

INTRODUCTION

Poetics is a word that essentially means a “theory of literature.” It refers to beliefs about the nature, purpose, function, and laws of literature. The literary handbook that you are now reading, called *Poetics* after this idea, discusses such ideas and also provides an account of historical worldviews and literary movements, as well as terms and tools for literary studies. *Poetics* is your literary handbook and history of literature for this year. *Poetics* is a large document, so use the Table of Contents to find the titles of articles that your Student Activity pages have assigned.

I. BIBLICAL POETICS: A THEORY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

A. WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

1. DEFINING HUMAN LANGUAGE

An understanding of literature begins with an understanding of language. We will do best, then, to begin with the question, “What is language?” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “language” as “words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.” We modify this definition slightly for the sake of emphasis. Our definition of language is, “*Words and methods of combining them for the purposes of expression, communication, and naming.*” This definition includes both the idea of expressing thoughts and the concept of receiving another’s expressed thoughts, as well as another important (though slightly less common) aspect of language: naming.

2. ORIGIN OF HUMAN LANGUAGE: A GOOD GIFT FROM GOD

We know that human language was created by God, and for a specific purpose or purposes, because we know that *all* things were created by God, and always for His purposes (1 Corinthians 8:6 and Proverbs 16:14). But when we say that language was created by God for specific purposes, we are making several claims.

1. First, we claim that human language was *designed* by God—that its form and the way it functions are products of the mind of God.
2. Second, we claim that human language is *controlled* by God (as we see in Genesis 11, the account of the Tower of Babel).
3. Third, we claim that human language is *directed* by God towards definite purposes or ends.

Furthermore, we should note that humans alone, of all earthly creatures, have from God the gift of speech and the ability to use language. Moreover, this ability to speak, call, and name was man’s from the very beginning (Genesis 2:19); it was not an ability developed by man himself; nor was it a result of the Fall. Language was originally intended as a good gift—and it is still a good gift, when used rightly.

Finally, since we know that man is made in God’s image and that God *spoke* the universe into being (Genesis 1:3), and since man can also speak, we might even say that man’s ability to use language is one of the ways in which he reflects God’s attributes.

3. ORIGINAL PURPOSES OF HUMAN LANGUAGE: EXPRESSION, COMMUNICATION, AND NAMING

The Bible, it should be noted, does not specifically say *why* God created language. We know that He created it for a purpose, because He never does anything without a purpose, and we try to trace that purpose backwards from what we know of the unfallen results—that is, from what we know about the way God and man used language in the Garden of Eden before man sinned. In Genesis 1-3, we see Adam consistently using words to communicate with other beings in his unfallen and perfect state (Eve, God, etc.), so we can suppose that communication is at least part of what God intended human language to do.

It is worth mentioning that Adam did at least one other thing with language. In obedience to God, he used it to name the animals. We might sum up, then, by saying that in man’s unfallen state, language is used for expressing thoughts in at least two different directions (besides simply expressing one’s thoughts out loud to oneself):

1. To communicate verbally with other beings who are capable of communicating verbally (which includes at least other humans, angels, and God Himself)
2. To name things (e.g., animals)