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**TOWARDS A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING
OF LITERARY CREATIVITY**

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"Son of man, pose a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel." (Ezekiel 17:2)

Introduction

For Christian teachers to decide what is appropriate and what is not has always been a major issue when choosing the topics for a particular subject. When it comes to literature, this struggle has more than once seemed to be a fruitless task, many times due to the wrong assumptions of the ones involved in such discussions. Such assumptions often include prejudices, weak argumentation, and misinterpretation of Ellen G. White's statements on the subject. This has led to regrettable extremes—some of them almost humorous in their naiveté—as some people condemned literary fiction because they thought it opposed the Philippians 4:8 principle, "whatever things are true..."

Unfortunately for Christians who still believe in the authority of the Bible, most speakers and researchers on the subject overlook the cornerstone of any value-related discussion: the Bible itself. It is within its pages that we should strive for answers that may supply us with a reliable basis when confronting those unavoidable questions every Christian teacher of literature must eventually face. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to survey the Bible looking for answers in relation to creativity and literature that can help us as teachers to meditate on "whatever things are true...noble... just...[and] pure" (Philippians 4:8).

The Beginning of It All

Whatever words you may use to define literature, it is generally accepted that the discipline is an art that involves creation using words, either in written or oral form. Now, is there in the Bible any notion of the way the human ability of creating started? When studying the account of Genesis 1 and 2, we normally point out Genesis 1:26, 27—the creation of man in God's image—as the key verses of the whole description. What we usually forget to stress is that the divine image

that God gave Adam is reflected in *all* of man's distinctive features. As Westermann says, "man, in his entirety, corporeally as well as spiritually and intellectually, is to be designated as a creature in God's image" (qtd. in Ferch 1985:37). That is why I found it interesting to analyze what Adam received from God the very first day of his existence on this earth.

<i>What God gave Adam</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Reference</i>
A PLACE	The Garden of Eden	"...God planted a garden...and there put the man whom He had formed." (Genesis 2:8)
The MEANS	Food	"...God said, 'I have given you every herb that yields seed...and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.'" (Genesis 1:29)
A SPECIAL TIME	The Sabbath	"...God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it..." (Genesis 2:3)
A RELATIONSHIP	The woman (marriage, family)	"...He [God] made...a woman... Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife..." (Genesis 2:22, 24)
A JOB: Physical	To tend and keep the garden	"...God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it." (Genesis 2:15)
A JOB: Intellectual	To name the living creatures	"...God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them." (Genesis 2:19)

Let us stop for a moment at the last one. Many times I have wondered why God did not say, "Look, Adam, this is a horse", or, "Do you see that? It is called cow." After all, He had already given names to other "results" of His creation (Genesis 1:10). Undoubtedly, God had another purpose in mind. Some commentators relate the naming of the animals with an evidence of man's ruling over all the living creatures (Heidt 1969:39; Stigers 1976:72; Voth 1992:79). But there is another feature to point out. *God wanted Adam to start using that God-given capacity of creating.* The naming of the animals was much more than mere words applied to inferior beings. It implied knowing the nature and the character of the ones named (Aalders 1981:95; Leupold 1990:131). And, as Leupold adds, the fact that "whatever Adam called each living creature, that was his name" shows that "the names given had been appropriate and worthy of man's intelligence" (131).

By creating associations, comparisons, and similes, and due to an unknown process but for *the* Creator, Adam began to reflect an essential part of God's image, that is, the capacity of being part of the process of invention and creation. "In this nominative process there is an act of secondary creation...by which man makes other creatures mentally objective" (Rad 1985:100). That ability of creating—in White's words "the power to think and to do" (1952:17)—is considered "the prime manner in which we are made in God's image" (Spring 1998:3), since it constitutes "a manifested and attempted response to an innate and original cultural mandate that links man with God in activities" (G. Blackwell 1992:5). Even though we should never overlook the fact that God is the only one able to actually create (taking into account the ultimate meaning of the word), it is humanity's privilege and challenge to somehow reflect that divine attribute in the pale constructions of imagination. Coming back to the Genesis account, we find a few verses later the first recorded poem of the Bible, as Adam suddenly became a "poet" when seeing Eve for the first time. He said,

*This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called woman,
for she was taken out of man.*

After sin entered into this world, human faculties were affected. God's image in humanity suffered from the transformation. However, though stained by sin, human beings continued to be the reflection of God's image, since "as long as we are humans we are, by definition, in the image of God" (Kidner 1967:51) (See Gen.9:6 and James 3:9). And of course, the capacity of creating outlived the scope of Eden. In Genesis 4, three interesting characters are mentioned: Jabel, "the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock" (v.20); Jubal, "the father of all those who play the harp and the flute" (v.21); and Tubal-Cain, "an instructor of every craftsman in bronze and iron" (v.22). These verses show clearly that humanity kept developing his creative abilities, some of them related to manual activities, and others to intellectual ones. Undoubtedly, such development spreads out to the present, where the creative manifestations have been defined as

possessing “originality, variety, fluency, and flexibility” (Ruch, qtd. in G. Blackwell 1992:5).

