between good and evil is another storyline. And a final storyline is the account of how God intends people to live—the story of God’s rules for human living. To summarize, if we stand back from all the individual passages and genres of the Bible, we can find five storylines intermingled: God’s actions, humankind’s actions, people’s choices for or against God, the struggle between spiritual good and evil, and the story of God’s demands for how people should order their lives.

If we take a wide-angle view of the unfolding story as arranged in the Bible, we can see the following major events and accompanying genres:

- Creation and fall: primeval history
- Covenant: patriarchal history
- Exodus: epic and law
- Conquest of the Promised Land: hero stories and national history
- Israelite monarchy: court history, psalms, wisdom literature, poetry
- Exile and return: prophecy
- The life of Christ: gospel
- Beginning of the Christian church: Acts and the epistles
- The end of human history: apocalypse

The foregoing list organizes the sequence of the Bible according to the leading *events*. A complementary way of organizing the flow of the

Bible is by the clusters of *books* that make up the canon (the Bible in its final form). If we streamline just a little, for each grouping of books in the canon we can identify (a) the books that make up a given cluster and (b) one or more genres that dominate each unit or with which that unit is particularly remembered (see chart below).

Books of the Bible	Dominant Genre/Common Designation
Genesis—Deuteronomy	Pentateuch: history and law
Joshua—Esther	Historical narrative
Psalms—Song of Solomon	Poetry and proverb (wisdom literature)
Isaiah—Daniel	Major prophets
Hosea—Malachi	Minor prophets
Matthew—John	Gospels
Acts	Church history
Romans—Thessalonians	Epistles to churches
Timothy—Philemon	Pastoral epistles to individuals
Hebrews—Jude	General epistles
Revelation	Apocalypse

The arrangement of biblical material as shown in the chart was not part of the original Bible (the parts of which were gradually composed individually), but there is logic and helpfulness in the way in which tradition and then groups of religious scholars arranged the canon.

A Unique Book

Although the external format of the Bible is familiar (a literary anthology), once that point has registered with us we need to say that, on the other hand, the Bible is very different from anthologies of English and American literature. The Bible is unlike other anthologies in at least three ways.

First, three different authorial impulses and types of writing converge: the theological or religious, the historical, and the literary. This is not the case with ordinary literary anthologies, which do not share the first two categories in a major way. Furthermore, history and theology books do not ordinarily package their history and theology in literary forms, whereas the Bible does. Often we can see elements of all three

impulses in a Bible passage, but usually one dominates. We can say additionally that overwhelmingly the theology and history of the Bible are embodied in literary forms.

A second trait that sets the Bible apart from other anthologies of diverse writings is the religious preoccupation of the writers. The writers view all of life, even in its common dimensions, as part of a spiritual reality. All experience is ultimately related to God and the spiritual life. Everything recorded in the Bible exists in an implied or explicit supernatural world that surrounds it. In the Bible, a sunrise is not simply a fact of nature; it is a manifestation of God's work in the world. The stated or implied purpose of the writers of the Bible is to move readers or listeners to know and obey God, to humble themselves before God and acknowledge their sins, and to be redeemed from their lost state.

The Bible is an artistic and entertaining book, but these are by-products of something more primary, namely, the purpose of conveying the information that people most need to know so they can reform their lives accordingly. The primary purpose of the Bible is didactic ("having the intention to teach"), not aesthetic or artistic. "The Bible is more than a classic," writes Charles Dinsmore; people "do not read it in the same spirit in which they read Homer. . . . The multitudes go to the Bible . . . for power; they go to renew their sense of spiritual realities, and to catch again the vision splendid. This book passes beyond a classic and becomes . . . a Word of God, because it voices those ultimate truths which give to life its meaning."¹

This does not mean that we should ignore the artistry of the Bible; everything that biblical writers put into their writing is important and something they expect us to value. C. S. Lewis hit the nail on the head when he said that the Bible "demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms," that is, as a religious book. "It will not continue to give literary delight very long to those who go to it for something quite different." The Bible, said Lewis, is read "almost exclusively by Christians . . . who read it to be instructed and get literary enjoyment as a by-product."² We should note that in Lewis's formulation the Bible *does* give literary enjoyment. J. I. Packer is of the same opinion when he applauds approaches

¹ Charles Dinsmore, *The English Bible as Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 102.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 33–34.

to the Bible that send readers to the Bible “with expectations of enjoyment,” though (as with Lewis) that “enjoyment . . . is a by-product.”³

A final unique feature of this anthology is the high degree of unity it possesses. An anthology of English or American literature has the loose unity noted above (unity of national origin, familiar genres, geographic area, theme or subject matter), but the unity of the Bible goes far beyond that. It is a vast interlocking network of references to common events and beliefs. Writers of the Bible keep referring to the same events, the same doctrines, the same God, and the same religious practices in a way that is not characteristic of other anthologies. The whole system of marginal cross-references that we commonly find in printed English Bibles does not exist in an anthology of English or American literature. An important aspect of this unity of reference is that many events are foreshadowed in the Old Testament and then fulfilled in the New Testament. Augustine’s formula is accurate: the New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.

Unifying Stylistic Traits

The Bible shows the same diversity of genres, literary techniques, and authorial temperaments that we find in other anthologies. Nonetheless, it is useful to be alert to certain stylistic preferences that exist in the Bible so we can pick up on them as we read. Literary style is an important part of literary form, and this book is about the literary forms in the books of the Bible. Following is a list of stylistic preferences that most biblical writers share, and of course there are many exceptions.

Preference for the concrete over the abstract. Biblical writers share the impulse to express themselves concretely rather than abstractly. This is a way of saying that the Bible is predominantly literary, whereas ordinary history and theology books are not. A literary scholar has described the prevailing vocabulary of the Bible as being “concrete, vivid, [and] simple in phrasing.”⁴ Literary critic Albert C. Cook agrees: in the Bible “nearly every word presents a concrete meaning. . . . Everywhere we are face to face with motion, activity, life.”⁵

³J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 8–9.

