

As the foregoing list suggests, a literary Bible is distinctly different from other study Bibles. It is ideal as a first approach to the Bible because the content of the Bible can be mastered only if we pay attention to the forms in which that content is embodied. Further, the commentary that we provide is a guide *into* the Bible, not a reference source of information *about* the Bible. This literary commentary is thus a means to the end of equipping readers to renew their commitment to the Bible and to the living God who has revealed himself in the literary forms of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

This book is both a reader's Bible and a literary Bible. It is a reader's Bible by virtue of its format, which is designed to facilitate sitting down and reading through the Bible. An important part of that format is that the biblical text has been divided into units of a length that invites devotional reading day by day, each preceded by helpful tips for reading the passage that follows.

This book is a study Bible as well as a reader's Bible. The commentary that appears before each passage contains tips for analysis as well as tips for reading. Furthermore, the format and commentary make this literary Bible ideal for use in group Bible studies. Study leaders can use the commentary to help organize their thoughts about a passage and formulate a series of discussion questions.

One of the greatest gifts of the literary approach to the Bible is that it enables readers to grasp a passage as a literary *whole*. Although this book preserves the traditional chapter and verse numbers for ease of reference, it omits the distraction of footnotes (except for the standard ESV notes dealing with translation issues). The reason for this omission is simple: a reader cannot read a passage as a flowing, unified composition while at the same time reading footnotes. Traditional study Bibles are reference books; this literary Bible is a reader's Bible. The single-column format enhances this purpose.

This book is also, as the title promises, a literary Bible. It is a guide to individual books and passages of the Bible that highlights the Bible's literary features. To explain this in more detail, we need to explore the concept that the Bible is literary and the question of what it means to approach the Bible in keeping with its literary nature.

Before we do that, however, we need to clarify a very important point: the content of any piece of writing is communicated *through form*. The concept of form needs to be construed very broadly here. It means anything having to do with *how* a writer has embodied his or her content, starting with the very words. Without literary form, no content can exist. We cannot extract the moral or theological meaning of a story without first assimilating the plot, setting, and characters of the story, or the meaning of a poem without first pondering the poem's images and figures of speech.

This means that a certain priority needs to be given to literary form—not a priority of importance but a priority in the sense of what comes first. To approach the Bible as literature as this literary Bible does is not like dessert—something pleasurable to add to more important aspects of the Bible. The literary approach is the first item on the agenda—the starting point for other approaches to the Bible. This has been a point of neglect among Bible readers and Bible scholars that this literary Bible aims to correct.

WHAT IT MEANS THAT THE BIBLE IS LITERATURE

▣ **Literary genres.** The most customary way to define literature is by the external genres (types or kinds of writing) in which its content is expressed. The two main genres in the Bible are narrative and poetry. Numerous categories cluster under each of these. Narrative subtypes, for example, include hero story, Gospel, epic, tragedy, comedy (a U-shaped plot with a happy ending), and parable. Specific poetic genres keep multiplying as well: lyric, lament psalm, praise psalm, love poem, nature poem, epithalamion (wedding poem), and many others.

x

Still, these literary forms are only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to narrative and poetry, we find prophecy, visionary writing, apocalypse, pastoral, encomium, oratory, drama (the book of Job), satire, and epistle. Then if we start adding more specific forms like travel story, dramatic monologue, doom song, and Christ hymn, the number of literary genres in the Bible readily exceeds one hundred. Many of these genres are defined in the glossary at the back of this Bible. For entries in the glossary, the editors have placed an asterisk in front of each term the first time it appears in the commentary on a given book of the Bible.

The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should program our encounter with a text, alerting us to what we can expect to find. For example, the most prevalent of all literary forms is narrative or story. To make adequate sense of a story, we need to know that it consists of plot or action, setting, and characters. These, in turn, constitute the basic grid through which we assimilate the story and talk about it.

In view of how many literary genres are present in the Bible, it is obvious that the overall literary form of the Bible is the anthology, as even the word *Bible* (Greek *biblia*, meaning "little books") hints. As an anthology, the Bible possesses the same kinds of unity that other anthologies exhibit: multiple authorship (approximately three dozen authors); diverse genres; a rationale for the assembling of this particular collection of materials (a unifying religious viewpoint and story of salvation history, as well as the fact that all the books except Luke and Acts were written by Jews); comprehensiveness; and an identifiable strategy of organization (a combination of historical chronology and groupings by genre). With belief in the inspiration of the Bible as a foundational premise, we can say that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate editor of the anthology that we know as the Bible.