However, from the Bible it becomes clear that in order to understand how this ability can be developed in human beings, it is essential to consider it within the scope of God’s wisdom. Only when we comprehend the nature and purpose of His wisdom do we become able to grasp the importance and necessity of creativity in human life as part of that wisdom. Therefore, what is God’s wisdom? Can it be “transferred” to human experience? If yes, how?

The Manifold Wisdom of God

In the Bible, the word “wisdom” (OT Heb. “hokmá”; NT Gr. “sophos”) “represents a wide semantic field, and is used in a variety of different contexts”¹ (Myers 1987:1058). However, what is clear is that the connotation of the word is “intensely practical, not theoretical” (Douglas 1980:1650). According to the Bible, God is the source of all wisdom (Job 12:13; 38:36). Likewise, it is in Christ where “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). But, what is the nature of that wisdom? Is it an abstract quality that belongs only to God? Can it somehow be received by human beings? As we said, God’s wisdom is much more than a nice theoretical definition. Even when He prescribed His laws, God “explored wisdom, which is treated as a tangible object or idea” (Zuck 1992:301-302). What is more, the Bible itself assures us that God’s wisdom is revealed in human lives. Paul calls that “made-known” wisdom of God “manifold” (Ephesians 3:10); that is to say, it can be manifested in many different ways. The word “manifold” (Gr. “polypoikilos”) deserves special analysis. According to Eadie (1979), it means not simply “varied” but actually “much varied” (232), and Mitton (1989) understands it as “richly diversified” (128). The original Greek word, though, suggests “the intricate beauty of an embroidered pattern” (Robinson, qtd. in Foulkes 1978:98), since it may imply both beauty and diversity (Vaughan 1980:76). Brachter (1982) translates it as “his wisdom in all its

¹ Though the application of the word is usually practical, according to some scholars, its use can be divided in wisdom related to thought, discourse, or action. For a complete explanation, see G. F. Hawthorne 1993:967, 968.

different forms,” and he thinks that the phrase refers to “the application of wisdom to the different areas of experience” (79). For a Christian, it is the wisdom that “takes insights gleaned from the knowledge of God’s ways and applies them in the daily walk” (Douglas 1980:1651). As we study the exemplary lives of the great men of the Bible, we find not only the various means by which God’s wisdom was manifested in their lives, but also the purpose of such manifestations. Some of them are presented in the following chart:

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>God gave him wisdom</i>
Deuteronomy 34:9	JOSHUA	To be in charge, to be a leader.
Exodus 35:30-35	BEZALEEL	“To design artistic works, work in gold and silver and bronze,...and in all manner of artistic workmanship.” To teach.
1 Kings 3:28	SOLOMON	“To administer justice.”
1 Kings 4:29-33	SOLOMON	To write proverbs and compose songs. To be a lecturer.
Daniel 5:11,12	DANIEL	To interpret dreams, solve riddles and explain enigmas.
2 Peter 3:15	PAUL	To write epistles and “essays”.

It is interesting to point out that, under this meaning, God’s wisdom is given to everyone in order to fulfill a specific task that—as in Bezaleel’s case—is not necessarily an intellectual one. Thus the pattern of Eden is repeated. In Daniel’s story, God’s wisdom for him “speaks of knowledge and capacity for proper decision...of mental reflection and discernment” (Wood 1973:142). On the other hand, in Solomon’s case that wisdom seems to cover a rather wide range of intellectual achievements (judge, writer, composer, lecturer). But it is not as simple as that. Noth says that Solomon’s wisdom in judging was more than “human sagacity or shrewdness” (qtd. in Jones 1984:133), since it implied “understanding mind and ability to distinguish between good and evil” (Rice 1990:37). Rice also considers the wisdom of 1 Kings 4:29-33 as a “breadth of learning and the ability to gain insight from the observations of nature” (42).

