

Ryken, Leland *How To Read The Bible As Literature... And Get More Out Of It*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 208 pp. \$16.99

Author's Intent:

Ryken has set out to inform and improve his reader's understanding and perception of the Bible. To this end, his opening remark in the book's Premise reveals the misconception that the author aims to correct. In his words: "The one thing the Bible is not is what it is so often thought to be – a theological outline with proof texts attached." To his credit, the author does more than just diagnose the disease, he prescribes and applies the cure of comprehension. Ryken offers both an intellectual understanding of literature and a passion to see God's Word revealed in the totality of its revelation, beauty, and nuance. Ryken defines his ultimate purpose for the book as follows: "...to make the methods of literary criticism more accessible to anyone who reads and studies the Bible."

His concern is two-fold. First, at the level of expectation, the author rightfully acknowledges that far too many readers of the Bible approach Scripture like a businessman picks up the Wall Street Journal. There is a certain degree of inquisitiveness, appreciation, and emotion with which the businessman searches the pages of the Journal, knowing there is valuable information hidden within its pages. Both the businessman and typical Bible reader tend to apply these same feelings to a filtering process in their reading habits. Rather than embrace the fully embellished message of the text, headlines are sought, nuggets are mined, and factoids are carried away. While all of the information gathered in such a process is accurate, it is at best incomplete and at worst, when taken out of context, misleading. Consequently, Bible readers, more than

businessmen, need to understand that there is a fuller message to be heard in the Bible when one approaches it with the proper perspective, understanding, and tools of discernment.

The second facet of Ryken's concern is in regards to the Bible reader's ability to recognize and comprehend the vast array of instruments, styles, and nuances of literary device used throughout Scripture. Whereas Ryken's first concern dealt with the problem of awareness, his second focus is primarily application oriented. The author has taken on the noble task of trying to teach a basic level of interpretative reading by both explaining and illustrating the key literary concepts, with which many Bible readers are unfamiliar.

#### The Book's Content:

*How To Read The Bible As Literature* begins by establishing a premise. The Bible is literature; therefore, it needs to be interpreted as such. Ryken devotes the entire first chapter to proving this under-girding point. He does a masterful job of walking the reader back and forth between literary definitions and biblical examples; complete with their corresponding presence in Scripture. Not only does he successfully argue that the Bible should be read as literature, he offers help for those who are ill prepared to do so.

The remainder of the book follows an effective, systematic approach. In the broadest sense, Ryken identifies and defines eight foundational elements of biblical literature: stories, poetry, proverbs, the Gospels, parables, epistles, satire, and visionary literature. From there, he zeros in on the various subsets in each category. In a funneling type of approach Ryken brings his readers all the way down to specific examples in each area. The comprehensive result offers a premise, definition, example, interpretation, and

explanation of each component. The author concludes the work with an illuminating chapter that shows the literary unity that is woven into the overall fabric of the Bible.

#### Striking Thoughts & Affirmative Contributions:

- As simple as it may sound, the first striking thought I had came from Ryken's definition of literature: "I do not mean everything that is written. I use it in a more restricted sense to mean the types of writing that are often called 'imaginative literature' or 'creative writing,' in contrast to expository writing."
- "...be sensitive to the experiential side of the Bible... resist the tendency to turn every biblical passage into a theological proposition, as though this is what the passage exists for."
- "Biblical stories exist on a continuum from a bare outline of what happened to a full account of how it happened. The more fully and concretely the story is told, the more literary we should consider it to be..."
- "The Bible is a mixture of genres, some literary, some expository, some mixed. The major literary genres are narrative or story, poetry (especially lyric poetry), proverb, and visionary writing (including prophecy and apocalypse)."
- "No principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole."
- "...the more they [readers of the Bible] know about how stories work, the more they will enjoy and understand vast portions of the Bible."
- "... we must get maximum mileage out of the few details that are given regarding the characters in the brief, unembellished stories of the Bible."
- "One of the most crucial of all rules for reading the stories of the Bible... analyze in detail the unity of the story, noting how each episode relates to the overriding framework(s) and how the episodes relate to each other in the unfolding progress of the story."
- "...pay attention to the changes that occur between the beginning and end of a story, noting carefully the precise ways in which characters change and the causes of those transformations."
- "...be alert for the presence of foils, dramatic irony, and poetic justice in biblical narrative, both for what they add to your response to the story and what they contribute to the meaning."
- "...the storyteller both presents an experience and offers an interpretation of it... we can profitably pursue our quest to find the themes of a story by dividing the process into two phases: identifying what the story is about (the topic or subject of the story); and how the writer wishes us to view the experience that is presented (the theme of the story)."
- "It is common to find characters within the stories of the Bible making key utterances that we intuitively recognize as summing up what the story as a whole is asserting."

