

The Bible as Literature
Part 1 (of 4 parts):

"Words of Delight": The Bible as Literature

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Evangelicals are witnessing a paradigm shift in how biblical scholars study and discuss the Bible. This shift involves not only a growing awareness that much of the Bible is literature but also a tendency to use the methods of literary criticism when analyzing the Bible. Evangelicals should participate in this movement, which holds immense promise but which to date has been dominated by nonevangelicals. What is required is not only a receptivity to a literary approach but also an awareness of what constitutes a genuinely literary approach.

Interest in a Literary Approach to the Bible

New winds are blowing in biblical studies. The most immediate evidence is the titles of new books. Though titles like the following are still a minority, they are increasingly common: *Matthew as Story*;¹ *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*;² *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*;³ *The Literary Guide to the Bible*.⁴ Or consider the

¹ J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

² Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

³ J. P. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Dover, NH: Van Gorcum, 1981, 1986).

⁴ Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

following table of contents from a recent commentary on the Gospel of John: Narrator and Point of View; Narrative Time; Plot; Characters; Implicit Commentary; The Implied Reader.

Even more telling, perhaps, is the way in which literary terms are now smuggled into titles where they seem to have been dragged in gratuitously: *Call to Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel*;⁵ *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel*.⁶ Feminist studies of the Bible typically advertise themselves as a literary approach. Some other commentaries whose titles promise a literary approach in fact turn out to follow the familiar contours of conventional Bible commentaries. Titles such as those mentioned above point to a scholarly fad that will be a dominant influence on biblical scholarship for the foreseeable future. In liberal scholarship it is already replacing the long-standing obsession with tracing supposed stages of composition in a biblical text.

The movement toward literary approaches to the Bible began two decades ago in high school and college English departments. In 1975 a survey by the National Council of Teachers of English disclosed that courses in the Bible as literature ranked in the top 10 of 180 commonly offered high school English courses. In the past decade scholarly articles on the Bible have appeared in the standard literary journals. The most influential literary critic of this century, Northrop Frye, gave impetus to the movement by saying that "the Bible forms the lowest stratum in the teaching of literature. It should be taught so early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind, where everything that comes along later can settle on it.... The Bible ... should be the basis of literary training."⁷

While Frye's vision was never fully realized, the Bible is now part of the literary canon that college teachers of literature teach in their courses and about which they write in their scholarly journals. The most dramatic evidence of this was the appearance of the book pretentiously titled *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Despite its weak content, this book was reviewed in all the leading sources, was selected by a book club, and made its way into ordinary bookstores. As so often in life, symbolic truth proved more important than the reality behind it.

⁵ Augustine Stock, *Call to Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982).

⁶ George Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1987).

⁷ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 110-11.

The interest in the Bible by literary scholars sparked a similar interest among liberal biblical scholars at a time when several decades of cutting and pasting the biblical text had left scholars feeling that the possibilities of that approach had been exhausted. The infusion of a literary approach into this larger world of biblical scholarship has been overwhelmingly positive. It has led scholars to focus on the biblical text instead of escaping from it as quickly as possible. Scholars have shown a new willingness to accept the biblical text as they now find it instead of undertaking textual excavations into the supposed layers of composition. And they have at last been content to treat texts as unified wholes instead of cutting them into a patchwork of fragments.

But what about evangelical biblical scholars? I first became interested in the literary analysis of the Bible two decades ago. When I taught my first course on the subject and subsequently wrote my first book on it, virtually all the help from published sources came from liberal biblical scholars. It was a rarity to find an evangelical who said anything about the literary dimension of the Bible. Today there is a large body of literary commentary on the Bible, but little of it comes from evangelical scholars.

Yet the promise of this approach is immense. Evangelical biblical scholarship is standing at an important crossroads. It can continue to produce the type of theologically and apologetically oriented biblical material that it has produced for the past century, or it can enter an open door to new and different emphases in handling the Bible. The burden of this article is to encourage evangelical teachers and preachers of the Bible to believe that a literary approach is something that deserves their participation.