⁴C. Boyd McAfee, *The Greatest English Classic* (New York: Harper, 1912), 104.

⁵Albert C. Cook, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 4:32–33.

Realism. There is plenty of fantasy in the prophetic and apocalyptic visions of the Bible, but once we move beyond those two genres, biblical writers show a preference for realism in the dual sense of (a) being factual and historical instead of fictional and (b) including non-ideal aspects of life. The Bible does not escape from real life but includes what is ugly and evil.

A preference for simplicity of style, seen best in the plain, unembellished narrative style of the Bible. Paradoxically, this simplicity is often majestic in effect, so we can speak of the combined simplicity and majesty of the Bible. “The simplicity of the Bible,” writes Northrop Frye, “is the simplicity of majesty . . . : its simplicity expresses the voice of authority.”⁶

A preference for the brief unit rather than the long and elaborated one. The result is that readers need to be prepared to get maximum mileage out of the few details given. Literary scholar Erich Auerbach, in a classic essay comparing storytelling technique in Homer and the book of Genesis, claims that with the Bible’s prevailing brevity, many of the nuances of meaning “remain unexpressed, are only suggested”; much “remains mysterious and fraught with background,” requiring “subtle investigation and interpretation.”⁷

A knack for capturing what is universal in human experience. The writers of the Bible embody what is elemental in life. Literary scholar John Livingston Lowes speaks of how the Bible is “compact of the primal stuff of our universal humanity—of its universal emotional, sensory experiences.”⁸ Someone else writes in a similar vein that the world of the Bible “is stripped and elemental—sea, desert, the stars, the wind, storm, sun, clouds, and moon, seedtime and harvest. . . . Occupation has this elementary quality also.”⁹

Affective power, or the ability to move us. English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge expressed it best: “Did you ever meet any [other] book that went to your heart so often and so deeply?” (*Notebooks*). “The

⁶Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 211.

⁷Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11–15.

⁸John Livingston Lowes, “The Noblest Monument of English Prose,” in *Essays in Appreciation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), 4–5.

⁹Howard Mumford Jones, “The Bible from a Literary Point of View,” in *Five Essays on the Bible* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1960), 53.

Biblical style,” writes literary scholar Henry Seidel Canby, “is eloquent and almost unequaled in emotional expressiveness.”¹⁰

A prevailing seriousness or gravity (Latin *gravitas*), communicating a sense of the urgency and momentousness of what is presented. Albert C. Cook speaks of the “dignity of theme and earnestness of treatment” that we find in the Bible.¹¹

A confrontational quality, leaving readers with the feeling that they need to accept or reject what they have read. Erich Auerbach noted this quality when he wrote that the Bible’s “religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth. . . . The Bible’s claim to truth . . . is tyrannical.” The Bible “seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”¹²

The dramatic impulse to embody the subject matter in dialogue and the spoken word, often accompanied by attention to stationing of characters in a scene. The Bible presents us with continuous dramas in miniature, and many of its poems are prayers addressed to God or direct addresses to humans. The Bible is filled with voices speaking and replying and ears listening.

Aphoristic flair, the continuous presence of concise, memorable statements that immediately compel our attention and are almost impossible to forget. As we read the Bible we usually sense a concise energy and compression—an intensity in which every word counts. Albert C. Cook speaks of how in the Bible the effect “is produced with a few masterful strokes, so that the resulting impression is one of conciseness and economy.”¹³

English Romantic essayist William Hazlitt may be allowed a summary statement: “There is in all these parts of the Scripture . . . an originality, a vastness of conception, a depth and tenderness of feeling, a touching simplicity” (*Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth*). We continuously feel as we read the Bible that by some mystery words have become more than words.

¹⁰Henry Seidel Canby, “A Sermon on Style,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, December 22, 1928, 534.

¹¹Cook, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 29.

¹²Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14–15.

¹³Cook, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 29.



GENESIS

The word *genesis* means “origin” or “beginning,” and this explains why the first book of the Bible bears its title. Genesis is the Bible’s book of beginnings on multiple levels. It starts the Bible. It narrates the origin of the world and the human race. It contains the story of the first sin, the first murder, and the first covenant of grace that God extends to the human race. Genesis also spans more time than any other Bible book; in fact, its time frame is more extensive than the rest of the books together. No other book of the Bible contains such an abundance of bedrock, universal human experience as Genesis.

The Book at a Glance	
50 chapters, 1,533 verses	
Primeval History	
1-3	Creation, life in Paradise, fall into sin
4-11	Human history after the fall: Cain and Abel; Noah and the flood; dispersion of the nations at the Tower of Babel
Patriarchal/Covenant History	
12:1-25:18	Story of Abraham and Sarah
25:19-26:35	Story of Isaac and Ishmael
27-35	Story of Jacob and Esau
36-50	Story of Joseph and his brothers

Genesis as a Book

Genesis begins with a perfect world and ends with a coffin, showing that the book has unity and completeness, despite the large number of individual units and details. The original creation and the paradisaical garden within it symbolize perfection; the coffin symbolizes the effects of sin in the world. We can infer that the purpose of Genesis is to tell the story of the human race during its first millennia, within a strongly theological framework. The main features of that theological framework are (1) God's creation and governance of the world, (2) the original innocence of the world and the human race, (3) the fall of the human race and the world into sin, (4) the terrible results of human sinfulness, and (5) a countermovement in which God offers redemption and restoration to people. It is obvious from this outline that Genesis is the foundational book of the Bible that sets forth the first principles of knowledge about God, people, and the physical world.

Authorial perspective is an important literary aspect of Genesis. The author is both a historian and a literary author. As a historian, he is preoccupied with historical facts about people, events, and places. As a literary author, he is above all a storyteller who embodies what he wants us to know about life in characters, events, and settings. There is an indirectness about the historical and literary approach to truth in Genesis: instead of listing generalizations about God and commands to follow, the author assembles historical information and arranges it as a collection of stories, leaving readers to extract the right ideas about God and people. We should also note that although God is, of course, the central preoccupation of the author, there is also a clear focus on individuals and families. "Domestic narrative" is an accurate label for Genesis, and in many ways the families are dysfunctional.

