

Lesson Nine: Literary Devices and Features

Since the Exegete is one who leads out the meaning it is important that one be able to evaluate and recognize different literary devices and methods of expression. As in other sections we can only do this in a very hurried way and mention a few things that otherwise may be overlooked. Most of our students have been exposed to many of these things through the course in hermeneutics and I will not repeat them in detail at this point. For the general work I prefer Mickelsen: INTERPRETING THE BIBLE and for more compact treatment Berkhof: PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION. And in spite of everything else, a good course in English literature is a gold mine in background for this sort of thing.

There are at least two values for knowing the literary devices and we sketch them crudely in this order:

--it generally enables one to know better what the text says,

--and it always gives one a richer experience in the knowledge of the text.

This is why Bibles that render biblical poetry as poetry have a great attraction for the particular reader. Poetry and prose differ in every language and to render all the poetry as prose in translation is to lose the feel of much of it.

So in this short lesson I want to call your attention to some literary devices and hope that you will pursue further information in this as you study.

1. The genre or class of literature.

It is not as mysterious as it sounds. It refers to the classification of literature after classical patterns. Beyond the mere prose and poetry variety of expression we ask ourselves..

--is it a narrative? If so, what sort? (Don't be afraid of this. The writers of Scripture worked under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and He is master of all literary forms and inspired them to express their messages in what was natural for them although it may have been different from one writer to another.)

Narratives may be in the biographical area, the historical recitation, or the chronicle form, etc. Narrative literature tends to be unadorned, marked with simple vocabulary and style. The writer is not pleading a cause, he is telling an account.

--is it a language form? A parable, an allegory, a short story? These and other forms are identifiable. When one has made the initial identification one proceeds to the classes within that level. I am sorry not to sketch them all and the particular hermeneutical concepts are rather well stated in Mickelsen.

--is it a poem? Then what sort of poem? a dirge (Lamentations); a conceit (Song of Solomon); an epic (Miriam's song). Poetry by its very nature uses a more complicated vocabulary and often gives meanings not found in prose to simple words.

Please note we do not press genre as the liberals do who wish to reduce the character of Scripture to mere productions of men...and explain it naturalistically.