

# The Loom: Introduction to Literary Study

## POETS OF JERUSALEM AND ATHENS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCIPLINE OF LITERATURE

This question of what literature is has its basis, like all linguistic inquiries, in the question of what language is and why anybody should bother with it. We will be best off, then, to begin with the question, “What is language?”

### WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

*Oxford English Dictionary* defines “language,” in a generalized sense, as “Words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.” This definition is useful, but I will add the following remarks: language was created by God for specific purposes, as were all things (1 Corinthians 8:6; Proverbs 16:14), and Christ is Himself described as the Word (John 1:1-17; Revelation 19:13). These additions complicate matters a good deal, as we will see.

When we say that language was “created by God for specific purposes,” we are making several claims. First, we claim that language was *designed* by God, that its form and the way it functions are products of the mind of God. Second, we claim that language is *controlled* by God (as we see in Genesis 11, the account of the Tower of Babel). Third, we claim that language is *directed* by God towards a definite end.

Let us add to these three the observation that humans alone, of all earthly creatures, have from God the gift of speech and the ability to use language. Moreover this ability to speak and call and name was man’s from the very beginning (Genesis 2:19), and was not a result of the Fall. Therefore, we have no reason to suppose that language was originally intended in any other wise than as a good gift. And, since we know that man is made in God’s image, and that God spoke the universe into being (Genesis 1:3), it seems logically necessary that we should take man’s linguistic ability as the reflection of a divine attribute.

From these things it appears probable that the central purposes of human language are: communication between God and man, and between man and man (and between man and spirits, such as angels). Certainly it is clear that God made man capable of speech, and that God speaks to man. Likewise we know that man speaks to God, and to other men. God and Adam spoke together in the Garden of Eden, as did Adam and Eve to one another in their unfallen state. Language does not seem to have been used by human beings for any other purposes besides those of definition (naming) and communication in the beginning, nor has it been in the millennia following. Definition and communication together constitute the apparent purposes of language.

By way of a final observation, it is worth noting that language is a *powerful* tool, chosen by God for the task of creating a universe. We see the implication that this is also true (to a lesser extent) for human language in the account of Babel, wherein God says, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (*English Standard Version*, Genesis 11:6). Therefore God says, “Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech” (*English Standard Version*, Genesis 11:7). By destroying the unity of human linguistics, God set limits to human accomplishment. Surely that speaks for the potency of language!

So far we have described Language as a means toward definition and communication, via words, which are the good and powerful gift of God to men for this purpose: that men should use it to define various things and communicate with God, with other men, and with spirits. There is, however, still another depth to be sounded in this matter of language: and it is the fact that God the Son, Jesus Christ, in some important sense *is* the Word—John calls him simply “the Word” in his gospel (*English Standard Version*, John 1:1-17), and Revelation names Him the “Word of God” (*English Standard Version*, Revelation 19:13).

Since at least the time of Augustine and the fall of Rome, scholars have wondered about the relationship between signs (words) and their significance (what words mean). Philosophers have also debated the relationship between language and reality for centuries, as you will discover in our *Pageant of Philosophy*. On the whole, humans are curious about the process by which minds verbally (whether in speech or writing) transmit thoughts. This concept of Christ as Word does

much to heighten the mystery of language. For, as the author of Hebrews says, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (*English Standard Version*, Hebrews 1:1-2a). God has spoken to us in many ways, by many words, but with Christ He sent the essence, the Word Himself.

It is as if God had spoken to us about the concept of love—as if He used *lyubov* (Russian), *amor* (Latin), *love* (English), and all the other words we know which mean the same idea—for many centuries. But then God sent love in the person of Christ, the essence of love, the essence of words in the Word. That is what it is like. In fact, that is what it is.

In summary, then, man should understand that he has language from God as a unique, powerful, and peculiar gift, to be used or misused according as he makes it a means of glorifying God or himself. Man should understand, moreover, that insofar as Christ is the Word, He is also that which is most meaningful in language and communication.