The big organizational plan of the book is twofold: primeval history (chaps. 1–11) and patriarchal history (chaps. 12–50). Primeval history reaches back to the mysterious origins of human life on this planet. The world we enter in these chapters is simplified and elemental. We know that the people and events really existed, but we do not picture them as our next-door neighbors; instead, the characters are prototypes (original models). Patriarchal history tells the story of the patriarchs and their families—the fathers in the line that produced the twelve tribes

of Israel. The patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—belong to what we call the “heroic ages” (a label that encompasses primeval history as well), but the patriarchs come alive in our imaginations as people who might be in our own circle of acquaintances. Starting with chapter 12, Genesis traces the history of a single family through four generations. This family history is covenantal, recounting the story of God’s contractual promises or blessings bestowed on the patriarchs and the obligations placed upon the patriarchs in response, consisting chiefly of following God’s call and obeying his commands.

The book is a balancing act between big patterns and an abundance of specific details. To start with the second of these, Genesis contains a crowded scene of people; in fact, we tend to recall Genesis as a memorable gallery of individual characters. The diversity of genres and the self-contained or episodic nature of numerous brief units further create a kaleidoscope of details, always shifting and never in focus for very long. The quantity of names, dates, and places in Genesis is probably unsurpassed in any subsequent book of the Bible. Anyone who has outlined Genesis can confirm the amazing multiplicity we find there.

But all this complexity is structured on a few simple patterns, and these can unify the book in our minds. The clear division between primeval history and patriarchal history is one principle of symmetry, with the universal history of the first movement balanced by the focus on a single covenant family in the second. The book follows a simple, straightforward chronological arrangement, with the result that at every point, we are aware that a single history is being presented in a sequential and progressive manner.

The plot of Genesis is what literary critics from the time of Aristotle have called an “episodic plot.” This means that the book is comprised of a host of self-contained episodes. Unlike what we find in a novel, no human character is present from beginning to end. We usually leave an episode behind once it is over. Probably most of the individual episodes circulated orally until the author of Genesis put them into a single collection. The overall plot conflict in this episodic story is God’s interaction with sinful humanity. The central character or protagonist in this plot is God, the only character present throughout the book.

A final unifying aspect of Genesis considered as a self-contained

book is the concept of literary hero. A literary hero is a protagonist who is representative of people generally. Heroes are also largely idealized (otherwise we would not call them heroes), but few heroes are perfect or wholly idealized. Even when the heroes of Genesis fail, we can see our own experiences in their lives, and this points to another aspect of literary heroes, namely, the way in which they are representative of people generally.

Genesis is an anthology of hero stories (to be elaborated in greater detail below). Additionally, even though the gallery of characters in Genesis is huge, the author balances that expansiveness by focusing on six major heroes: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We also remember the book by its five famous heroines: Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. In a book where the family is the most consistent arena of action, we can also arrange it by five famous couples: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel.

The Genres and Literary Forms of Genesis

Story of origins. Genesis starts with a genre that was especially important in the ancient world—the story of origins. This label can have a broad definition, but usually it means stories that recount how a divine being (in classical mythology divine *beings* [plural]) brought the physical world into existence. The label “creation story” is often used synonymously with story of origins, but we need to define the issues carefully. As C. S. Lewis noted, the so-called creation stories of mythology are usually not about the creation of the world but are theogonies, stories about the origin of the gods. Or, if they are stories about the physical world, they usually start with “stage props” already in place, with the result that they recount an early stage in the history of the world but not the actual beginning.

Genesis 1–3 can be viewed as a triptych of stories that together constitute the Bible’s story of origins: chapter 1 is the Bible’s creation story; chapter 2 tells the story of the beginning of human life in a perfect garden; chapter 3 narrates the story of the origin of evil. The Bible’s creation story (chap. 1) is noteworthy for the high degree of artistry with which it is told. The stories of origin in Genesis also embody foun-

Passage	Content	Contribution to the Story of Redemptive History	Type of History	Cast of Characters	Most Memorable Events or Characters
1:1–2:25	God's perfect creation	God blesses his creation	Primeval history	The whole human race	Four main events: creation, fall, flood, Tower of Babel
3:1–24	Humanity's fall into sin	The human race forfeits God's blessing			
4:1–5:32	Cain, Abel, genealogies				
6:1–9:29	Noah and the flood				
10:1–11:32	Dispersion of the nations				
12:1–25:18	Story of Abraham	God unfolds a plan to bless his covenant people	Patriarchal history	A single family line	Four main characters: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
25:19–26:35	Story of Isaac				
27:1–35:29	Story of Jacob				
36:1–43	Generations of Esau				
37:1–50:26	Story of Joseph and his brothers				

dational information that explains much of our own lives, and their explanatory value is incalculable.

Etiology. Closely related to the story of origin is the genre known as “etiology,” which is a story that tells how a person or place received its name or how a practice began. A biblical etiology links the origin of a name or a custom to a historical event and is not a fictional story composed to explain an already existing phenomenon. Within the Bible, the form appears most often in the book of Genesis. The story of the Tower of Babel (11:1–9) tells how Babel received its name, as well as how multiplicity of languages began. The story of Jacob’s wrestling with the angel of God (32:24–32) explains why “the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket” (v. 32). The etiology is a somewhat mysterious form for modern readers, but it was important in ancient societies and is so preeminently in Genesis.

Genealogy. The genealogy is a close relative of the story of origin and etiology. A genealogy is a list of ancestors. It is a genre that baffles modern readers, but, again, it was an important genre for the primitive

mind. The genealogies of Genesis serve as many as five purposes: they reflect the interest of biblical cultures in family and individual origins or roots; they express the continuity of generations (for either good or evil); they show the importance that God places on individuals (inasmuch as named individuality is important in the genealogies); they root biblical faith in space-time history; and they embody theological meaning (as, for example, in the genealogies that trace the messianic line).