From these considerations, the link between wisdom and creativity becomes obvious. God, the source of all wisdom, gives human beings the ability of creating

by giving them a small “portion” of His wisdom in order that they can apply it to their everyday projects. So wisdom becomes “the ordering principle of this creation process” (Habel 1985:400) and—as Janzen (1985) puts it so nicely—it “emerges in the creative act, as it were at the edge of the knife, the point of the chisel, the tip of the brush...” (198).

Now, where does literature fit in this pattern? Here we are forced to make a distinction: On one hand, the creativity related to words—that is to say, literature—is just another way in which that manifold wisdom of God can be manifested in human life. As we have seen, God’s wisdom given to Solomon in order that he could write proverbs and compose songs was no less than the one given to Joshua to act as a leader or to Bezaleel to design, engrave, and teach. On the other hand, in His infinite wisdom, God chose to communicate His message in written form. It seems that—between all the possible means of transmission—God decided to give His lasting message of love in a way that could endure both space and time. Time after time God’s order to the prophets is: “Write” (See for instance Jeremiah 30:2 and Habakkuk 2:2). Sometimes, the written word represents an extra opportunity given by God in order his people could listen to His voice (See Jeremiah 36:2,3). What is more, in Exodus God said to Moses: “Write these words, for *according to the tenor of these words* I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” (34:27). So for God the written word has an authority that seems not to be present in other human expressions, at least not in such a degree. And of course, this fact was emphasized by Jesus when—when dealing with temptation or controversy—resorted to the ultimate authoritative words: “It is written”. Now, it is impossible to overlook the fact that God did not only choose to communicate through the written word, but also in a literary way (Longman 1987:151). That implies that when analyzing the content of the Bible, a literary approach (taking into account imagery, for instance) is “imperative to understand its meaning” (McClarty1989). As Silva (1990) humorously puts it, “Forget that fact [the imagery of the Bible], and you will decide that David was not a person but a lamb” (17). It is as simple as that. So from the Bible, what can we learn about

human creativity applied to literature? As usual, the answers can be found in the Bible itself.

Towards a Creativity-Based Literary Approach to the Bible

Important scholars as Stendhal, C. S. Lewis, Herder, and T. S. Eliot have always opposed the idea of simply considering “the Bible as literature” (Longman 1987:8). Apparently, it is not enough to scan the Bible looking for good examples of similes, metaphors, and hyperboles (that by the way, abound in it). Paradoxically, this approach may minimize one of the purposes of using such devices, that is, to communicate God’s truth in human terms. So it seems that a deeper analysis is required if we want to grasp the implications of using a literary “frame” to get a better comprehension of biblical truths. By a literary approach we mean what Sternberg calls “discourse-oriented analysis.” Such analysis “sets out to understand not the realities behind the text but the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect” (qtd. in Eskenazi 1988:3), and should acknowledge, among other considerations, that,

1. “God has...spoken to us...through human languages...If we ignore the character of human language, we will likely misunderstand Scripture” (Silva 1990:17).
2. “The literary approach and methods are no less important than the historical ones...It is impossible to appreciate the nature of biblical narrative fully...without having recourse to...literary scholarship” (Bar-Efrat 1992:10). Obviously, we should not “deny or downplay historical reference of the biblical text in the face of its literary artifice” (Longman 1987:151).
3. “The writers of the Bible had an amazing literary talent whose subtleties we are just beginning to comprehend” (Alter, qtd. in McClarty 1989).
4. “Jesus found it impossible to communicate...without using literary discourse” (Ryken, qtd. in Barayuga 1993:3).
5. God himself resorted to literary forms to communicate His truth. In addition, more than once He ordered a prophet to use that means (See Ezekiel 17:2).

I would like to spend some time adding a few comments to the previous points. First of all, it is not my purpose to describe the nature of revelation and inspiration according to the Bible. Enough explanations have already been produced to prevent people from thinking of its writers as simple robots or dictating-machines. What I would like to present, though, are a few examples of the ways in which some of the authors used their creativity when transmitting the messages from God. From all the existing examples, I have chosen some related to what we call in the Old Testament “the prophetic books.” Some of them are probably the least read by Christians, though their richness is not minimized by that fact. The following examples are mostly based on the work of Smith (1994), where they are taken from.