Obstacles Discouraging a Literary Approach to the Bible

Obstacles exist, however, that may prevent such participation by evangelicals. Contentment with the status quo is one of these obstacles. After all, to adopt a literary approach to the Bible is to encounter the unfamiliar. Abandoning the familiar for the unknown involves risk and requires the humility (and sometimes even the humiliation) of adopting the position of a beginner. But of course the person who stays with the familiar misses the exhilaration that comes from discovering how to do something better than he or she has done it before. Furthermore the literary approach to the Bible is more familiar than the uninitiated might think. Good biblical expositors and preachers intuitively practice an incipient literary criticism on the biblical text. But their efforts in that direction could be strengthened by being more conscious and systematic, and by being better informed by the methods and theory of literary criticism.

To those who have inquired into literary approaches to the Bible, other obstacles appear formidable. One is the sheer confusion of techniques that fall under the rubric of "literary criticism." Unfortunately that discipline is in disarray; in fact it is an embarrassment to one who is part of that discipline. The prevailing fashions in literary criticism are ideologically based. Unfortunately those ideologies are generally uncongenial to evangelical Christians. They include philosophic nihilism or skepticism, Marxism, and militant feminism. Iconoclasm toward traditional interpretations of literary texts dominates published scholarship, with the methods of deconstruction serving as the handy demolition tool for those who disdain the truth and beauty that readers have found in literature through the ages.

The chaotic state of current literary criticism should not prevent biblical expositors from approaching the Bible as literature. For one thing biblical scholars at large are as guilty as literary critics are of practices that are uncongenial to an evangelical viewpoint. In the standard journals on biblical scholarship there is the same range of belief and unbelief, the same preponderance of hostility to an evangelical view of the Bible, and the same incidence of specialized vocabulary and esoteric methods encountered in literary journals. In both cases reliable guides are needed to help weed out the aberrations, but it is unwarranted to refuse to enter the field simply because there is much that is uncongenial. Some of the destructive current trends in literary criticism began with biblical scholars and philosophers, not with literary scholars.

A third obstacle that prevents evangelicals from warming to the literary approach to the Bible is common misconceptions of what constitutes literature. Foremost among these is that literature is necessarily fictional. It seemed for a time that the equation of literature and fiction had dropped out of circulation, but it has been resurrected by leading literary critics. They are at pains to signal that they regard the narratives of the Bible as at least partly fictional and unreliable as factual history. Yet these discussions are not really literary in nature. They are actually a Johnny-come-lately version of the debate over historicity that has long raged among biblical scholars. The question of fictionality in the Bible belongs to historical scholarship, not literary criticism. The very literary critics who make pronouncements about the fictionality of biblical narrative would not think of conducting similar arguments when they discuss extrabiblical literature. If one were to reject a literary approach because some literary critics question the historicity of the Bible, he on the same logic would have to reject a historical approach, since liberal biblical scholars also question the accuracy of the Bible's history.

The fear that a literary approach to the Bible requires an ac-

ceptance of the fictionality of biblical narrative is based on a misconception about literature. Fictionality, though common in literature, 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 literary approach depends on a writer's selectivity and molding of the material, regardless of whether the details actually happened or are made up.

Nor does the presence of artifice and convention in a biblical text imply fictionality. By way of analogy, consider the conventions surrounding the live television sports report. In this television genre the reporter is filmed with a sports arena in the background. During the course of the report the reporter either interviews an athlete or is momentarily replaced by a film clip of sports action. At the end of the report, the reporter stares into the camera and utters a catchy, impressive-sounding one-liner. The artifice of such conventions is obvious. Yet they do not undermine the factuality of the report itself. There is an unwarranted assumption in some quarters that the presence of literary conventions and artifice in the Bible signals that the content is fictional rather than factual.