Hero story. The preceding three genres are important in Genesis, but in terms of total space they are of second-tier importance. Far more crucial to our successfully navigating the book is the genre of the hero story. In fact, Genesis is an anthology of hero stories. The things we primarily need to know about these hero stories are the following.

- The minimal requirement of a literary hero is that he or she is a representative of universal human experience, including our own experiences.
- A hero needs to be largely admirable, a positive model whom we aspire to follow.
- But a hero need not be *wholly* admirable; heroes become our representatives partly by embodying the common failings of the human race.
- Although we legitimately apply the adjective *heroic* to any admirable and representative character in a story, it is best to use the noun form, *hero*, for the protagonist. This is a helpful strategy because a hero story is built around the central hero. We can assimilate a hero story well if we simply view ourselves as the hero's observant traveling companion, learning the lessons that the hero learned.
- A key to assimilating a hero story is to assume that the tellers of hero stories say what they want to impart about human experience and truth by embodying these things in the life and actions of the central hero and secondary characters who might be heroic. Hero stories codify a society's values and moral code.
- We should identify the hero's experiment in living and note whether that experiment comes to a good or bad end. On that basis, we can formulate an understanding of what the storyteller intends for us to carry away by way of instruction. We can extract the intended instruction from a hero story if we regard it as being an example

story in which we can see good behavior to emulate and bad behavior to avoid.

If we apply the foregoing grid to the hero stories of Genesis, we will handle them very well—better than if we consult commentaries that say virtually nothing about the story qualities of Genesis and the way in which the author embodies truth in the characters and actions of heroes. Writers of hero stories cast their lot with character and action as the vehicle for the truth they aim to impart; we cannot extract that truth without analyzing character and action.

In keeping with our focus on the literary forms that biblical authors impose on the materials of real life, it is important to make a distinction between life and the literary/historical portrayal of life. Real life provides *the materials from which* a hero and heroic life can be constructed, but real life does not provide heroes of the type we find in Genesis. The heroes of Genesis are the product of the selectivity and shaping hand of the author. The author has molded the materials of life (but did not invent fictional data) in such a way that the essential issues stand out, silhouetted with clarity.

Narrative or story. We should not overlook the obvious: a hero story is, first, a generic story. From start to finish, the primary literary form of Genesis is story. The individual units are comprised not of ideas but of the three ingredients that make up all stories: plot (actions), characters, and settings. The essence of *plot* is one or more conflicts that run their course and reach resolution. Our primary goal in regard to the *characters* of Genesis should be to get to know them as fully as the storyteller enables us and to ponder what the storyteller is telling us about life by means of these characters. *Settings* provide the enabling context for the events in a story and the characters who inhabit the settings; we should therefore analyze how a setting serves as a fit “container” for the actions and characters that exist within it.

Tragic plot. A tragic plot tells the story of a hero or a group who begins in prosperity, makes a tragic choice, and brings about misery as a result. Genesis 3, the story of the fall, is the prototypical tragedy for the entire human race; it is the story in which we can see the tragic principle in

its pure form. After Genesis 3, we find many tragic plots in Genesis, to which we can apply the following grid: (1) What is ideal in the initial phase of the story? What constitutes the tragic hero's greatness? (2) What tragic mistake does the tragic hero make, and what tragic flaw of character can we discern in that mistake? (3) What form do the usual catastrophe and suffering take in this particular tragedy? (4) Does the tragic hero come to perception about the nature of the tragic mistake? (5) For us as readers, what wisdom or redemptive aspect can we carry away from this particular spectacle of human failing? The story of Cain (4:1–16) is a good example of a tragic plot.

Comic plot. A comic plot is a U-shaped story in which events first descend from prosperity into potential tragedy and then rise to a happy ending. That is the *complete* comic plot, but many comedies begin at the bottom of the U and narrate the gradual conquest of obstacles to the happy ending. In either case, a comic plot is a success story. Literary tragedy embodies the pessimistic principle of human life in this world, whereas comedy embodies the principles of optimism and hope. There are as many comic plots as tragic plots in Genesis. The story of Joseph, the favored son of his father who is sold into slavery and then endures a series of misfortunes but eventually becomes the second-most powerful ruler in his nation, fits the U-shaped comic plot to perfection.

Conversations and divine-human encounters. In keeping with the impulse of biblical narrative to package its material as mini-dramas, we should be alert for the prominent role that dialogue plays in the stories of Genesis. Often the action is carried by conversations; as we overhear characters interact, we can piece together the outlines of a story. In addition, many of the conversations in Genesis are between God and people, thus falling into the narrative subtype of divine-human encounter.

Satire. Satire is the exposure of human failing. The template on which a satire is constructed is an object of attack. There is also a stated or inferred satiric norm—a standard of correctness by which the failure is being judged. The satiric element in Genesis is embodied in narrative form, and more specifically it is located in the character flaws of many characters. The most sustained satire in Genesis is the story of Jacob,

as his character flaws are repeatedly laid out to view. But some of the shorter stories are also classics of satire, such as those of Cain and the Tower of Babel. Additionally, Genesis contains numerous stories of dysfunctional families, and these always have a satiric element.

Birth story. In keeping with the domestic emphasis of Genesis, there are numerous birth stories. The birth of Isaac incorporates a related narrative subgenre: the annunciation story in which an angel announces that a barren wife will bear a child.

Epic. While lacking the single plot required by epic, Genesis has many traits that epics possess. It is not simply the story of a family but of the origins of a nation, so it has the usual epic trait of national destiny. Deity reaching down into human and earthly affairs is omnipresent in epics. Epic presents an entire cosmology, and the story of creation at the beginning of Genesis ensures such epic sweep of setting. We also find such staples of epic as catalogs or lists, genealogies, quests, worship scenes, journeying from one place to another (geographic sweep), and ritual actions (e.g., circumcision and sacrifice).