## WHAT IS “LITERARY” LANGUAGE?

Commonly speaking, there are two kinds of language: the plain sort that communicates facts and information, and the ornamented or arranged sort that pleases as it communicates. The first is what one expects to find in cooking recipes and car manuals. The second is what most authors try to achieve as they write their newspaper articles, inspirational works, advertising campaigns, slogans, sermons, speeches, and of course fiction, plays, and poetry. The goal is not only to convey information, but to do so with clarity, power, and beauty, so that whoever is reading or listening will be pleased by—and disposed to agree with—what is said. Toward that end, authors take great care to choose and arrange the words that will most appealingly convey a particular set of thoughts.

This task of arranging and ornamenting in order to make one’s work pleasing as well as communicative is called “artistry,” and it is not unique to writers. We see the same labor going on in sculpture, music, fabrics, paintings, architecture, and so forth. It is an impulse towards pleasing which drives the potter, for example, to labor many extra hours over a pot so that the vessel will not only hold water, but hold it gracefully.

As is probably clear by now, it is the second sort of language—the one that includes artistry—which is known as “literary language.” The addition of artistry to language makes possible a discipline called “the study of literature.” There are many subjects that teach *what* is said, or what the facts are: history, philosophy, geography, and chemistry books all do that. Those who study literature are interested also in *how* things are said—literature students want to know whether the arrangement of sentences and choice of words is pleasing as well as instructive, and in what ways. That is why we study it separately.

Having understood this much, we are now in a position to examine the classics of both Christian literature (works of Jerusalem poets) and secular literature (sometimes called literature of Athens because of the impact which Greek poets have had on western authors and their works).

## THE POET LAUREATE OF JERUSALEM: LITERARY LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

Those who are familiar with God’s attributes will hardly be surprised to learn that literary language was His invention. God is the greatest artist of all, and the only book which we have from Him—the Bible—is overwhelmingly literary. Even allowing for human agency, there is in the Bible a consistent display of artistry which, in its unearthly beauty, seems to argue for the inspiring hand of a divine Artist.<sup>1</sup> One has only to consider the simplicity and grandeur of Genesis 1, or the exquisite loveliness of the Psalms, in order to recognize that Someone has taken great care with the task of arranging and ornamenting Scripture.

Discerning God’s pleasure in literary artistry does not seem difficult, since evidence of divinely-inspired beauty abounds in the Bible. Consider, too, the testimony of the writer who penned Ecclesiastes: “The Preacher also taught

<sup>1</sup> For proofs of artistry in the Bible, please consider the arguments and examples offered by Leland Ryken in Chapter 3 of his work, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2004).

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the people knowledge, weighing and studying and *arranging* many proverbs *with great care*. The Preacher sought to find *words of delight*, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (*English Standard Version*, Ecclesiastes 12:9b-10, emphasis added). If artistry is not a matter of importance to God, why would He lead the Preacher to arrange his proverbs with “great care,” and seek to find “words of delight”? God is the poet laureate of Jerusalem and He has adorned His words of truth with the added loveliness of artistry.

## THE FUNCTION OF ARTISTRY IN JERUSALEM LITERATURE

Since God never does anything without a purpose, it is legitimate to ask *why* He includes artistic arrangements and ornamentation in His written work. Of what use, after all, is artistry? Dr. Leland Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College and style editor of the English Standard Version translation of the Bible, gives an apt answer. He explains that artistry has two purposes: it is pleasurable in itself, and it intensifies the impact of an utterance (*Words of Delight* 16). Together, these two explain the key functions of artistry in the Bible: artistry is pleasurable in itself (God so enjoys giving human beings pleasure!), and it reinforces meaning—*how* a thing is said can emphasize *what* the thing is saying. Here is an example from the Psalms: to say that one waits for God is true, but it may not capture the senses; to say that one waits for God more than a watchman waits for the morning is both true and captivating—the reader immediately begins to imagine what it would be like to wait, cold and hungry and stiff, atop a wall somewhere, for the first dear rays of morning light. The simile of a watchman embodies the principle of longing for God in a concrete example with which we can identify. We feel it more, and we understand it better, because our experience agrees with it. That is the power of artistry in language, and the joy of artistry in literature.

## IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: TO TEACH AND DELIGHT, TO BE TAUGHT AND DELIGHTED

Since man is made in the image of God, he has the privilege of imitating God in his use of language. Writers (both in Jerusalem and in Athens) have a phrase for this. They call it “to teach and to delight.” The Preacher’s testimony fits easily into this expression, for he sought to teach the people knowledge (words of truth), and at the same time to arrange his proverbs and find words of delight. Nor was he the only one. This same concept can be found in inscriptions from ancient Egypt. A Roman poet, Horace, first expressed it in the elegant phrase which we will use here. Horace’s Latin has it as *utile et dulce*; in the English of Sir Phillip Sidney, who wrote about the same idea many centuries later, it is “to teach and to delight.”

The responsibility of teaching truth is a heavy one, and the difficulty of delighting is great. In addition, each Christian author who accepts this double task must answer complicated questions, such as, “What is a correct understanding of the relationship between teaching and delighting, between content and form, between truth and artistry? Do we teach knowledge of God in order to reach the end of delighting in God? Or do we delight in God so that we will have a motive to seek knowledge of Him?”

The answers to these questions can have a deep impact on readers, and so we look to God’s work for guidance. Here, Leland Ryken is again helpful. He demonstrates that artistry (delighting) is very much present in the Bible, and is a good, important thing in itself, but that artistry is also clearly the servant of truth (teaching).<sup>1</sup> As explained before, artistry has the ability to reinforce truth. At the same time, however, we must be clear on the role that each has to play. Truth is primary, and artistry should never be used as an excuse for carelessness with it. Imagine what would have happened if the human writers who penned the Bible had been more concerned with making their words flow smoothly than they were with describing God accurately!

In the Bible, delighting and teaching the truth always go together, and God seems to place a high value on each of them. However, equal value does not necessarily mean self-same roles. Men and women are equal before God, but they have different roles to play: men are to lead, women are to help. In the same way, delighting and teaching are both valuable to God, and perhaps equally valuable. Yet delight has been given the role of helping and adorning truth, just as a woman does her husband.

1 *Words of Delight*, 507-509.

Although writers face a great task, the impact of faithful teaching and creative delighting is an immortal one. Words fitly spoken are like apples of gold in a setting of silver (*English Standard Version*, Proverbs 25:11), and will not soon be forgotten.

## TEACHING TRUTH: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND ATHENS

If the difference between the literature of Jerusalem and the literature of Athens were only a matter of different silver settings for golden apples of truth, few (if any) Christians would be likely to object to Athenian works. The Bible makes use of a wide variety of forms: prose, poetry, epistle, proverb, hero story, epic, epithalamion, and parable are just a few of the genres included. The trouble with secular literature is not that it comes in forms such as free verse and the science fiction novel (Christian authors have made use of both), but that its contents are not truthful to the entirety of human experience. To greater or lesser extents, non-Christian writers all reject the truth found in Scripture's account of reality. And, to whatever degree they portray another account—whether they say, as many do, that God is dead; or agree with Thomas Hardy that God (if He exists) is not kind to man; or insist with the ancient Egyptians and Greeks and Romans that there are multiple gods—their accounts are false, and so are their teachings. They have left out of their picture of human experience the most important element: knowledge of and relationship with God. In light of this, the Christian student of literature may well ask, “Why should I read secular works? What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” The next few sections will be devoted to answering these questions.

## INCLUDING ATHENS: WHY STUDY SECULAR LITERATURE?

“I have a friend who said something that really helped me with this.”

The speaker was Jennifer, a tall, slender, twenty-one-year-old Literature major at Patrick Henry College. She, I, and a few other friends sat at a back table in the college dining hall. It was the middle of a busy school day in March. Jennifer, who like most of us had been homeschooled all her life, was explaining the degrees by which she had come to read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, our current assignment in English Literature.

I knew that Jennifer had struggled for a long time with her vocation. Before coming to school she wrestled intensely with the same issues that all of us who wanted to be Christian students of literature had had to face. Some of them were questions like “Why should a Christian study works that show apathy, irreverence, or even hostility towards God?” and, more relevantly, “Why should a Christian read a book like *Tess*, about a sweet English dairymaid who is first raped by one man, then betrayed by another, then tempted by grief and anger to kill the first man, which in turn leads to her own execution—especially when all of it is told in such a way as to make God seem at best indifferent to her misery?” I knew that Jennifer loved the artistic beauty of literature, but I also know that she had strong concerns about secular content. I was all the more interested, therefore, to hear her reasoning.