A final obstacle to the literary approach to the Bible is a fear that such an approach means only a literary approach, devoid of the special religious belief and authority that Christians associate with the Bible. C. S. Lewis fueled this skepticism. The Bible, he said in an oft-quoted statement, "is not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach."⁸ Elsewhere he observed that "those who talk of reading the Bible 'as literature' sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about."⁹ Yet the context in which Lewis made these comments shows that his objections concerned an abuse of the literary approach, not the approach itself. In fact Lewis followed one of the quoted passages with the following defense of a literary approach: "There is a ... sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are."¹⁰

To sum up, it would be tragic if evangelical scholars and preachers allowed themselves to be deterred from a literary approach to the Bible because of objections that turn out to be fallacies. One can

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 33.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

take a literary approach without getting sidetracked by exotic and specialized critical approaches. To view the Bible as literature does not require one to regard it as fictional or to compromise one's view of its special religious authority.

Characteristics of a Literary Approach to the Bible

What does it mean to read and study and preach the Bible as literature? If literary criticism presented a united voice, it would be easy to answer that question. But as already indicated, literary criticism itself is today in a state of transition and disarray. With so many scholars clamoring to climb aboard the Bible-as-literature bandwagon, and with so many books and articles claiming to be a literary approach to the Bible, we obviously need criteria by which to assess the claims.

People who wish to undertake a literary study of the Bible can safely disregard much that is currently going on in the world of specialized literary criticism. They need to consider traditional literary criticism. A literary scholar asserted that "what biblical scholars need to hear most from literary critics is that old-fashioned critical concepts of plot, character, setting, point of view and diction may be more useful than more glamorous and sophisticated theories."¹¹

What most characterizes traditional literary criticism? The answer is that genre does, provided it is understood that literature itself is a genre. That is, works that are classified as literature have identifiable traits that set them off from other kinds of writing, just as specific genres like narrative and poetry have identifying traits. Evangelicals should be skeptical of any approach that claims to be literary if it fails to define what makes a text literary. The literary properties of a text extend to both content and technique.

At the level of content, the differentia of literature is its presentation of human experience, as distinct from the conveying of information, facts, or propositions. Literature is incarnational. It enacts rather than states. Instead of giving abstract propositions about virtue or vice, for example, literature presents stories of good or evil characters in action. Literature gives the example instead of the precept, or combines the example with the precept. The knowledge that literature imparts consists of living through an experience or (in the case of poetry) picturing a series of images. The language of literature is prevaingly concrete rather than abstract. The fifth commandment states propositionally, "You shall not murder." The story

¹¹ John W. Sider, "Nurturing Our Nurse: Literary Scholars and Biblical Exegesis," *Christianity and Literature* 32 (1982): 19-20.

of Cain and Abel incarnates that same truth, without, it might be noted, using the abstraction "murder" or a command that people should refrain from it.

Several important corollaries follow from the incarnational nature of literature. Because the aim of a literary text is to recreate an experience rather than develop a logical argument in essay fashion, the first item on the agenda for the reader or expositor is to relive the text as vividly and concretely as possible. A literary text seeks to encompass its reader in a whole world of the imagination, not to point beyond itself as quickly and transparently as possible to a body of information.

Furthermore the fact that a literary text embodies an experience means that the whole story or the whole poem is the meaning. There is something irreducible about a literary text. The generalizations made about it are never an adequate substitute for the meanings that the work itself communicates. Certainly a set of propositions cannot be said to convey the full meaning of a literary text. Nor must a reader express the content of a story or poem in the form of a proposition before he or she can be said to have grasped its meaning. If readers *recognize* the neighborly behavior of the good Samaritan, for example, they have grasped the experiential truth of Jesus' parable.

