

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Learning How to Understand and Apply the Bible

Session Two: Literary Genre

"The awareness of genre tells us what to look for in a text and how to organize our experience of it."
– Leyland Ryken

Introduction

What is Literary Genre? "The specific type of literature that God inspired to communicate His Word." In other words, it's the categories of literary styles that the biblical authors used when they wrote down the Word of God.

Literary Genre in the Bible: The Bible is composed of different types of literature to communicate its message. Understanding each of these styles and how they function is a major key for interpreting the Bible and discovering the message that God wants us to hear. Each genre is used with a specific purpose, which also means that each have limitations.

Some literary scholars have identified over 50 different types of literature (genres) in the Bible, but in reality, there are just a few that we need to be aware of for our purposes – Historical Narrative, Poetry, Wisdom, Prophecy, Apocalyptic, Gospel, and Letter.

Biblical Genres

1. **Historical Narrative:** The stories and descriptions of real events as they actually took place. Unlike legends or myths, the historical sections of the Bible are intended to be read as real events in history. Historical narratives are often identified by the inclusion of a plot, characters, dialog, and dramatic tension. Contained within the genre of historical narrative are several sub-genres, such as law, speeches, dialog, records, contracts, covenants, letters, lists, genealogies, etc. Scholars estimate that historical narrative comprises 43% of the Bible.
 - a. **Books:** Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, sections of Job and the Prophets, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts.
 - b. **Function:** God revealed his Word through historical narrative to give us an accurate account of what happened in the past. What God revealed through this genre of literature is to be taken as literal history, which explains the true unfolding of God's will, along with promises, examples, and lessons. However, from a theological perspective, God was very selective in what was reported and didn't disclose every detail or event, but only what was necessary to

accomplish his will. Also, the biblical authors also reported events that they do not approve of morally or theologically (descriptive vs prescriptive).

- **Example:** “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). We are to understand God as Creator of all that exists. Therefore, the creation account is not a symbol or metaphor for evolution. Creation week literally took place. Adam and Eve were real people. Satan literally entered the garden and deceived both into committing sin, which led to a fallen race and cursed world that is still experienced today. However, we are not told exactly how the sun, moon, and stars were made. That’s beyond the scope of God’s purpose.
- **Interpretive Question:** When reading a historical narrative, ask yourself why the writer told the story. What purpose does it serve?

2. **Poetry:** Biblical poetry is a literary device that uses short lines or verses, arranged in meter, containing similar sounds, symbols, expressions, parallels, metaphors, and word pictures to deliver God’s truth in an artistic way. A large portion of poetry was used for singing. Most Bibles utilize verse-formatting to indicate where poetic language is being used, which captures the meter and structure of the poem.
 - a. **Books:** Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and other occurrences interspersed throughout books of the Bible (Job, Jonah, Daniel, etc.).
 - b. **Function:** Biblical poetry is used to appeal to the reader’s emotions, to connect with the heart and mind, and to help with memorization. The imagery and other devices used are not to be taken literally, but figuratively as a means of pointing to God’s literal truth. However, we should never think that figurative language indicates untruthfulness or mythology.
 - c. **Example:** “I love you, O LORD, my strength.
 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
 my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
 my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” (Psalm 18:1-2)
3. **Wisdom:** Biblical wisdom literature imparts knowledge from human experience concerning how to live life, avoid trouble, and how to deal with some of its more difficult aspects (suffering, doubt, deep questions). These sections are often written in poetry. Even though this literature is written from a human perspective, it is overshadowed by divine truth. Therefore, every word is truly wisdom from God.
 - a. **Books:** Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and other occurrences throughout books of the Bible.

- b. **Function:** When reading wisdom literature, we must treat each passage as “principles, not promises.” In other words, such wisdom is generally true, but not universally true. For example, think about the modern phrase, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away!” While it is generally true that eating fruits and vegetables will keep a person healthy, it does not guarantee that a person will never get a disease.
 - c. **Example:** “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Prov. 16:7). While living according to God’s will and loving others should lead others to appreciate me (even enemies), the Bible still indicates that persecution will come.
- 4. **Prophecy:** The literary genre of prophecy is God revealing his truth (future truth) to invoke life-change today. God often revealed prophecy through visions, dreams, or personal dialog. Biblical prophecy was often written in poetic meter. While the words of each prophecy may contain poetic elements not meant to be taken literally, the truth presented in the prophecies is guaranteed to be fulfilled. Prophecies range from conditional to non-conditional (e.g. judgments); single fulfillment to multiple fulfillment (e.g., the destruction of Jerusalem).
 - a. **Books:** The prophetic books of the Bible are known as the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel), the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi), but also in many other books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 1-2 Kings, Matthew, Acts, etc.).
 - b. **Function:** In prophecy, God revealed the future to give warnings and to give hope. However, these words were given to generate life-change among those who listened. Some of the biblical prophecies in the Old Testament were meant for that generation and have already been fulfilled, which reminds us of the authenticity and accuracy of God’s Word. Other prophecies have yet to be fulfilled, which calls us to live in faithfulness.
 - c. **Example:** “But he was pierced for our transgressions;
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 and with his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)
- 5. **Apocalyptic:** The literary genre of apocalyptic is similar to prophecy, but its main focus is on what will take place in the end times. The word “apocalypse” means “to reveal or uncover.” Robert Plummer notes, “Apocalyptic literature is a genre of Jewish literature characterized by its use of symbolic imagery to reveal God’s mysterious, providential workings behind the scenes and his coming plans for the future” (213). Therefore, God is revealing what will take place in the end of world history. This literature is known for its heavy use to symbols and images, such as dragons, beasts, stars, flames, etc. Like prophecy, while the symbols are not to be taken literally, the truths they point to are guaranteed to take place.

- a. **Books:** The main apocalyptic books are Daniel and Revelation, but we also see language in parts of Isaiah and the Gospels (Olivet Discourse).
 - b. **Function:** To give details about God's decisive victory over sin and evil, which results in a new heavens and new earth for those who trust in Christ and eternal judgement for those who reject the gospel. These details are not given to fuel endless speculation, but to encourage people that God is victorious, and judgment will come on those who are opposed to Christ.
 - c. **Revelation 13:1–2** – “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.”
6. **Gospel:** The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” Therefore, the literary genre of “Gospel” is a specific type of literature that tells the “good news” of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. We find specific details about his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Attention is given to his miracles, teachings, and interactions with others.
- a. **Books:** Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - b. **Function:** While the gospel accounts are considered “historical narrative,” their author writes with the specific purpose of persuading people to trust Jesus as Savior. We notice that not every detail about Jesus' life is given, but only those that are necessary for helping people see that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and has accomplished God's will to provide salvation to those who believe.
 - c. **Example:** “And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:39–41)
7. **Letter:** The biblical genre of letter (epistle) contains the correspondence between the apostles and the local churches.
- a. **Books:** Pauline Epistles (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon); General Epistles (1-2 Peter, James, Hebrews, Jude, 1-3 John).
 - b. **Function:** Each letter is designed to instruct the church on matters of theological and practical importance. They were often written in response to problems, or to give direction, or to clear up confusion. The truth found in these letters are still binding and profitable for all churches throughout history.
 - c. **Example:** “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Cor. 1:10)