Literary Form and Religious Vision in Genesis

Inferred Literary Intentions of Genesis

The book is designed to achieve the following: acquaint us with first things—the events that happened first in human history and the foundational principles of human existence; satisfy our taste for story by giving us stories that are the very touchstone of great narrative; give us a full-fledged portrait of the character of God; get us to share essential human experiences with memorable characters; clue us into the beginnings of God’s covenant of redemption that culminated in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus; show us how to live our daily lives in accordance with God’s will for people.

What the Literary Forms of Genesis Silhouette with Heightened Clarity

- The only character present throughout Genesis is God, and this literary form of *the dominant protagonist* embodies a religious vision, namely, that God is the ultimate reality. Throughout Genesis

we understand that the most important thing we need to understand is who God is.

- God is not usually the central character in the individual stories, but he is always understood to be the ultimate being. Thus virtually every story in Genesis is at some level a story about the acts of God. This narrative motif of *the acts of God* is offered to us as a revelation of God's character and acts.
- The literary format of individual stories in which a series of characters interact with God shows how people are inevitably related to God and how their individual destinies are determined by how they relate to him. We can call this the “literary form of the drama of the soul's choice,” and in Genesis the human choices that characters make embody the principle that we all need to choose for or against God and thereby determine our destinies.
- The momentousness of life comes through strongly by means of all the literary forms—the portrayal of the character and acts of God and the stories of people making spiritual choices in relation to God.
- The tragic plots of Genesis show the sinfulness of the human race and its bent to make the wrong choices, but the comic U-shaped plots show the redemptive potential of life in a universe arranged by God.
- The presence of the archetypal plot motif of crime and punishment (repeated numerous times in Genesis) embodies the principle of justice that God has built into the fabric of life, but the counterbalancing story of God's covenant dealings (covenantal history) with Adam, Eve, Noah, and the patriarchs shows that from the beginning God had a plan for dealing with human sinfulness, making an escape from judgment a possibility for people who choose to accept God's redemptive plan.

Literary Tips for Reading Genesis

(1) Since nearly every unit is a story, we need to be ready to apply what we know about story, with plot, character, and setting forming the main agenda of considerations. (2) Because most of the stories are hero sto-

ries, we can ask what is representative about a given hero and analyze what is good or bad about him or her. (3) Literary narratives are always at some level *example stories*, so we need to decide what a given story is an example *of* and formulate what the story says about life by means of that example. (4) Genesis is particularly rich in its portrayal of universal human experience; we should observe what aspects of our own experience are embodied in a given story. It is important to do justice to the human side of Genesis (while not neglecting the divine side). (5) Along with much that is familiar, many of the characters, events, and settings seem remote from everyday life; we can relish the opportunity to be transported from our own time and place to a strange (yet familiar) world. (6) Most of the stories (and even the genealogies) are constructed on an underlying template of human sinfulness and divine grace; we need to look for evidences of this template in individual stories and in the overall story (the Puritans claimed that every passage in the Bible has a double theme: law and grace—the bad news of human failure to meet God’s commands and the good news of what God does to save people despite their failings).

Perspectives on the Literary Forms of Genesis

The protagonist:

The characterization of God may indeed be said to be the central literary concern of the Bible, and it is pursued from beginning to end, for the principal character, or actor, or protagonist of the Bible is God. Not even the most seemingly insignificant action in the Bible can be understood apart from the emerging characterization of the deity. With this great protagonist and his designs, all other characters and events interact, as history becomes the great arena for God’s characteristic and characterizing actions. —Roland M. Frye

A literary work from the heroic ages:

We must not think of these as ordinary . . . people; but, next to Christ and John the Baptist, they were the most outstanding heroes this world has ever produced. . . . Those patriarchs were most holy men endowed with superior gifts, being the heroes, as it were, of the entire world. —Martin Luther

Human characterization:

The people throughout the book are normal and familiar, such as we are accustomed to meet in our day-to-day intercourse with our fellow men. . . . Though they are lifelike, alive, and normal, they are not . . . average human types. They eat, sleep, shepherd the flock, till the soil, make love, and generally pursue the interests common to all men. But . . . they . . . represent in their being something greater than themselves. —Solomon Goldman

The view of people (always important in literature):

How simple are the images of Israel's ancestors! They have almost more shadow than light. . . . The nobleness of these figures consists in the fact that they conquer in the strength of the grace granted to them. . . . Their mistakes are the foils of their greatness for sacred history. —Franz Delitzsch

The world we enter as we read Genesis:

The sublime influence of God . . . reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable. —Erich Auerbach



EXODUS

The starting point for understanding the book of Exodus is its title. *Exodus* is the Latin form of the Greek word *exodos*, which means “exit” or “departure.” The unifying core of Exodus from which everything radiates is the departure of the fledgling nation of Israel from Egypt after 430 years of life and slavery there. That account of the book needs to be expanded slightly: once the nation has left Egypt, it enters the phase of establishing its identity as a nation, with the result that we get a set of foundational principles and practices for a religious nation. Exodus is the gospel of the Old Testament—God’s first great act of redemption. There is also a personal and metaphoric aspect to the book, as it becomes the story of rescue from bondage in our own spiritual pilgrimage.

The Book at a Glance	
40 chapters, 1,213 verses	
1-4	Israel's enslavement in Egypt; preparation of Moses to deliver the people of God
5-15	Moses's confrontation of Pharaoh; the ten plagues; expulsion from Egypt, ending with the Red Sea deliverance
16-18	Journey through the wilderness to Mount Sinai
19-31	The law given, along with instructions for the tabernacle
32-34	The golden calf and the replacement tablets of the law
35-40	Building of the tabernacle

Exodus as a Book

Despite the unifying theme of deliverance from bondage, the content of the book is actually heterogeneous. The first eighteen chapters are narrative, but under that umbrella we find different types and styles of narrative. Chapter 1 is national history and deals with Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites living within Egypt's borders. Then the focus shifts to a single heroic figure, Moses, whose birth in Egypt, exile in Midian, calling by God to be the nation's leader, and return to Egypt (chaps. 2–4) are a self-contained action of exile and return. Then the national and personal histories combine in the long single combat between Moses and Pharaoh over the request of the Israelites to worship God in the wilderness, culminating in the actual exodus from Egypt and the institution of the Passover (chaps. 5–13).