The literary impulse to incarnate human experience or reality also has implications for how Bible students view the truth that the Bible communicates. For most people, truth is synonymous with ideas that are true rather than false. But the truthfulness that literature imparts is a whole further type of truth, namely, truthfulness to reality or to human experience. The story of the Fall in Genesis 3, for example, is a truthful portrayal of such human experiences as temptation, guilt, rationalization of sin, fear of discovery, shame, alienation, and irremediable loss.

The ability to see truthfulness to reality in the Bible is rendered easy because of a further trait of literature—the fact that it embodies universal human experience. History tells what *happened*, while literature tells what *happens*—what is true for all people at all times. This premise underlies a good sermon or Bible study, which assumes the continuing relevance of the experiences portrayed in the story or poem.

The Bible is more than a work of literature, but it is not less. It combines three impulses in a way that partly accounts for its uniqueness. These three impulses are theological, historical, and literary. Usually one of these dominates a given passage, but not necessarily to the exclusion of others. Thus claiming that Genesis 3 tells how the fall into sin *happens* does not question that it also tells how the original fall *happened*. Yet a touchstone that allows readers to gauge

whether a text is literary is the degree to which they can see universal human experience in it.

The content of literature is human experience, presented as concretely as possible. How much of the Bible is literary by this criterion of concrete embodiment of human experience rather than abstract argument? Realizing the mixed nature of biblical writing, 80 percent is not an exaggeration. The implications of this for preaching and teaching the Bible are immense. It should affect our selectivity of passages for teaching and preaching. There is no good reason why preachers should gravitate so naturally and consistently to the abstract, expository (informational) parts of the Bible, chiefly the Epistles.

In response to a presentation I recently gave on reading the Psalms, a pastor in the audience claimed that to practice what I had suggested would be to unlearn what he had been urged to do in seminary. The homiletics teacher had in effect told his students not to preach from the Psalms because they are deficient in propositional content. Instead the students were encouraged to preach from passages that had "meat," that is, the Epistles. The preponderance of literary writing in the Bible shows that God trusted literature as a medium for conveying truth, and it should serve as a curb against excessive reliance on abstractly theological passages in Bible teaching and preaching.

Of course it is possible to choose literary passages for exposition and yet fail to treat them in a literary manner. The commonest form of this failure is to reduce literary texts to abstract propositions. Instead of reliving a story, the prevailing tendency among preachers is to develop three generalizations and dip into the biblical story to illustrate them. The images in the Psalms are reduced to a series of propositions. The result is that preachers and teachers and their listeners have slipped into thinking of the Bible as a theological outline with proof texts attached. Knowing that literature is a concrete embodiment of human experience can help people interact with the Bible in terms of the kind of writing it really is.

If literature is definable partly by its experiential content, it is also characterized by its technique and forms. The most common way of defining literature is by its genres (literary types). Through the centuries, people have agreed that certain genres (such as story, poetry, and drama) are literary in nature. Other genres, such as historical chronicles, theological treatises, and genealogies, are expository in nature. Still others fall into one category or the other, depending on how the writer handles them. Letters, sermons, and orations, for example, can move in the direction of literature if they display the ordinary elements of literature.

Every literary genre has its distinctive features and conventions.

These should affect how a person reads and interprets a biblical text. Readers and interpreters need to come to a given text with the right expectations. If they do, they will see more than they would otherwise see, and they will avoid misreadings. Literary genre is nothing less than a "norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text."¹² An awareness of genre can program one's reading of a passage, giving it a familiar shape and arranging the details into an identifiable pattern.

A literary approach to the Bible will require biblical scholars and expositors to enlarge their list of genres and let their knowledge of how each genre works control what they do with biblical passages more thoroughly than they usually do. This will not require a sophisticated set of critical tools. In fact mastering the tools of literary analysis that are taught in a typical high school or college literature course is the best starting point, as my own books on the subject are designed to suggest.¹³

As stated earlier, it is possible to be misled into thinking that a literary approach means adopting one of the specialized critical "schools" currently in vogue. There is something far more basic (and far more productive of insights into biblical texts) that undergirds a literary approach, regardless of the specific critical school to which a critic belongs. The deep structure of literary criticism includes an awareness of how stories and poems work, how metaphor and other figurative language communicates, and an appreciation for the artistry of an utterance. It would be lamentable if in adopting esoteric critical approaches, the essence of a literary approach were missed. Such an approach will be eclectic in the sense of using whatever tools of analysis yield the most insight into the Bible, whatever "school" of criticism they belong to.