- “Principle of narrative interpretation: assume that the storyteller has included every detail for a purpose, and do not hesitate to reflect on how the story is affected by the inclusion of a detail as compared with the effect if the detail were omitted.”
- “...rule for interpreting biblical stories... look upon the conclusion of a story as an implied comment on (evaluation of) the characters and events that the story presented.”
- Page 68-69 offered a very helpful “checklist” of narrative elements that require scrutiny (the list was too long to include here).
- “...the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction... the story of Abraham embodies an ideal of faith...”
- “...speaking of comedy... critics do not mean a humorous story but rather one with a certain shape of plot. Comedy is the story of the happy ending. It is usually a U-shaped story that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, and rises again to end happily... comedy rather than tragedy is the dominant narrative form of the Bible and the Christian gospel.”
- “Poetry is heightened speech. It compels attention and involvement... Biblical poetry uses the highly patterned structures of parallelism in its various forms.”
- “The proverb... is a form of verbal art, and its content comes from close observation of life.”
- “The parables of Jesus are masterpieces of storytelling... simple stories... didactic in their purpose. We must usually attach a symbolic meaning to some of the details in the story, and always find one or more religious themes in them.”
- “The forcefulness, beauty, and affective power of the New Testament Epistles are not accidental... The corresponding skills that they require from readers are the ability to determine the overall structure of an epistle, to ‘think paragraphs’ in following the logical flow of ideas, to interpret figurative language, and to be sensitive to the effects of artistic patterning.”
- “The reader’s task with satire is fourfold: to identify the object(s) of attack, the satiric vehicle, the tone, and the norm or standard by which things are criticized.”
- “Visionary literature liberates us from the mundane and familiar and literal. It is an assault on our patterns of deep-level thought in an effort to shake us out of our complacency with the normal flow of things. Visionary literature is a revolutionary genre.”
- “The Bible is an amazingly unified book.”

Points of Disagreement:

There were no points with which I disagreed in this book. On the contrary, I found it to be enlightening and edifying from cover to cover.

### Assessment of the Value of the Book:

I can personally attest to the merit of Ryken's purpose for writing this book. He sought to give his readers a better understanding of the Bible's literary components, and the subsequent tools to understand them. In the case of this writer, the author was successful. Ryken has helped to broaden my grasp of biblical truth by empowering me to see, study, and share a fuller context of God's Word.

I am certain this book makes a useful contribution to the discussion of preaching. My conviction stems from the fact that Ryken's work seeks to advance the truth of Scripture. Moreover, he has effectively framed the issue, identified the challenges, and offered workable solutions for Bible readers and preacher alike. Anyone who is interested in hearing and sharing ALL that God has to say through Scripture will benefit from reading this book. And I dare say, pointing the first finger at myself, that very few people are so well versed in the Scriptures that this book would not benefit them to some degree.

To contrast the book's strengths and weaknesses, I would first praise the author's insight to recognize there is a problem that needed to be addressed. Secondly, his approach, starting with the big picture and working his points down to specific examples, allowed the book to be more than just "right" – it makes the book helpful and effective. If I had to identify one weakness, I would say that at times Ryken comes across a bit too academic in his delivery. There were a few times in the book that his confidence and perspective seemed more rooted in the literary discoveries than God's revelation.

I will recommend this book to others in the future because I believe it will help many better understand God's Word.

- Jeffrey Pearson