

The Ugly Bible?

By Rich Lusk

Believe it or not, there was a time when people thought the Bible was ugly. And no, I'm not talking about when the NIV was first released. I'm referring to the views of those trained in the rhetoric of classical antiquity who first encountered the Scriptures outside their native Hebraic habitat.

For example, Jerome, one of the great scholars of the early church, neglected the Scriptures for a while because of their "rude style." Cicero and Ovid were so much more attractive than those barbaric Hebrews and coarse apostles! When Jerome compared the Scriptures to the ornate (even ostentatious) literature of the Greco-Roman world, he believed there was really no comparison at all.

In a sense, of course, Jerome was right. Just as the incarnate Word had no "form or comeliness" and "no beauty that we should desire him," so it was with the inscripturated Word. In the Greco-Roman culture in which Jerome labored, the unadorned style of the Scriptures became something of an apologetic issue. How could something be true without being beautiful? Why should those accustomed to eloquent speeches, flowing poetry, and brilliant philosophy give the Bible a second look?

It's not my purpose here to answer those questions directly. Maybe in another essay at another time we'll wrestle through those issues. Instead, I want to offer a counter-point. It is true that Scripture seems rather plain when compared to Homer or Ovid. But whereas Homer and Ovid have a beauty that is only skin deep, Scripture's glorious beauty resides just below the surface. Sometimes, those steeped in the literature of antiquity missed Scripture's beauty because the whole Bible (OT and NT) is the product of Hebrew culture, a culture which had its own literary styles and conventions, quite different from the classical literature of other cultures in the ancient world.

For example, Greek poetry had a certain rhythm to it, called dactylic hexameter, which sounded quite splendid when performed orally. By comparison, the Hebraicized Koine Greek of the NT couldn't help but sound rough and crude to educated Greeks. Moreover, what in the Bible could match Homer's charming character epithets? Next to the grandiose descriptiveness of Homer, the Biblical authors seemed unimaginative and dull. Biblical characters seem underdeveloped, biblical scenes under-described, and biblical records of events under-detailed when compared to the literary giants of Greece and Rome.

But if Jerome had the benefit of a graduate level comparative literature course, he may have evaluated the Bible differently. As the church learned more and more to read Scripture on its own terms, rather than in terms of an alien, pagan literary milieu, something happened. Readers began to find a certain beauty in the inspired text. Homer and Hesiod, among others, had produced a certain kind of literary culture in Greek and Roman civilization. But once the Roman empire was Christianized (meaning

Biblicized!), the Bible began to reshape literary views and values, and, indeed, began to create its own literary culture.

As the Bible saturated Western civilization more and more, shaping and forming it in the process, not only did readers find hidden beauty in the text of Scripture, but the Bible in turn produced its own literary milieu. By the time of Dante and Chaucer, and then Shakespeare and Milton, the Bible had become the book by which all others were judged. It was regarded as not only the truest, but also the most beautiful, of all works of literature. It was regarded as the literary standard for poetry and the epitome of all stories.

And so today, most Christians instinctively regard the Bible as a beautiful work of literary art. Literary critics (even those who are quite secular!) regularly point to Ruth, Esther, and Mark as literary masterpieces. Proverbs is regarded as the greatest of aphoristic literature. The poetry of the Psalter is revered. The Bible is studied for its use of literary forms, such as parallelism and chiasm, and its use of literary techniques such as irony, wordplays, and *leitmotifs*.

Of course, there is a danger in studying the Bible as literature – danger that one will miss the *truth* because of the *beauty*. A lot of the best literary work on the Bible is done by scholars who are without God and without hope in the world. But the dangers should not keep us from the delights of reading and enjoying Scripture as literature – albeit, inspired and authoritative literature.

Interestingly, it was none other than the great Augustine who led the way in transforming the church's approach to the Bible. Without the advantages (or disadvantages?) of Jerome's education, Augustine succeeded in making the "literary turn" in biblical studies. While his approach to hermeneutics was certainly not revolutionary, he had immersed himself in the Scriptures enough to find in them *both* wisdom *and* eloquence. Augustine was one of the first – if not *the* first – to discover the aesthetic majesty of God's Word. By time he wrote his justly praised handbook *On Christian Doctrine*, he saw Scripture as the ultimate literary artifact in form and content, excelling all others in truth and beauty.