Literary subject matter. Literature is also identifiable by its subject matter. It is differentiated from expository (informational) writing by the way in which it presents concrete human experience. Instead of stating abstract propositions, logical arguments, or bare facts, literature embodies what literary authors often call "the stuff of real life." We can profitably think of biblical writing as existing on a continuum, with abstract propositional discourse on one end and concrete presentation of human experience on the other. The more thoroughly a piece of writing falls on the experiential end of the spectrum, the more literary it is.

To illustrate, the command "you shall not murder" is an example of expository discourse. The story of Cain and Abel embodies the same truth in the form of characters in concrete settings performing physical and mental actions. Expository writing gives us the precept; literature gives us the example. "God's provision extends to all of our life" is a thematic summary of Psalm 23; the psalm, however, eschews such abstraction and incarnates the truth about providence in a pastoral poem that images the daily routine of a shepherd and his sheep.

The subject of literature is human experience rendered as concretely as possible. The result is that it possesses a universal quality. Whereas history and the daily news tell us what *happened*, literature tells us what *happens*—what is true for all people in all places and times. A text can be both, but the literary dimension of a text resides in its embodiment of recognizable human experience. While we rightly think of the Bible as revelatory (God's supernatural revelation of truth), the literary parts of the Bible are at the same time the human race's testimony to its own experience.

The goal of literature is to prompt a reader to share or relive an experience. The truth that literature imparts is not simply ideas that are true but *truthfulness to human experience*. The implication for interpretation is that Bible readers, teachers, and expositors need to be active in re-creating experiences in their imagination, identifying the recognizable human experiences in a text (thereby building bridges to life in the modern world), and resisting the impulse immediately to reduce a biblical passage to a set of theological ideas.

Archetypes and motifs. An archetype is a plot motif (such as initiation or quest), character type (such as the villain or trickster), or image (such as light or water) that recurs throughout literature and life. The presence of archetypes in a text signals a literary quality. When we read literature, we are continuously aware of such archetypes as the temptation motif, the dangerous valley, or the hero, whereas with other types of writing we are rarely aware of archetypes.

Archetypes are the building blocks of literature. Writers could not avoid them even if they tried. The Bible is the most complete repository of archetypes in the Western world, and this makes the Bible a universal and primeval book (reaching down to bedrock human experience). Awareness of archetypes helps us see the unity of the Bible (since we keep relating one instance of an archetype to other instances), the connections between the Bible and other literature, and the connections between the Bible and life.

Stylistics and rhetoric. Literature also uses distinctive resources of language that set it apart from ordinary expository discourse. The most obvious example is poetry. Poets speak a language all their own, consisting of images and figures of speech. The most important of the special resources of language that push a text into the category of literature include the following: imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, allusion, irony, wordplay, hyperbole, apostrophe (direct address to someone or something absent as though present), personification, paradox, and pun.

The most concentrated repository of such language in the Bible is the books that are poetic in their basic format—the prophetic books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (a book of prose poems), Song of Solomon, Revelation. But literary resources of language are not limited to the obviously poetic books of the Bible. They appear on virtually every page of the Bible beyond the poetic books—most obviously in the discourses of Jesus and in the Epistles, but also, though less pervasively, in the narratives of the Bible.

A related literary phenomenon is rhetoric—arrangement of content in patterned ways and employment of conventional literary techniques or formulas. Parallelism of sentence elements, for example, is an instance of stylized rhetoric. Patterns of repetition—of words, phrases, or content units—is a distinguishing feature of the Bible. So are the aphoristic conciseness and memorability that continuously raise the Bible to a literary realm of eloquence far above everyday discourse. A specimen page from a New Testament epistle might include the presence of rhetorical questions, question-and-answer constructions, direct addresses to real or imaginary respondents, and repeated words or phrases within a passage, and we can depend on it that famous aphorisms will appear in abundance.

Artistry. Literature is an art form in which beauty of expression, craftsmanship, and verbal virtuosity are valued as rewarding and as an enhancement of effective communication. The one writer of the Bible to state his philosophy of composition portrays himself as, among other things, a self-conscious stylist and wordsmith who arranged

his material "with great care" and who "sought to find words of delight" (Eccles. 12:9-10). Surely our impression is that the other writers of the Bible did the same.

The standard elements of artistic form include unity, theme-and-variation, pattern, design, progression, contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence, and symmetry. Authors cultivate artistry like this because it is important to their effect and intention. The Bible is an aesthetic as well as a utilitarian book, and we need to experience it as such, both for our understanding and for our enjoyment.

■ **Summary: Reading and interpreting the Bible as literature.** Any piece of writing needs to be assimilated and interpreted in terms of the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are usually embodied in literary forms. Those forms include genres, the expression of human experience in concrete form, stylistic and rhetorical techniques, and artistry.