<i>PROPHET</i>	<i>LITERARY CREATIVITY</i>	<i>REFERENCES</i>
<i>AMOS</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative ways of thinking: oracles written in pairs. • He made use of literary forms of speech common in his setting (hymn, vision, disputation, judgment oracle, woe oracle, and salvation oracle) (52). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paired oracles: 1:3-2:16. • Paired visions: 7:1-9:4
<i>JONAH</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary forms of speech from the nation’s hymnic tradition (90). • Surprising use of irony (92). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prayer: 2:2-9 • Irony of God’s compassion (cf. 2:1-9 and 4:1-11)
<i>MICAH</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary skill: He wove similar themes together. • He played with words by repetition and used puns (104). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puns on the names of the cities and their punishment: 1:10-16.
<i>HABAKKUK</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prophet and songwriter. He used literary traditions, as laments and a hymn (182). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laments: 1:2-4; 1:12-2:1. • Hymn: 3:1-19.
<i>JOEL</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagery taken from agricultural, military, and temple life (232). 	
<i>EZEKIEL</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He used parables, allegories, and drama (256). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parables and allegories: 15-17; 19-20). • Drama: 4-5; 12:1-7.

It is important to notice that God used every one of the prophets according to his own skills; in other words, God-given wisdom to talk and write stressed the prophets’ natural abilities and took into account their background and setting.

Smith believes that they “were faithful to their calling, but they had the freedom to communicate the divine word in a way that was appropriate to the Judean audience they addressed” (342).

In some cases, God’s intervention seems to be given in a much more direct way, as when Ezekiel writes, “The word of the Lord came to me saying...” or, “Say to the house of Israel...” One of these great examples is found in Ezekiel 16. In that chapter and through His prophet, God tells a striking allegory of His love relationship with Jerusalem. It is almost impossible to read its metaphors and vocabulary and stay unmoved. God speaks of Jerusalem as a bastard girl (v. 3), who was abandoned in her blood the day she was born (v. 5). Later, she is described as a beautiful woman with long hair and formed breasts (v. 7), who was saved by a lover (remember we are talking about God Himself!) and accepted as his wife (v. 8). Unfortunately for the loving husband, when she became famous she played the harlot, accepting lovers from every land and forgetting her covenant (v. 15-43). She is described as the opposite of other prostitutes, since she pays for her services instead of being paid (v. 34). The allegory finishes with a promise of future forgiveness (v. 63). Any sincere person who analyzes biblical stories like this one will definitely gain a new vision of the purposes and importance of literary creativity as given by God, who should be considered—according to McGarrel—“the greatest literary artist” (1994:7).

In the New Testament, “the Gospels...do their work in our minds and hearts because of their unique literary form” (Sire 1990:164). In addition, we can see how Jesus resorted to literary devices time after time in order to communicate his eternal truths in an effective way. Parables and allegories are usually the first words that come into our minds when talking about Jesus’ teaching methods. And a deeper analysis of the way He used to communicate with humanity would show us that,

1. *His use of literary narratives went beyond their effectiveness as a teaching device:* The Son of God could have transmitted His eternal truths in a very simple way without resorting to literary devices. Beyond the teaching device of allegories

and parables, there is an aesthetic element in Jesus' stories that should not be overlooked.

2. *Above subject, Jesus was interested in literary narratives as ways of critically thinking in eternal truths:* More than once, he invented or imagined stories that were not only contrary to the Old Testament teachings but also to His own beliefs. The story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" constitutes a clear example, where you can meditate on the importance of paying attention to the prophets—among other things—though we can not argue that Jesus is making a statement on the immortality of the soul or the doctrine of hell. For Jesus' audience, it was very clear that his story was just that—a story with a moral.

Summarizing, we can say that the Bible identifies clearly this process of origin and transmission of creative language as one that starts with a Creator God who decides to reveal His truth in human languages—languages which are a product of the one human beings acquired from God, when humanity was created in God's image. Above all this use of language was sanctioned by Jesus' example, which we are supposed to follow.

What should we do?

Once we understand the background and scope of literary creativity according to the Bible, there is no doubt that that will affect the way in which we—as Christian teachers of literature—decide to face the questions raised on the selection of texts and syllabus content. For that purpose, I would like to present a few points that I consider essential to achieve a sort of literature syllabus that respects Christian values while at the same time highly esteems literary masterpieces of all ages.

1. *Do not overlook the limitations of Literature:* As any other human enterprise, Literature comes short in portraying an ultimate vision of reality. If there is a word that characterizes any human achievement, that is "incompleteness". The best literary works can not represent but a partial view of reality, and any sincere Literature teacher should acknowledge and remember this fact when judging the worth of a particular work. And of course, if such teacher, besides

being sincere is Christian, he will remember that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:11). From the Bible, it becomes clear that the full vision and understanding of things is future, since it is centered in the hope of the new world, that is God’s world (See Conzelmann 1975:228).