The first thirteen chapters are a fast-paced, continuous narrative, with the story of the plagues told with full detail and in what literary scholars call an “embellished” or “copious” style. The departure from Egypt is then followed by journeying in the wilderness (chaps. 14–18). It is a story of national survival, as the Israelites undergo a series of adventures and narrow escapes, with God's rescue of them the counterbalance to continuous threats to survival. Just as we begin to think that the entire book will be a story, the narrative mode comes to an abrupt halt. What follows is somewhat mystifying to a modern reader, but we need to keep the point of unity in view—the deliverance of a nation followed by the beginnings of national identity.

The first block of nonnarrative material is the detailed commands that God imparts to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai (chaps. 19–24). We can profitably divide this mass of commands into two categories: the Ten Commandments (20:1–17) and the Book of the Covenant (20:22–23:33). The Book of the Covenant consists of case laws that show how to apply the Ten Commandments. So as we reach the midpoint of the book, we have been given a long block of narrative (chaps. 1–18) and a briefer but equally detailed section of law (chaps. 19–24).

But we are not allowed to settle down into what has become familiar. The section of legal material gives way to the architectural data of God's design for a place of worship (chaps. 25–31). That place is called the “tabernacle,” and Moses receives God's instructions for it

on Mount Sinai (where he also received the Law). The mass of details concerning physical dimensions and types of wood and colors of cloth overwhelms us, but those details were a blueprint to follow (as narrated later in the book).

Exodus is a book of surprises, and after the informational unit on the materials and design of the tabernacle, we make a sudden return to the narrative mode with the incidents of the golden calf, the resumption of the journey, and Moses's making new tablets of the Law (chaps. 32–34). But the return to the narrative mode is only momentary, and the final section of the book (chaps. 35–40) is a catalog of how Moses and a host of workmen constructed the tabernacle and its accoutrements, accompanied by information about the worship that was to take place in the tabernacle.

The content and arrangement of Exodus prove three things about the book. One is the sheer number of details. This means, second, that Exodus is a difficult book to master, one that resists the “rapid read.” Third, in addition to the baffling *quantity* of data, we encounter distinctly different types of material: narrative, law, architectural blueprint, and worship manual. We can attach corresponding themes to these genres: deliverance for narrative, covenant for law, and holiness for the material devoted to the tabernacle.

Difficulties That Need to Be Solved

(1) The narrative first half of the book sweeps us along with the usual narrative momentum, but it is easy to get bogged down and discouraged by the seemingly endless lists of laws and architectural details in the second half. The solution is to resign ourselves to the slower pace of reading that the second half requires. (2) In addition to being baffled by the *quantity* of details in the second half, the *relevance* of this material to our own lives is somewhat hard to determine. One way to extract significance from the seemingly remote commands and worship details is to meditate on underlying principles—the moral principles that underlie the ceremonial laws, for example, or the spirit of holiness (being set apart) that comes through the details, or the ideals of beauty, awe, and reverence in the worship of God. The situation of particular details serving as a net in which to capture the universal is a standard literary procedure. (3) In addition

to issues of quantity of detail and relevance, there is a difficulty with the unity of the book. Initially it is hard to see how the laws and building details contribute to a story of national deliverance and formation. But the national scope of the book helps us solve this problem: once God has delivered the nation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, he turns to the task of constituting Israel as a national and spiritual entity.

The Genres and Literary Forms of Exodus

Epic. The most useful literary label for the book is rarely applied but nonetheless covers more than anything else, namely, epic. Epic is a story of national destiny, and this describes Exodus perfectly. Epic captures a nation at a moment of crisis and often in its stage of formation. Again this fits the story of Israel that we find in Exodus. Epic stories of a nation are often placed into an international context, and in Exodus the nation of Israel intersects with Egypt and other nations through which Israel passes on its forty-year journey. Epic is a didactic (“having the intention to teach”) genre that sums up what a whole culture wants to record about its basic values. The long sections devoted to law and worship fall into place if we relate the book to its epic genre. Epic is written in a high style, and we can note in this regard that verbal elaboration is prevalent throughout Exodus; examples include patterns of repetition in the story of the plagues and in the list of laws, and similar repeated formulas in the instructions for building the tabernacle and the subsequent building of it.

Epic expansiveness is always balanced by a counter impulse toward unity. Epics have a central event (called the “epic feat”) to which everything is related, and in Exodus this is obviously the departure of Israel from Egypt. It is a rare epic that does not make use of the journey and quest motifs, and this fits Exodus as well. Equally importantly, epic features a central hero commonly known as the “epic hero”; Moses fills this role in Exodus.

Parody and anti-epic. Parody occurs when a work of literature imitates or parallels an existing literary genre but with inverted or drastically different effect. In the epic of Exodus this takes a very particular form, and we can take the title for that form from scholarship on John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*. That poem reenacts all the usual epic motifs

Passage	Content	Theme	Location	
1:1-22	God's people suffer in slavery	God not glorified because Pharaoh will not let God's people go	Israel in Egypt	
2:1-25	Birth and exodus of Moses			
3:1-4:17	The call of Moses			
4:18-6:30	First audience with Pharaoh			
7-10	The first nine plagues	God glorified in judging Egypt		
11-13	Passover and final plague	God glorified in redeeming his people	From Egypt to God's mountain	
14:1-31	Crossing the Red Sea			
15:1-21	The song of salvation			
15:22-18:27	Journey through the wilderness	God glorified in providing for his people		
19-20	The Ten Commandments	God glorified in giving his people the law		
21-23	The Book of the Covenant			
24:1-18	God makes a covenant with Israel			
25-31	Plans for the tabernacle and its priests	God glorified in worship		Israel at Mount Sinai
32:1-35	The golden calf			
33-34	God renews his covenant with Israel			
35-39	The tabernacle built according to plan			
40:1-38	God's glory fills the tabernacle			

and conventions, but it inverts them in such drastic ways that it is now common to call *Paradise Lost* an anti-epic or counter-epic as well as an epic. In Exodus, this anti-epic element takes the following forms: (1) Epic heroes are case studies in self-confidence and self-reliance, but Moses is a reluctant hero who relies on God. (2) The nearly constant subject of epics is military warfare, and the important characters are conquering warriors; in Exodus, military conflict is replaced by spiritual warfare, and the victories that occur are achieved by God, not the nation's army. (3) Conventional epics celebrate the superior qualities of the author's nation, whereas Exodus is a satiric epic that repeatedly exposes the imperfections and ignominy of the Israelites. Many other details can be fitted into this anti-epic pattern.