These literary features are not extraneous aspects of the text—not optional matters to consider if we have time or interest to do so after we have assimilated the message or content of a passage. Instead, they are the forms *through which* the content is mediated. If the writing of the Bible is the product of divine inspiration—if it represents what the Holy Spirit prompted the authors to write as they were carried along (2 Peter 1:21)—then the literary forms of the Bible have been inspired by God and need to be granted an importance in keeping with that inspiration.

APPROACHING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

We might think that acknowledging the literary nature of the Bible would automatically produce a literary approach to the material, but this has not been the case. Even scholars and commentators who subscribe to the literary nature of the Bible as outlined in the preceding section overwhelmingly ignore the Bible's literary features in their commentary. The concept of the Bible as literature has tended to be head knowledge only, without application to the text.

The goal of this literary Bible is to provide literary commentary and tips for reading the Bible in keeping with its literary features. Accordingly, the commentary provided in this book takes seriously the traits that make the Bible literary. Specifically, the critical apparatus that the editors have provided will do the following things:

- provide prompts to the human experiences that we find in the text
- identify the genre(s) of a passage
- name archetypes and motifs that permeate a passage
- comment on the style and rhetorical patterns of a passage
- make occasional observations regarding the artistry of a passage, with particular attention to the unity of passages
- show the flow of passages within themselves and also as they relate to the books of the Bible in which they appear and ultimately to the Bible as a whole

In all of these areas, the editors' commentary provides a starting point. It is up to readers to apply and extend what the commentary has begun.

FALLACIES ABOUT A LITERARY APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

Before we can embrace a literary approach to the Bible with enthusiasm, we of course

need to be relieved of anxieties about viewing the Bible as literature. Resistance to viewing the Bible as literature has rested on misconceptions about what literature is, both in itself and as it relates to the Bible. Below are five false characterizations that have prevailed in some Christian and non-Christian circles, accompanied by an explanation of why the allegations are untrue.

■ **Fallacy #1: Viewing the Bible as literature betrays a liberal theological bias.** It is untrue that viewing the Bible as literature means automatically adopting a liberal theological attitude toward the Bible. A survey of commentators who conduct literary analysis of the Bible shows the same range of viewpoint, from conservative to liberal, that other approaches to the Bible manifest. There is nothing inherent in a literary approach that requires a liberal perspective. In fact, it is entirely possible to begin a literary analysis of the Bible exactly where all study of the Bible should begin—by accepting as true all that biblical writers say about the Bible (its inspiration by God, its reliability, its complete truthfulness, etc.).

We need to remind ourselves that it is possible to approach the Bible theologically and miss the mark of truth, too. Theologizing by itself is no guarantee of truth. There has been as much false theology as there has been true theology, so a literary approach to the Bible is neither more nor less suspect than a theological approach.

■ **Fallacy #2: The idea of the Bible as literature is a modern idea that is foreign to the Bible itself.** The idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself. The writers of the Bible refer with technical precision to a whole range of literary genres in which they write—proverb, saying, chronicle, complaint (lament psalm), oracle, apocalypse, parable, song, epistle, and many another.

Furthermore, some of the forms that we find in the Bible correspond to the literary forms that were current in the authors' surrounding cultures. For example, the Ten Commandments are cast into the form of suzerainty treaties that ancient Near Eastern kings imposed on their subjects, and the New Testament epistles, despite unique features, show many affinities to Greek and Roman letters of the same era.

Mainly, though, we can look to the Bible itself to see the extent to which it is a literary book. Virtually every page of the Bible is replete with literary technique, and to possess the individual texts of the Bible fully, we need to read the Bible as literature, just as we need to read it theologically and (in the narrative parts) historically.

■ **Fallacy #3: To speak of the Bible as literature is to claim that the Bible is fictional.** While fictionality is common in literature, it is not an essential ingredient of literature. The properties that make a text literary are unaffected by the historicity or fictionality of the material. A text is literary based on a writer's selectivity and molding of the material and the style of presentation, regardless of whether the details really happened or are made up.

Nor does the presence of convention and artifice in the Bible necessarily imply fictionality. The modern television genre of docudrama is filled with conventions (interviews of people, film clips of events, material from archives) that do not detract from the factuality of the account.

