A Sampler of Literary Features Found in the Bible

I. Narrative

Detail
Use of detailed description to add realism (see account of near-sacrifice of Isaac, Gen. 22)

Foreshadowing
Dropping a hint concerning an event yet to transpire. The promise that “the boy and I will worship and return” hints at possibility of Isaac’s surviving the visit to Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22)

Hyperbole
Expressing a condition in extreme terms which are not intended literally. “All” livestock and “all” crops and trees were destroyed by plague on livestock and plague of hail, respectively. Yet some survived to be casualties of hail and locusts, respectively (see Ex. 9.6 and 25, 9.25 and 10.15).

Irony
Stating opposite of what is intended; a form of humor or rebuke, “That they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven,” Mark 4.12.

Reversal
Unexpected turn of events: captured ark of covenant ‘captures’ enemy deities (1 Sam. 4-6); instead of Esther and Jews, it is Haman who meets his demise (Esther).

Rhetorical Question
Posing a question when the answer is obvious, “Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up from the earth when there is nothing to catch?” Amos 3.3.

Significant Repetition of Concept or of Actual Terms
Good... Good... Very Good in Gen. 1.

Suspense
Temporarily withholding information describing a final resolution, heightening reader’s sense of anticipation: the build-up of events leading to miraculous fire consuming Elijah’s sacrifice, 1 Kings 18.

II. Poetry

Acrostic
Use of initial letters of verses to spell a word. Generally biblical acrostics are alphabetic, spelling out the alphabet. See Ps. 110, 119, and much of Lamentations.

Chiasm
A sequence of terms which occur twice, and appear in reverse order on their second appearance: “Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed,” Isa. 6.10. Also prophets / Nazirites in Amos 2.11-12.
Closure
Beginning and ending a section with similar concept or expression, *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*, Ps. 8.1 and 9.

Dynamic Progression
A sequence of similar items which progress from lesser to greater, from remote to near, or along some other vector: *naïve, fool, scoffer* present a progression of decreasing receptivity to Wisdom’s call (Prov. 1.22), three postures of Ps. 1.1 indicate increasing receptivity to the wicked.

Merisma
Shorthand whereby a totality is expressed by mentioning only two parts, *The Lord made heaven and earth...* refers to creation of all material existence, not strictly “heaven” and “earth”, Ps. 121.2.

Metaphor
Comparison without “like” or “as”, *The Lord is my shepherd*, Ps. 23.1.

Parallelism (“Thought-Rhyme”)

**Synonymous**
Second half-line (stichos) mirrors first half-line, *Many seek the favor of the generous, and everyone is a friend to a giver of gifts*, Prov. 19.6. **NOTE:** often 2nd member intensifies theme opened by first member. Here, “many” grows to “everyone”, and “generous” becomes more vivid in “giver of gifts”.

**Antithetical**
Second half-line (stichos) opposes first half-line, *The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*, Ps. 1.6.

**Synthetic**
Second half-line extends concept begun in first half-line, *Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full*, Prov. 19.17.

Personification
Lending traits of a living being to an inanimate object. Similarly, when the human traits are attributed to something which is not human it is called an example of “anthropomorphism.” *“Riches...will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle,”* Prov. 23.5 (personification). *“To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”* Isa. 53.1b (anthropomorphism).

Reversal
Unexpected turn of events: the thugs who extinguish others’ lives without a second thought, *They lie in wait for their own blood*, Prov. 1.19!!

Simile
Comparison using “like” or “as”, *They are like trees planted by streams of water*, Ps. 1.3.

Summation
Concluding member of a series which is modified by “all”: “Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.” Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace (Prov. 3.16-17). Also Gen. 1.26, Ps. 96.11.