Regardless of the genre in which a given work is written, literature is identifiable by its special resources of language. Reliance on these can occur in texts that we would not consider to be primarily literary, and wherever they appear they require literary analysis. A discourse becomes literary, for example, when a writer exploits such resources of language as metaphor, simile, allusion, pun, paradox, and irony. These are the very essence of poetry, but in the Bible they appear everywhere, not just in the poetry. This is why, inci-

¹² Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 136.

¹³ These books include *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984) and three books published by Baker Book House: *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (1987); *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (1987); and *Effective Bible Teaching* (with Jim Wilhoit; 1988).

dentally, a literary approach is necessary throughout the Bible and not just in the predominantly literary parts.

A literary approach to the Bible is preoccupied with literary form. In any written discourse, meaning is communicated through form. The concept of form should be construed very broadly in this context. It includes anything that touches on *how* a writer has expressed the content of an utterance. Everything that gets communicated does so through form, beginning with language itself.

While this is true for all forms of writing, it is especially crucial for literature. Literature has its own forms and techniques, and these tend to be more complex and subtle and indirect than those of ordinary discourse. Stories, for example, communicate their meaning through character, setting, and action. To understand a story, a reader must first interact with the form, that is, the characters, settings, and events. Poetry conveys its meanings through figurative language and concrete images. It is therefore impossible to determine what a poem says without first encountering the form (metaphor, simile, image, etc.).

The literary critic's preoccupation with the *how* of biblical writing is not frivolous. It is evidence of an artistic delight in verbal beauty and craftsmanship, but it is also part of an attempt to understand *what* the Bible says. In a literary text it is impossible to separate what is said from how it is said, content from form. The aesthetic dimension of a literary approach to the Bible is also important. Literary criticism is capable of showing that the Bible is an interesting rather than a dull book, and a book that is beautiful as well as truthful. There is as much artistry and craftsmanship in the Bible as in any other anthology of literature, as recent literary approaches have abundantly shown.

To sum up, a literary approach to the Bible begins and ends with an awareness of what makes a text literary. An adequate grasp of this will tend to generate its own methods of analysis. Obviously a text is best approached in terms of the kind of writing it really is. A literary approach will yield its best results only if the text being analyzed is literary. In recent years some scholars have applied high-powered literary methods to biblical texts that are not primarily literary in nature. The results have been decidedly meager, despite all the appearance of a literary approach. Therefore whether a piece of analysis is literary is determined partly by what biblical text the writer has chosen to discuss.

Benefits of a Literary Approach to the Bible

What advantages does a literary approach offer to biblical expositors? First, it provides an improved methodology for interacting

with a biblical text. In the 13th century Roger Bacon argued that the church had done a good job of communicating the theological content of the Bible but had failed to make the literal level of the Bible come alive in people's imaginations. A similar situation exists today. The main evidence is the scarcity of expository sermons in evangelical pulpits. Topical preaching dominates. Many preachers preach sermons on single verses or even single phrases. The biblical passage read before the sermon becomes almost superfluous as the sermon unfolds. A set of propositions fleshed out with real-life anecdotes or biblical parallels replaces any reliving of the specific biblical text. Believing that the Bible is uniquely powerful to communicate God's truth, expositors should find ways to allow the Bible itself to form the basis for their sermons and Bible studies.