■ **Fallacy #4: To approach the Bible as literature means approaching it only as literature.** Some people resist embracing the concept of the Bible as literature out of the fear that to speak of the Bible as literature necessarily means paying attention *only* to the Bible's literary features and ignoring its more important aspects. But the same

argument might be used to preclude a study of the history or language of the Bible, since with these approaches, too, a person might remain fixed on those aspects only. To analyze the Bible as literature need not entail abandoning the special authority that Christians ascribe to the Bible or the expectation that God will speak to us through it. Nor does it necessarily mean that the reader will not pay equal attention to other aspects of the Bible—its history, its language, its theology, its sociology, its psychology. The Bible requires multiple approaches, and the literary approach is one of them. A theological approach to the Bible by itself is incomplete. A literary approach seeks to complement other approaches, not to replace them. It is appropriate to say again, however, that the literary forms of the Bible are the means *through which* the content is expressed, and this means that literary analysis has a particular priority as the only adequate starting point for other kinds of analysis.

■ Fallacy #5: To say that the Bible is literature denies its divine inspiration. If we believe in the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, we believe that whatever we find in the Bible is what God wanted us to know and possess. We do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible because of the content that we find there. It is actually the other way around: we begin with the premise of inspiration, so that whatever is in the Bible is what God the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors to compose.

If God moved the writers of the Bible to write as they did, the only plausible inference is that God inspired the forms of the Bible. We should not say he inspired "the forms of the Bible as well as its content," because the content is embodied *in* the forms. The three modes of writing that we find in the Bible—*theological, historical, literary*—are all equal in regard to inspiration. God inspired the writing of all three, and the writers of all three were equally dependent on inspiration by the Holy Spirit to write the truth.

Second Peter 1:21 tells us that the writers of Scripture wrote as they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit." Thus when the Bible gives us literary subject matter—the concrete embodiment of human experience—that subject matter is present through the agency of divine inspiration. So are the genres and forms of the Bible. If God inspired some writers to tell stories, others to write poems, others to write satire or letters or visions, then those forms deserve attention in keeping with their inspired nature.

TWELVE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is not a totally unique book. In general, its literary forms function in the same way that these forms function beyond the Bible. A story is a story, whether in the Bible or beyond it. A metaphor is a metaphor. Nonetheless, it is possible to make generalizations about characteristic literary features of the Bible, with no implication that these features do not exist elsewhere. Below are twelve literary qualities or preferred literary techniques that we often find in the Bible.

1. A unifying story line. Although the overall genre of the Bible is the anthology of individual books and passages, the Bible possesses a unity far beyond that of other literary anthologies. The technical term for a unifying superstructure such as we find in the Bible is *metanarrative* (big or overarching story). In the Bible, the metanarrative is the story of salvation history—the events by which God worked out his plan to redeem humanity and the creation after they fell from original innocence. This story of salvation history is Christocentric in the sense that it focuses ultimately on the substitutionary sacrifice and atonement of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from death. The

unifying story line of the Bible is a U-shaped story that moves from the creation of a perfect world, through the fall of that world into sin, then through fallen human history as it slowly and painfully makes its way toward consummation and arrives at the final destruction of evil and the eternal triumph of good.

2. The presence of a central character. All stories have a central character or protagonist, and in the overarching story of the Bible God is the protagonist. He is the unifying presence from the beginning of the Bible to the end. All creatures interact with this central and ultimate being. All events are related to him. The story of human history unfolds within the broader story of what God does. The result is a sense of ultimacy that comes through as we read the pages of the Bible.

3. Religious orientation. The subject of literature is human experience, and this is true of the Bible, too, but a distinctive feature of the Bible is that it overwhelmingly presents human experience in a religious and moral light. Events that other writers might treat in a purely human and natural light—a sunrise, a battle, a birth, a journey—are presented by the authors of the Bible within a moral or spiritual framework. Part of this moral and spiritual framework is the assumption of the biblical authors that a great conflict between good and evil is going on in our world and, further, that people are continually confronted with the need to choose between good and evil, between working for God's kingdom and going against God.

4. Variety of genres and styles. Every literary anthology of the Bible's magnitude displays a range of literary forms, but the Bible's range may well top them all. We need to be alert to this, because the religious uses to which we put the Bible can easily lull us into assuming that the Bible is all one type of writing. The list of individual forms, if we include such specific motifs as the homecoming story or trickster or love poem, keeps expanding. (A complete guide to these literary forms as we find them in the Bible is Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998].) The variety that we find in the Bible stems partly from the large categories that converge—history, theology, and literature, for example, or prose and poetry, realism and fantasy, past and future, God and people.

5. Preference of the concrete over the abstract. While the New Testament contains a great deal of theological writing, the general preference of biblical authors is for concrete vocabulary. This is especially true of the Hebrew language of the Old Testament. In the Bible, God is portrayed as light and rock and thunder. Slander is a sharp knife. Living the godly life is like putting on a garment or suit of armor. Heaven is a landscape of jewels. To read the Bible well, we need to read with the "right side" of the brain—the part that is activated by sensory data.