2. *Make a good selection (and share it)*: The same old principle of Philippians 4:8 still applies. When Paul speaks of “whatever is true”, he means “true” as opposed to what is insubstantial (the Greek idea) or as opposed to falsehood or error (Martin 1989:158). That is why truth, justice, and purity are still valid standards to measure your choices by. What is more, a Christian teacher should be always ready to admire beauty in all of its forms, since he/she acknowledges that it comes from a God who “made all things beautiful” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). That concept of beauty includes precision, elegance, and excellence. Consequently, it means that when given a choice between two specific works, you will always choose the one that is best. Once you have chosen them, share those texts with your students, pointing out the reasons that have made you choose them among others. And be prepared to defend your choices when either the Christian or the academic departments that you belong to (or your students) do not share your convictions.
3. *Do not be afraid to experiment (and assess the results)*: Do not think that in teaching literature, everything is “revealed.” Be ready to try new methods, even if some people acknowledge that they have failed when trying similar ones. Maybe this will mean a headache sometimes, but chances are that you will grow both professionally and as a person in daring to take the risk. For instance, by giving more importance to the critical potential of a literary work than to its subject, we can find new points of reflection and discussion, thus following the pattern used by Jesus (See Moncrieff 1996). What is more, even non-Christian literature could be used as a way of reflecting on Christian values (See Goldstein 1999). The same could be said of those pieces that see Christianity from a critical point of view (See Moncrieff 1993). In practical terms, a story like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”—considered by some critics as one of the best witchcraft stories in American literature—could be used to

meditate on the value of true Christianity and the results of the lack of it (See the introduction to N. Hawthorne, 1987 edition). Students are very likely to love and value the efforts of daring teachers, even if sometimes those teachers are forced to follow the next step.

4. *Do not be afraid of making adjustments (and acknowledging them)*: This point is related to the previous one. When the texts selected or the methods applied do not produce the results you were waiting for, do not hesitate to change them. Especially as regards the ways of promoting creativity, some activities may have different results of the ones you have intended them for. Be sincere, discuss the eventual changes with your students, and be prepared to receive their ideas and suggestions. There is usually a better way of doing things than the one you think is the best at a definite time. Your students will appreciate your capacity for adjusting and considering their opinions, and your efforts to give them the best instruction as you at the same time approach the subject from a Christian point of view.
5. *Be creative (and teach it)*: The best way of teaching students to make good use of literary creativity as the Bible sees it is being creative yourself. Plan carefully your class activities, including assignments that definitely promote creativity. Do not feel easily satisfied with what you are doing. Try to improve your literary analysis every time, striving to find new approaches to the same old works. Students will not find valuable your repetition of applications they can find in any book on the subject, but will be undoubtedly attracted by a new insight, by a lesson they had not imagined was there, especially if it is influenced by your own ideas and experience as they relate to a Christian worldview.
6. *Be wise (and show it)*: Above all, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you not only in the selection of texts but also when delivering your classes. The same God's wisdom of biblical times is still available. Pray for it, so you can receive that essential discernment that will enable you to develop your natural talents as well as improve your analytical and reflective capacity. Let the light of His

infinite wisdom shine through your intellect so that your students can perceive God's truth beyond a particular author and his/her work.

Conclusion

The Bible presents clear evidences that creativity was part of that image of God humanity received when created in God's image. Despite the fact that we live in a sinful world, "the power to think and to do" is still part of that image, and—in White's words—"it is the work of true education to develop this power" (1952:17). Literature, one of those products of human creativity, should be a means of reflecting the "manifold wisdom of God," and its careful analysis and methodical study should be systematically encouraged by Christian teachers who trust in the Bible as God's revelation to humanity. This encouragement will also imply a constant and conscious effort to develop abilities not only in order to understand the literary masterpieces but also to cultivate imagination and love for beauty in words. The literature teacher will see him or herself as God's agent, as part of a process in which he or she will strive by word and example to restore that image of God lost in Eden. After all, both teachers and students are part of the most beautiful and encompassing story of all, a love story that—despite some postmodernist prophets of doom—has nothing to do with human creativity or fictions since God Himself has testified of its reality through Jesus Christ. And there is no doubt that the implications of such a story can become real for both students and teachers as we strive to excel not only in admiring the literary masterpieces of the past, but in also developing our creative abilities for the glory of the God who created us to somehow reflect His manifold wisdom in the everyday pursuit of our talents.

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