Holy-war motif. It is important to get the idea of a holy war on our radar screen early in our journey through the Old Testament. If we do

not, we can scarcely avoid being appalled by the numerous accounts of military atrocity. Of course, not all the atrocities are condoned by the biblical authors or God, but when they are condoned, the implied context is that the battle is more than a military battle. The battle is really a spiritual and moral conflict between good and evil. Pharaoh is not simply a tyrant without regard for human rights and freedom, though that would be bad enough; he is the enemy of God and therefore of God's people. He is not just a political monstrosity (a tyrant) but a spiritual monstrosity (someone who defies God). In contrast to many of the holy-war conflicts that come later in the Old Testament, it is easy to assimilate the war of the Israelites against Pharaoh and the Egyptians as a holy war because the chief warrior is God.

Song of victory. A lyric form closely related to ancient military epics is the song of victory, which is a poem that celebrates a military victory and is couched in terms of a statement of thanksgiving actually delivered on the battlefield or suitable for such an occasion. The famous Song of Moses (15:1–18) is a song of victory that fits into the anti-epic mode by ascribing the victory to God as divine warrior instead of to a human warrior or army.

Satire. Satire is the exposure of human vice or folly. Its essential feature is an object of attack. The nation of Israel and leaders such as Moses and Aaron are sometimes idealized but more often exposed for their failings.

Narrative or story. The first nineteen chapters are all narrative, but the book never totally relinquishes the narrative impulse after that. The following narrative sections are interspersed throughout the law and architecture sections: 24; 32–33; 34:29–35; 35:20–29; 40:16–38. The key that unlocks the narrative units is the usual considerations of plot, characterization, and setting. Conversely, one cannot deal with Exodus adequately without exploring plot, character, and setting.

Hero story. Heroic narrative is important to the book because both the narrative and nonnarrative passages keep the focus on the single heroic character of Moses. Moses is one of the major characters in the Bible. The

author of Exodus never loses sight of Moses, although the story could have been told in other ways. The sections of law and building instructions are consistently packaged as commands that God gave to Moses and that Moses passed on to the nation. The conduct of Moses is offered to us as a model of godly leadership, and he is a national hero as well.

Miracle story. A feature of epics is the inclusion of “supernatural machinery”—divine beings and supernatural events. We might say that this is a feature of the entire Bible, but it is also true that miracles cluster in four eras of biblical history: the exodus, the prophets who lived before and during the Babylonian exile, the life of Jesus, and the apostolic age of the early Christian church. We cannot make complete sense of Exodus without having the genre of the miracle story continuously in our awareness. A subgenre of miracle story is the theophany, an appearance of God in visible form; there are numerous theophanies in Exodus, reinforcing the atmosphere of the miraculous.

Genres related to the exodus from Egypt. Before the Israelites leave Egypt, several narrative subtypes unfold in sequence. (1) Moses’s birth (2:1–10) is a birth story. (2) Moses’s flight to Midian and his sojourn there is a story of exile (2:11–25). (3) God’s call of Moses at the burning bush is a calling story (chaps. 3–4). (4) Moses’s confrontation of Pharaoh is a confrontation story, intertwined with stories of plague (5:1–12:32). (5) The departure from Egypt after the tenth plague is a combined expulsion story and rescue story, with etiologies included as well (explanation of how the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread originated, in 12:33–13:16).

Travel story. Once the Israelites leave Egypt, the conventions of the travel story dominate the book. The usual ingredients of the travel story are naturally present: journeying, change of geographic locale, encounters with neighboring nations and with God, struggle for survival, conflicts within the traveling community, rescue, testing, suspense, danger, wandering, guidance, and adventure.

Law. We might more precisely speak of “law giving,” inasmuch as the extensive sections dealing with the Ten Commandments and then a host

of specific laws (technically, case law) are packaged as an extended address by God to Moses (as evidenced by the way in which the material is enclosed in quotation marks). The primary format of the law-giving section is the list or catalog, and we might note in passing that catalogs are a conventional feature of epics. How to relate the section of law giving to the rest of the book is not as problematical as it might appear if we remember that epics not only tell a story of national destiny but also codify a nation's identity. In the ancient world, a nation could always point to its epic and say, "This is who we are. These are our values." Certainly the moral and spiritual identity of Israel is captured in its laws, including those we find in Exodus.

Suzerainty treaty. The Ten Commandments (20:1–17) fall into the form of an ancient genre known as the suzerainty treaty, and the Book of the Covenant that follows (20:22–23:33) also belongs to that genre in a general way. A suzerain was a Near Eastern sovereign. The treaties that these sovereigns imposed on their subjects were built around the following format: identification of the ruler by name and titles; a historical survey of past actions of the suzerain on behalf of his subjects; a list of commands; and a list of blessings that will follow from obeying the commands, with accompanying curses that will follow from disobedience.

Architectural blueprint. Another nonliterary or expository section is the instructions for the tabernacle—intertwined instructions for the worship that God prescribed to occur in the tabernacle and its eventual construction. Since this material does not fall into conventional literary categories, we are free to compose labels that fit the material most accurately: architectural blueprint; building instructions; worship manual; garment design; sewing instructions; and narrative of construction or building project.