6. Realism. The prophetic and apocalyptic parts of the Bible give us a steady diet of fantasy (flying scrolls, for example, and red horses), but the general tendency of the Bible is toward everyday realism. The Bible displays the flaws of even its best characters (Oliver Cromwell famously said that the biblical writers paint their characters "warts and all"). Although the Bible does not delineate the sordid experiences of life in the extreme detail that modern literary realism does, it nonetheless covers the same real experiences, such as violence, murder, sexuality, death, suffering, and famine. Of course the Bible differs from modern realism by showing us that there is a realism of grace as well as a realism of carnality. In other words, the Bible is not content to portray the degradation of a world that has fallen into sin without also portraying the redemptive possibilities of a world that has been visited by the grace of God and is destined for glory.

7. Simplicity. Although the Bible is certainly not devoid of examples of the high style, especially in the poetic parts, its overall orientation is toward the simple. The prevailing narrative style is plain, unembellished, matter-of-fact prose. Shakespeare's vocabulary is approximately twenty thousand words, Milton's thirteen thousand, and English translations of the Bible six thousand. Biblical writers often work with such simplified dichotomies as good and evil, light and darkness, heroes and villains. Of course there is a simplicity that diminishes and a simplicity that enlarges. The simplicity of the Bible paradoxically produces an effect of majesty and authority.

8. Preference for the brief unit. Linked with this simplicity is a marked preference for the brief literary unit. Biblical poets tend to write brief lyrics, for example, not long narrative poems. Most long narratives in the Bible such as the story of Abraham or the Gospels are actually cycles of stories in which the individual episodes are briefer and more self-contained than what we find in a novel. The prophetic books are actually anthologies of self-contained oracles and snatches of narrative. Other familiar biblical genres reinforce this tendency toward simplicity—proverb or saying, parable, lists of individual commands or rules, summaries of what various kings did, occasional letters (epistles) in which the author responds to a list of questions that have been asked or a crisis that has arisen in a local church.

9. Elemental quality. The Bible is a book of universal human experience. It is filled with experiences and images that are the common human lot in all places and times. The Bible embraces the commonplace and repeatedly shows ordinary people engaged in the customary activities of life—planting, building, baking, fighting, worrying, celebrating, praying. The world that biblical characters inhabit is likewise stripped and elemental, consisting of such natural settings as day and night, field and desert, sky and earth. Even occupations have an elemental quality—king, priest, shepherd, homemaker, missionary.

10. Oral style. Even though the Bible that we read is a written book, in its original form much of it existed orally. This is true because ancient cultures were predominantly oral cultures in which information circulated chiefly by word of mouth. The literary forms of the Bible show this rootedness in an oral culture. The prevalence of dialogue (directly quoted speeches) in the Bible is without parallel in literature generally until we come to the novel. Everywhere we turn in the Bible, we hear voices speaking and replying. The spare, unembellished narrative style of the Bible arises from the situation of oral circulation of the stories. Additionally, many of the nonnarrative parts of the Bible show signs of oral speech—the prophetic discourses and oracles, the psalms (which were sung in temple worship), the epistles (which were read aloud in churches), and the Gospels (where the words of Jesus are a leading ingredient).

11. Aphoristic quality. An aphorism is a concise, memorable statement of truth—in the words of English poet Alexander Pope, "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." The Bible is the most aphoristic book of the Western world. It is filled with sayings that are part of the common storehouse of proverbs and idioms: "pride goes before destruction" (Prov. 16:18); seeing "eye to eye" (Isa. 52:8); a "house divided against itself" (Matt. 12:25). This quality is present not only in the wisdom literature of the Bible but in all parts of the Bible and most notably in the sayings of Jesus.

12. The literature of confrontation. When we read Shakespeare or Dickens, we find ourselves moved to agreement or disagreement, but we do not ordinarily feel that we have been confronted by someone or something that requires us to make a choice. By

contrast, when we assimilate the Bible we feel as though we have been personally confronted with something that requires a response. While this choice is ultimately for or against God, the ideas of the Bible, too, require us to believe or disbelieve them. The Bible displays a vivid consciousness of values—of the difference between good and evil—with the result that it is virtually impossible to remain neutral about the ideas that confront us as we read the Bible.

■ **Summary.** Perhaps none of the twelve features noted above is unique in itself. But if we put them together, they produce a book that is unique. Reading the Bible is not just like reading another book. It has an affective power and aura of authority that cannot be duplicated. It possesses a quality of encounter that other books do not display, so that as we read we are confronted with the voice and presence of God and are virtually compelled to believe or disbelieve what we are reading. The Westminster Confession of Faith provides an apt summary of the things that make the Bible unique: "the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole [which is to give all glory to God], the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God."