As in so many areas, Augustine was a trailblazer well ahead of his time. It would be several more centuries before the church at large caught up with his analysis of literary forms and rhetorical techniques in the Bible. Augustine paid close attention to biblical metaphors, recapitulation, numerology, numbered patterns, symbolism, intentional ambiguities, and so forth. While other features of the Bible's ornate literary architecture were left undiscovered by Augustine, his work is of tremendous and enduring value. Several snippets of Augustine's literary analysis of the Bible are worth quoting.

Here, perhaps, some one inquires whether the authors, whose divinely-inspired writings constitute the canon, which carries with it a most wholesome authority, are to be considered wise only, or eloquent as well. A question which to me, and to those who think with me, is very easily settled. For where I understand these writers, it seems to me nothing can be wiser, but also nothing can be more

eloquent. And I venture to affirm that all who truly understand what these writers say, perceive at the same time that it could not have been properly said in any other way. For as there is a kind of eloquence that is more becoming in youth, and a kind that is more becoming in old age, and nothing can be called eloquence if it be not suitable to the person of the speaker, so there is a kind of eloquence that is becoming in men who justly claim the highest authority, and who are evidently inspired of God. With this eloquence they spoke; no other would have been suitable for them.

For Augustine, the Bible is a rhetorical model for the Christian teacher. By imbibing the forms of Scripture, the teacher is better able to communicate the beauty and wisdom of divine revelation. Like the biblical writers, Christian rhetoricians should avoid “eloquent non-sense;” instead they should strive to combine eloquence with truth. Augustine defends the propriety of employing rhetorical skills:

Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of the art? That the former are to tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter shall tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it?

Like the biblical writers, the preacher may use rhetorical beauty because his aim is not merely to *inform* but *transform*:

Accordingly a great orator has truly said that “an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to persuade” . . . But if he wishes to delight or persuade his hearer as well [as merely teach], he will not accomplish that end by putting his thought in any shape no matter what, but for that purpose the style of speaking is a matter of importance. And as the hearer must be pleased in order to secure his attention, so he must be persuaded in order to move him to action. And as he is pleased if you speak with sweetness and elegance, so he is persuaded if he be drawn by your promises, and awed by your threats; if he reject what you condemn, and embrace what you commend; if he grieve when you heap up objects for grief, and rejoice when you point out an object for joy; if pity those you present to him as objects of pity, and shrink before those whom you set before him as men to be feared and shunned.

The literary and artistic beauty found in Scripture is not mere adornment or ornamentation. It’s not just an “added bonus” thrown in “at no extra charge.” Rather, the form itself is part of the message. Unfortunately in our day, a quasi-Gnostic approach to the Bible often dominates evangelicalism. The form of Scripture is neglected because, supposedly, only the ideas matter. The fact that God gave us a story book and a poetry

book is considered irrelevant; what matters is translating everything in Scripture into systematic theology. But as C. S. Lewis has reminded us, literature is to be *received*, not merely *used* for our own ends. If we too quickly turn the Bible into systematic theology or practical application, we may end up missing its real point.

In reality, form and content are inseparable. Content always comes embodied, or packaged, in some form. That form in turn shapes the content. The literary form of Scripture is not a shell that the interpreter can safely rip away and discard. It is part and parcel of the meaning of the text itself. The literary techniques are not like layers of an onion that can be peeled off to get to the “core” meaning. Rather, the literary qualities of the text are built-in to the meaning of Scripture itself.

The inseparability of form and content should be obvious. Forms are not merely vehicles for transporting meaning; they carry inherent meaning in their own right. Changing the tune of hymn changes the meaning. The words may be the same, but it’s a different hymn with a different overall thrust. Similarly, two preachers could read the exact same sermon manuscript. But their differing styles and rhetorical techniques would result in two different sermons with potentially differing effects on their respective congregations.

In reading and interpreting Scripture, we must pay attention to both form and content. A holistic interpretation will integrate what Scripture *tells* us with what it *shows* us. Faithful Bible study will take into account the various literary features of God’s Word.

What, then, is the point of all this? Scripture is not an end in itself. The purpose of Scripture is to draw us closer to Christ. But Scripture does this not simply by teaching us true ideas about Christ, but also by revealing his beauty to us. His beauty as the Incarnate Word is reflected in the inscripturated Word. That beauty is often latent, and must be drawn out by a skilled reader. Quite often, we find it is a humble, hidden beauty. But it is a beauty we must see if we are to behold Christ in all his radiant glory and majestic splendor.