“It may be,” she said quietly, telling us what her friend back home in Texas told her, “that the Lord is having you read things that you wouldn't choose to read, so that you can experience life as you have never known it, and will never know it. It may be that He has people He wants you to reach out and minister to, whom you would never be able to relate to if you had not read these things.”

Knowing her as I did, knowing her conscientiousness and how *Tess* must grieve her, Jennifer's words left a deep impression on me. For the truth is that there were, and still are, girls like Tess, maybe even more now than when the book was written. My parents have taken in a few of them, and I remembered their faces from my childhood—single mothers who, through my parents' care, were learning to believe in a kind God.

The book is wrong, profoundly wrong, in what it says about God. But, listening to Jennifer, I realized that we students could now perceive the trap from a victim's perspective, and know better how to avoid walking into it. Still more, we could show that the book is wrong, and that girls like Tess have cause for hope.

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It seems to me that I understand better how those girls must have felt, and how many girls must still feel, after reading *Tess*. I think I know better how to care for them, now that I have read this book which allowed me to see through another's eyes experiences which I had never known, and conclusions about God that I had never reached. Classical works of literature may not contain truth about God, but the reason they endure is because they do express some profound and real truths: often those of mankind's painful state and obvious need for a Savior, though that is rarely the authors' intention.

To this day, Jennifer's argument still constitutes the best justification I can offer for the study of Athenian literature. It will grieve us, but it will also give us insight into the paining souls of those whom we see every day, perhaps insensitive to their extreme need. I can honestly say that reading *Tess* has made me a more effective evangelist, and certainly a more prayerful, compassionate Christian.

The argument for vicarious experience is not our sole reason for studying Athenian literature. There are other benefits. One of the greatest of them is, oddly enough, that such study builds a Christian's faith. Since all great literature tends to embody a set of principles in a concrete example (a story), we learn to discern the truth or falsehood of those principles as we read and compare them with our own. Thus we have opportunity after opportunity to test various worldviews without accepting them, and to compare them with Scripture and our own experience.

Such comparison is especially helpful in *Tapestry of Grace: Year 1* (ancient world) studies, and for a special reason: bombarded as Christians are by claims that the Bible is only one of many mythological curiosities collected from the remains of our ignorant predecessors, a careful study of and comparison between it and other works of contemporary literature demonstrates that the Bible is completely unique. The Bible expresses a worldview unlike anything else among literary works of the ancient world, as literary study can reveal.

There is a third powerful argument in favor of Athenian literature and that is, simply, enjoyment. The greatest single reason for reading a story or poem instead of an outline or logical proof is that human beings are made to enjoy stories, and to want stories. We delight in them by nature, without training or intention. This natural inclination, no doubt, is by the design of a kind God, who loves to give us joy, and who is Himself the greatest storyteller of all. Artistry is an ability given to all humans. Homer's content is not equal to the truth that Christians have told, but his form and techniques were so exquisite that no human author, arguably, has yet surpassed them. We can all enjoy the artistry that is a reflection of God's creativity, whether or not the fact was acknowledged by Homer.

To these great benefits may be added a host of lesser ones: a wider vocabulary range, increased analytical skills, heightened appreciation for and knowledge of literary techniques, awareness of other cultures, and so on. It is no accident that Literature is a recommended undergraduate degree for those who are considering law school—the discipline of literary analysis will sharpen discernment skills in reading, teaching the student to discriminate between content and form. It is difficult to be led astray by a false argument clothed in beautiful rhetoric when one knows all about rhetoric, recognizes each smooth-sounding trick of speech, and is able to mentally separate the pleasure of good writing from logical force and truthfulness (or lack thereof) in the argument.

So far, so good. But even if a Christian has good reasons for trying to get at the worldviews and thoughts embodied in Athenian works, will the benefits of doing so outweigh the cost of wading through all those smutty, ugly, crass, or just plain unwholesome pages?

## THE GARBAGE OF ATHENS: WHY SHOULD I MAKE MY CHILDREN READ "DIRTY LITERATURE"?

More books are being written in this time than in any previous era, and a number of them are, sad to say, completely without value for the human soul. Many stories—past and present—tend to favor lascivious prose, and Christians are right to shun them. However, not all stories are great literature, and great literature is usually characterized by the fact that it is not needlessly obscene. For example, the plot of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* revolves around an act of rape, but we are never given graphic details. Great Athenian literature can be agonizingly painful and ugly, but it is a pain and ugly-

ness of the human soul without God. It is not meant to give flight to pornographic daydreams. It is a serious attempt by those who reject God to make sense of the world and their own unhappy condition.

There will sometimes be profanity, and frequently graphic descriptions of violence (the *Iliad* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, contain both); there will be much pride and swagger of human accomplishments; there will be many expressions of pain and longing and loneliness and anger against a seemingly silent, seemingly cruel Heaven. These may cost your student tears of pity and grief, and even anger against authors who so conceal the truth from themselves and their readers. Is it not far better, however, to meet these ideas and people in the pages of books, where there is time and space to examine them beside Scripture, than to wait until your student is standing in front of a living person who seriously and articulately argues that God is dead, and expects a comprehensible response? The careful study of Athenian literature is one way to prepare your student to give an answer, at all times, for the Christian hope that he has.

Not all works which your student will be assigned by *Tapestry* reading plans, especially in Year 1 and Year 4, meet even the standards of “common decency” that characterize most great literature. Below are our criteria for the choices we’ve made for our Literature course.

- ❑ We first looked at standard lists of the classics of Western Civilization. Some works contained unsavory elements offensive to Christians, but also held important principles or persuasive challenges to the Christian faith that we wished to test; others were utterly useless, containing no redeeming features.
- ❑ We tried to balance each work’s elements: its representation of the era we were studying, importance to the flow of Western thought, and value of the message of the work itself.
- ❑ We then looked at costs: how much filth would our children need to wade through in order to find nuggets of truth or beauty?

After weighing all these factors, we made our selections. Some of the works that made our reading lists contain elements that may not be appropriate for *your* student. These assignments will not include explicit sex scenes (with one or two exceptions in the course of your four-year study), but some works do contain cursing or swearing, despair, allusions to sexual sin, and depictions of other sinful behavior (suicide, graphic war depiction) and choices. In order to help you sift our choices for the needs of your student, we have developed the literature warnings.

## WHAT ARE THE LITERATURE WARNINGS?

Literature warnings are our rhetoric-level effort to quarantine Athenian garbage while still giving your children the benefit of touring monuments. We try to avoid assigning selections that contain anything explicitly sexual, violent, profane, or scatological. For the most part, we succeed in this endeavor. However, in Year 1 and Year 4 especially, it is not always possible to find important rhetoric-level Athenian literature that is also entirely clean. Our solution to this dilemma is simple: wherever there are lines, sections, images, or even whole pages that may offend in one of the four categories listed above, we put a warning in the rhetoric level of the chart we call “A Glance Ahead,” placed at the end of each week-plan, so that you will be forewarned of what is coming up in the next week, and able either to modify, cut, or just more carefully prepare for your student’s upcoming assignment.

In some books we suggest that you cut or black out pages which, although your student will not be assigned to read them, he may inadvertently flip to or run across as he reads his assigned sections. You are always encouraged to pre-read the Teacher’s Notes version of the rhetoric-level literature discussion before giving your student his week’s assignment, which should give you a good idea of what it contains and where danger spots may be. We have the greatest possible respect for the fact that you are your student’s parent-teacher. You know best where his weaknesses lie, and our task is to give you all appropriate helps as you seek to guide him through the mucky streets of Athens. Therefore, please know that in this discipline, as indeed in all areas of your child’s education, you are ultimately in control and should feel more than free to skip entire books that you feel are inappropriate for your child.

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## **SUMMING UP**

We have explored what literature is, and have understood why it deserves our careful attention. We have considered language, artistic language, and God's pleasure in literary artistry. We have learned that literature can make truth sweeter to us and seen what benefits are to be gained from a study of both Christian and secular works. Let us conclude with a final thought from Scripture. The prophet Isaiah in several places speaks of the Lord's glory or of how the Lord will be glorified (Isaiah 44:23; 49:3; 60:21; 61:3). In each case, the word he uses for "glorify" can equally be translated "display his beauty." Our efforts to glorify God, therefore, can also be thought of as efforts to display His beauty. Literature and literary studies, concerned as they are with the beauty of artistry and the beauty of truth, can be an excellent means toward the end of studying understanding, and displaying the radiant beauty of God.