HOW TO USE THIS LITERARY BIBLE

This literary Bible is governed by a twofold goal: (1) to make the Bible reader friendly and (2) to show how application of literary tools of analysis helps in reading and understanding the Bible. We can apply these goals to two common uses that we make of the Bible.

First, we read the Bible devotionally. While this reading usually is not highly analytic in nature, we can nonetheless develop habits of reading that make our devotional reading more substantial than it often is. The literary prompts that appear in the introductions and headnotes of this literary Bible can become a "second sense" that we naturally put into practice as we read. Furthermore, even in devotional reading, we benefit from seeing the flow of a passage, and the lead-ins to individual passages in this literary Bible will help readers to perform that function.

Second, we study the Bible as well as read it devotionally. The commentary in this literary Bible provides analysis of individual passages and books of the Bible. Equally important, the critical apparatus of this Bible is filled with tools of literary analysis that can be applied to many passages. Much commentary on the Bible, including that found in conventional study Bibles, is more of a substitute for reading the Bible than a guide to studying it. This literary Bible is a guide to the Bible that pushes the reader into the text instead of providing mere summaries of the content that readily become substitutes for reading the Bible.

This literary Bible is an introduction to literary analysis. As noted above, we cannot assimilate the religious content of a Bible passage without first interacting with the form in which it has been embodied. Given that the Bible is a literary book, it cannot be studied and taught adequately if we do not start with analysis of the literary form of the passage we wish to explore. Thus the skills of literary analysis are themselves central to an informed experience of the Bible.

PREFACE

TO THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION (ESV) BIBLE

■ **The Bible.** "This Book [is] the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God." With these words the Moderator of the Church of Scotland hands a Bible to the new monarch in Britain's coronation service. These words echo the King James Bible translators, who wrote in 1611: "God's sacred Word . . . is that inestimable treasure that excelleth all the riches of the earth." This assessment of the Bible is the motivating force behind the publication of the English Standard Version.

■ **Translation Legacy.** The English Standard Version (ESV) stands in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations over the past half-millennium. The fountain-head of that stream was William Tyndale's New Testament of 1526; marking its course were the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the English Revised Version of 1885 (RV), the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV), and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971 (RSV). In that stream, faithfulness to the text and vigorous pursuit of accuracy were combined with simplicity, beauty, and dignity of expression. Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for a new century.

To this end each word and phrase in the ESV has been carefully weighed against the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, to ensure the fullest accuracy and clarity and to avoid under-translating or overlooking any nuance of the original text. The words and phrases themselves grow out of the Tyndale–King James legacy, and most recently out of the RSV, with the 1971 RSV text providing the starting point for our work. Archaic language has been brought to current usage and significant corrections have been made in the translation of key texts. But throughout, our goal has been to retain the depth of meaning and enduring language that have made their indelible mark on the English-speaking world and have defined the life and doctrine of the church over the last four centuries.

■ **Translation Philosophy.** The ESV is an "essentially literal" translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on "word-for-word" correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.

In contrast to the ESV, some Bible versions have followed a "thought-for-thought" rather than "word-for-word" translation philosophy, emphasizing "dynamic equivalence" rather than the "essentially literal" meaning of the original. A "thought-for-thought" translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.

Every translation is at many points a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between "formal equivalence" in expression and "functional equivalence" in communication, and the ESV is no exception. Within this framework we have sought to be "as literal as possible" while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence. Therefore, to the extent that plain English permits and the meaning in each case allows, we have sought to use the same English word for important recurring words in the original; and, as far as grammar and syntax allow, we have rendered Old Testament

passages cited in the New in ways that show their correspondence. Thus in each of these areas, as well as throughout the Bible as a whole, we have sought to capture the echoes and overtones of meaning that are so abundantly present in the original texts.

As an essentially literal translation, then, the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language. As such, it is ideally suited for in-depth study of the Bible. Indeed, with its emphasis on literary excellence, the ESV is equally suited for public reading and preaching, for private reading and reflection, for both academic and devotional study, and for Scripture memorization.

Translation Style. The ESV also carries forward classic translation principles in its literary style. Accordingly it retains theological terminology—words such as grace, faith, justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, propitiation—because of their central importance for Christian doctrine and also because the underlying Greek words were already becoming key words and technical terms in New Testament times.

The ESV lets the stylistic variety of the biblical writers fully express itself—from the exalted prose that opens Genesis, to the flowing narratives of the historical books, to the rich metaphors and dramatic imagery of the poetic books, to the ringing rhetorical indictments in the prophetic books, to the smooth elegance of Luke, to the profound simplicities of John, and the closely reasoned logic of Paul.