Summary

Exodus defies categorization. Literary scholars sometimes call a work of literature "sui generis"—of its own kind, unique, one of a kind. Exodus is sui generis. It is a hybrid book, and it is common for literary critics to call such a work "encyclopedic." Encyclopedic works always use a

mixed-genre format, and this certainly applies to Exodus. Instead of being dismayed by the way in which Exodus defies the unity that most books display, we should throw ourselves with zest into mastering a book that is a literary and spiritual adventure.

Literary Form and Religious Vision in Exodus

Inferred Literary Intentions of Exodus

The book is designed to achieve the following: tell the story of Israel's exodus from the land of slavery; record additional founding events in Israel's national history, packaged in the form of epic literature (provable by the omnipresence of epic traits); celebrate the mighty acts of God; expose and denounce evil wherever it is found in human experience; present a heroic (though not perfect) leader in the person of Moses and lead us to admire him and emulate his virtues; give us positive models of how people should relate to God as well as negative models of how not to relate to him; provide instruction regarding how God wants people to live, both morally and spiritually; call us to obedience and worship of God as God has prescribed; create within us a sense of awe and reverence for the deity and holiness of God; awaken in us a dread of the judgment of God against evil; enliven our sense of beauty in worship; and satisfy our innate love of a good story.

What the Literary Forms of Exodus Silhouette with Heightened Clarity

- The narrative sections of Exodus tell two stories. One is the story of what God does and correspondingly of his character or being. This divine story highlights the sovereignty of God, seen in his acts of deliverance and judgment. God also appears in his role as the one who instructs his people, seen in the laws he gives and the instructions for worship. Exodus is also a human story that tells us what the members of a specific nation did and, by means of that particular set of events, what people universally are like. In Exodus, people can be very good and very bad.
- Even though Exodus tells the twin stories of what God does and what people do, those two plotlines intertwine in such a way as to highlight how God and people interact. It is a story of divine

patience and judgment, as God continuously contends with wayward humanity.

- The long sections of law set in bold relief how God wants the human race to live and implicitly lay before us the need to obey God as the condition for living well in this world.
- The long sections dealing with the materials that went into the building of the tabernacle affirm the legitimacy of sensory experience, the importance of beauty in life and worship, and the reverence and “set apart” quality that are to characterize the worship of God.

Literary Tips for Reading Exodus

(1) The epic genre is the aspect of Exodus that allows everything to fall into place in our experience of the book. The narrative sections are pure epic, and the seemingly unrelated sections dealing with the law and the architecture of the tabernacle are part of the epic motif of the formation of a nation. (2) We should not minimize the role of Moses; his is a hero story par excellence, and Moses is a heroic figure from whose life we can learn foundational lessons about leadership and living. (3) We set ourselves up for frustration if we go to Exodus looking only for narrative or story. When we come to nonnarrative sections (chiefly law and architecture), we need to shift gears. These sections do not narrate action but impart information. The Bible is a book for all temperaments, and the sections of law appeal to a legal mind that wants matters clearly delineated, while the architectural sections appeal to the artistic imagination. (4) Exodus introduces us to numerous memorable characters, so we should relish the author’s skill in portraying them. The main characters are the heroic leader Moses, the tyrant Pharaoh, the grumbling nation of Israel, and the archetypal “sidekick” Aaron. (5) God, of course, is the divine character who controls the action. His characterization must be assimilated as a revelation—a body of information about the supreme being that the human mind could not with its own resources construct. Knowing who God is constitutes the most important information we can have; in keeping with the literary nature of Exodus, this information is packaged not as a theological treatise but as a literary/narrative characterization.

Perspectives on the Literary Forms of Exodus

Primacy of the imagination:

Exodus is an epic tale of fire, sand, wind, and water. The adventure takes place under the hot desert sun. . . . Almost every scene is a masterpiece: the baby in the basket, the burning bush, the river of blood, the angel of death, the crossing of the sea, the manna in the wilderness, the water from the rock, the thunder on the mountain . . . the gold calf, the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night. —Philip Ryken

Nonfictional mode:

[The exodus] cannot possibly be fictional. No nation would be likely to invent for itself, and faithfully transmit century after century . . . an inglorious and inconvenient tradition of this nature. —Nahum Sarna

Characterization:

Exodus is about a man, Moses. . . . Exodus is about a nation, Israel, moving from slavery in Egypt into freedom. . . . But ultimately Exodus is about the God of the covenant who has instituted a new relationship between himself and those whom he has called to be his people. —John L. MacKay

Structure:

Exodus consists of two main sections, chapters 1–15 and 16–40, a compositional scheme that embraces the physical and spiritual birth of the people of Israel. These two stages might be called Liberation and Covenant. —J. P. Fokkelman

Mixed-genre format and unity:

The Israelites placed their laws in a narrative context, in a book along with stories, genealogies, poems and prophecies, and even . . . within the same portion of the book. [We need to acknowledge] how much damage we do to this book by focusing on isolated portions of it without regard to the rest. —Gabriel Josipovici

EXPLORING *the* SHAPE *and* SUBSTANCE *of the* BIBLE

In this comprehensive and systematic volume, renowned literary expert Leland Ryken introduces readers to the specific themes, patterns, and techniques used by the biblical authors. A companion to Ryken's *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*, this practical guidebook will equip you to interpret each book of the Bible through the lens of its literary forms and features—helping you faithfully read, understand, and teach the Bible with greater insight.

“In any piece of writing, there is no content without the form in which it is expressed. Without the story or poem, for example, there is no message. . . . If the message is embodied in a form, we first need to master the form.”

FROM THE PREFACE

LELAND RYKEN (PhD, University of Oregon) served as professor of English at Wheaton College for nearly fifty years. He has authored or edited more than fifty books, including *The Word of God in English*, *The ESV Literary Study Bible*, and *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible*. He is a frequent speaker at the Evangelical Theological Society's annual meetings and served as literary stylist for the English Standard Version Bible.

BIBLICAL REFERENCE