A literary approach also offers an avenue to include the whole span of the Bible in one's repertoire of preaching and teaching. Someone confided that until he mastered a literary approach he would often read from the Book of Psalms to people he visited in the hospital but would avoid using any of the psalms as the basis for a Bible study because he did not know what to do with them. Someone else said that in seminary he was discouraged from preaching from narrative parts of the Bible because (so the argument ran) they did not contain enough propositions. Because expositors do not know how to come to grips with a biblical passage they readily resort to the perennial substitutes-allegorizing, moralizing, background information, and the bicycle trip through parallel passages. In all these cases, a literary approach provides an ideal antidote.

Greater emphasis on literary methods of interpretation would certainly help equip laypeople to handle the biblical text themselves. One of the most glaring failures of the church lies exactly in this area of teaching people to interpret the Bible for themselves. Basically the clergy has been handed the task of interpreting the Bible. Biblical scholarship itself has become so complex and specialized that ministers despair of teaching what they learned about biblical interpretation in seminary to their parishioners. Greater emphasis on literary methods of interpretation can be a step in the right direction.

By opening the doors to the entire Bible, a literary approach also insures that preachers and teachers will appeal to the whole range of human temperament in a typical audience, as well as in themselves. Seminary-trained people are far more oriented toward abstract theological thinking than is the cross-section of humanity. Another way of saying this is that ordinary people are less interested in abstract theology than most preachers are. To treat literary passages in the Bible in keeping with their concrete, experiential nature is a good way to counteract an excessively abstract approach

to the Bible. The Bible is more than a book of ideas, and it should be presented as such.

A literary approach can also help preserve the unity of biblical passages. A pioneer in the literary study of the Bible correctly observed that "no principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole."¹⁴ By contrast, methods of biblical scholarship have been prevalently atomistic. Liberal scholarship has undertaken textual "excavation" in an attempt to determine the various strata in the alleged development of a text from its original form to its final written form. Conservative scholarship has been equally atomistic in its verse-by-verse approach to biblical passages, as well as by its methods of proof texting. Yet one of the findings of educational research is that people can grasp details effectively only when those details are placed in a unifying framework. The ability to see unifying patterns in biblical passages is one of the greatest gifts a literary approach confers.

A literary approach can also shed new light on the entrenched methods and interpretations of biblical scholarship. Interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical and literary scholars is desirable. But few articles in journals of biblical scholarship refer to relevant treatments of the same topic by literary scholars. Is this a form of protecting one's turf, or are biblical scholars simply unaware of literary scholarship on the Bible? In either case, interaction between the two disciplines would be beneficial to both biblical and literary scholars.

As a literary scholar, I have learned an immense amount from biblical scholars. Biblical scholarship has provided the basic commentary on biblical passages from which I can construct literary explanations, and biblical scholarship has permanently altered my literary theory.

But the dialogue needs to flow the other way as well. In addition to helping biblical scholars in their basic approach to biblical texts, literary critics can help them rethink some of their entrenched positions. For example is everything in the Bible to be interpreted literally? If so, how does this relate to the obvious fact that the Bible includes innumerable figures of speech?

A final benefit that a literary approach can offer is increased enjoyment of the Bible. It can give content and meaning to the lip service paid to the beauty of the Bible. Among the writers of the Bible, the writer of Ecclesiastes presented his theory of writing most com-

¹⁴ Richard G. Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1895), p. 1719.

pletely. In addition to writing the truth, he arranged his content "with great care" and "sought to find words of delight" (12:9-10, RSV). The Bible is a literary masterpiece. A famous skeptic of Christianity in this century called the King James Bible "unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world."¹⁵ It should be more than this, but not less, for Christians. Aesthetic considerations were important for the writers of the Bible. They should also be important today to readers and expositors.

Conservative biblical scholarship stands at something of a crossroads. In the larger world of biblical scholarship, literary methods are more prominent with every passing year. The methods of traditional literary criticism, based on a clear understanding of what makes a text literary, can significantly enrich the insights of evangelical scholars and preachers.

Editor's Note

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¹⁵ H. L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p. 286.