In punctuating, paragraphing, dividing long sentences, and rendering connectives, the ESV follows the path that seems to make the ongoing flow of thought clearest in English. The biblical languages regularly connect sentences by frequent repetition of words such as “and,” “but,” and “for,” in a way that goes beyond the conventions of literary English. Effective translation, however, requires that these links in the original be reproduced so that the flow of the argument will be transparent to the reader. We have therefore normally translated these connectives, though occasionally we have varied the rendering by using alternatives (such as “also,” “however,” “now,” “so,” “then,” or “thus”) when they better capture the sense in specific instances.

In the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original. For example, “anyone” replaces “any man” where there is no word corresponding to “man” in the original languages, and “people” rather than “men” is regularly used where the original languages refer to both men and women. But the words “man” and “men” are retained where a male meaning component is part of the original Greek or Hebrew. Likewise, the word “man” has been retained where the original text intends to convey a clear contrast between “God” on the one hand and “man” on the other hand, with “man” being used in the collective sense of the whole human race (see Luke 2:52). Similarly, the English word “brothers” (translating the Greek word *adelphoi*) is retained as an important familial form of address between fellow-Jews and fellow-Christians in the first century. A recurring note is included to indicate that the term “brothers” (*adelphoi*) was often used in Greek to refer to both men and women, and to indicate the specific instances in the text where this is the case. In addition, the English word “sons” (translating the Greek word *huioi*) is retained in specific instances because the underlying Greek term usually includes a male meaning component and it was used as a legal term in the adoption and inheritance laws of first-century Rome. As used by the apostle Paul, this term refers to the status of all Christians, both men and women, who, having been adopted into God’s family, now enjoy all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children.

The inclusive use of the generic “he” has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it. Similarly, where God and man are compared or contrasted in the original, the ESV retains the generic use of “man” as the clearest way to express the contrast within the framework of essentially literal translation.

In each case the objective has been transparency to the original text, allowing the reader to understand the original on its own terms rather than on the terms of our present-day culture.

The Translation of Specialized Terms. In the translation of biblical terms referring to God, the ESV takes great care to convey the specific nuances of meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek terms. First, concerning terms that refer to God in the Old Testament: God, the Maker of heaven and earth, introduced himself to the people of Israel with the special, personal name, whose consonants are YHWH (see Exodus 3:14–15). Scholars call this the “Tetragrammaton,” a Greek term referring to the four Hebrew letters YHWH. The exact pronunciation of YHWH is uncertain, because the Jewish people considered the personal name of God to be so holy that it should never be spoken aloud. Instead of reading the word YHWH, they would normally read the Hebrew word *adonai* (“Lord”), and the ancient translations into Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic also followed suit. When the vowels of the word *adonai* are placed with the consonants of YHWH, this results in the familiar word *Jehovah* that was used in some earlier English Bible translations. As is common among English translations today, the ESV usually renders the personal name of God (YHWH) with the word LORD (printed in small capitals). An exception to this is when the Hebrew word *adonai* appears together with YHWH, in which case the two words are rendered together as “the Lord [in lower case] God [in small capitals].” In contrast to the personal name for God (YHWH), the more general name for God in Old Testament Hebrew is *elohim* and its related forms of *el* or *eloah*, all of which are normally translated “God” (in lower case letters). The use of these different ways to translate the Hebrew words for God is especially beneficial to the English reader, enabling the reader to see and understand the different ways that the *personal* name and the *general* name for God are both used to refer to the *One True God* of the Old Testament.

Second, in the New Testament, the Greek word *Christos* has been translated consistently as “Christ.” Although the term originally meant “anointed,” among Jews in New Testament times the term came to designate the Messiah, the great Savior that God had promised to raise up. In other New Testament contexts, however, especially among Gentiles, *Christos* (“Christ”) was on its way to becoming a proper name. It is important, therefore, to keep the context in mind in understanding the various ways that *Christos* (“Christ”) is used in the New Testament. At the same time, in accord with its “essentially literal” translation philosophy, the ESV has retained consistency and concordance in the translation of *Christos* (“Christ”) throughout the New Testament.

A third specialized term, the word “behold,” usually has been retained as the most common translation for the Hebrew word *hinneh* and the Greek word *idou*. Both of these words mean something like “Pay careful attention to what follows! This is important!” Other than the word “behold,” there is no single word in English that fits well in most contexts. Although “Look!” and “See!” and “Listen!” would be workable in some contexts, in many others these words lack sufficient weight and dignity. Given the principles of “essentially literal” translation, it is important not to leave *hinneh* and *idou*

completely untranslated, and so to lose the intended emphasis in the original languages. The older and more formal word "behold" has usually been retained, therefore, as the best available option for conveying the original sense of meaning.

Textual Basis. The ESV is based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (2nd ed., 1983), and on the Greek text in the 1993 editions of the *Greek New Testament* (4th corrected ed.), published by the United Bible Societies (UBS), and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.), edited by Nestle and Aland. The currently renewed respect among Old Testament scholars for the Masoretic text is reflected in the ESV's attempt, wherever possible, to translate difficult Hebrew passages as they stand in the Masoretic text rather than resorting to emendations or to finding an alternative reading in the ancient versions. In exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or, if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text. Similarly, in a few difficult cases in the New Testament, the ESV has followed a Greek text different from the text given preference in the UBS/Nestle-Aland 27th edition. In this regard the footnotes that accompany the ESV text are an integral part of the ESV translation, informing the reader of textual variations and difficulties and showing how these have been resolved by the ESV translation team. In addition to this, the footnotes indicate significant alternative readings and occasionally provide an explanation for technical terms or for a difficult reading in the text. Throughout, the translation team has benefited greatly from the massive textual resources that have become readily available recently, from new insights into biblical laws and culture, and from current advances in Hebrew and Greek lexicography and grammatical understanding.

Publishing Team. The ESV publishing team includes more than a hundred people. The fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee has benefited from the work of fifty biblical experts serving as Translation Review Scholars and from the comments of the more than fifty members of the Advisory Council, all of which has been carried out under the auspices of the Good News Publishers Board of Directors. This hundred-member team, which shares a common commitment to the truth of God's Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy, is international in scope and includes leaders in many denominations.

To God's Honor and Praise. We know that no Bible translation is perfect or final; but we also know that God uses imperfect and inadequate things to his honor and praise. So to our triune God and to his people we offer what we have done, with our prayers that it may prove useful, with gratitude for much help given, and with ongoing wonder that our God should ever have entrusted to us so momentous a task.

Soli Deo Gloria!—To God alone be the glory!

The Translation Oversight Committee*

*A complete list of the Translation Oversight Committee, the Translation Review Scholars, and the Advisory Council, is available upon request from Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

EXPLANATION OF FEATURES INCLUDED IN THIS EDITION

The *Literary Study Bible* includes two valuable features, in addition to those listed in the Editors' Preface, to encourage the reading and study of the Bible: textual footnotes and cross-reference footnotes. A brief description is provided below explaining the purpose and use of these notes.

TEXTUAL FOOTNOTES

Several kinds of footnotes related to the ESV text are provided throughout *The Literary Study Bible* to assist the reader. These footnotes appear at the bottom of the page and are indicated in the ESV text by a superscript *number* that follows the word or phrase to which the footnote applies (e.g., "Isaac²").

The footnotes included in the ESV Bible are an integral part of the text and provide important information concerning the understanding and translation of the text. The footnotes fall mainly into four categories, as illustrated in the examples below.

(1) *Alternative Translations.* Footnotes of this kind provide alternative translations for specific words or phrases when there is a strong possibility that such words or phrases could be translated in another way, such as: "Or *keep awake*" (see Matt. 26:38); and "Or *down payment*" (see Eph. 1:14). In such cases, the translation deemed to have the stronger support is in the text while other possible renderings are given in the note.

(2) *Explanation of Greek and Hebrew Terms.* Notes of this kind relate primarily to the meaning of specific Greek or Hebrew terms, as illustrated by the following examples:

(a) Notes about the meaning of names in the original languages, such as: "*Isaac* means *he laughs*" (see Gen. 17:19); and "*Simeon* sounds like the Hebrew for *heard*" (see Gen. 29:33).

(b) Notes that give the literal translation of a Greek or Hebrew word or phrase deemed too awkward to be used in the English text, such as: "Greek *girding up the loins of your mind*" (see 1 Pet. 1:13).

(c) Notes indicating that absolute certainty of the meaning of a word or phrase is not possible given our best understanding of the original language (e.g., Hebrew words occurring so infrequently in the Old Testament that their meaning cannot be determined with certainty). Such words are identified with a note stating that "The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain" (see, e.g., Josh. 17:11).

(d) Notes that indicate the specialized use of a Greek word, such as: "brothers," translating the Greek word *adelphoi* (see, e.g., the extended note on Rom. 1:13, corresponding to the first occurrence of *adelphoi* in any New Testament book, and the abbreviated note, e.g., on Rom. 7:1, corresponding to subsequent occurrences of *adelphoi* in any New Testament book); and "sons," translating the Greek word *huioi* (see, e.g., Rom. 8:14). See also the discussion of *adelphoi* and *huioi* in the preface.

(3) *Other Explanatory Notes.* Footnotes of this kind provide clarifying information as illustrated by the following examples: