



## Biblical Genres

**Narrative** – makes up the largest portion of the Bible (40% of OT and 60% of NT). Narrative provides the overall framework within which we understand all the other genres.

- First we pay attention to the story and its details. The main point is in the plot and its development.
- Second, remember that the narrator has had to be

selective in what he records, so the details that are present are significant. How do they contribute to the point of the narrative? How do they connect this narrative to what came before and what comes after?

- Third, context is vital. How does this narrative fit into the rest of the book, the rest of the section of Scripture, and the narrative of the Bible as a whole?
- Fourth, what's the point of the narrative in light of the author's purpose in writing the book? Story is not an end in itself, and we are not necessarily the point either!
- Every individual narrative is part of the greater narrative of Scripture, the ultimate narrative of God's creation of the world and His redemption of it.

**Parable** – Parable is an important and often misunderstood genre, largely found in the Gospels, but also in the Old Testament prophets. Fundamentally, a parable is a pictorial comparison between something familiar and known and a spiritual truth or reality. The picture is typically fictional, though realistic. They are not generally allegorical, even when various parts of the picture represent various spiritual truths. Many times the details just add vividness to the picture.

- The most important question to ask about a parable is, "What's the main point or points?"
- Pay attention to repetition, the reversal of expectations, or changes in voice from first to third person. These are clues to the main emphasis.
- The conclusion or main point is typically at the end, and usually centers on the nature of the kingdom or the King.
- Context is still king, so interpret parables in light of the context of the larger surrounding narrative. Don't rip them out of the context in which the author has placed them.

**Poetry** – One third of the Old Testament (which is more than the whole New Testament) is poetry. The key to exegeting Hebrew poetry is to realize that, like English poetry, Hebrew poetry presents extremely compressed and image-rich language. Poetry in any language is intended not only to communicate truth but also to evoke emotion.

- The most common feature of Hebrew poetic structure is parallelism in three different forms – synonymous (an idea is repeated for emphasis), synthetic (one idea builds upon another), and antithetical (one idea is contrasted with another).
- Perhaps the most important key to interpreting poetry is to remember that it's a poem. A literal reading of a poem will look different than a literal reading of narrative.

**Wisdom** – Wisdom literature is about living well in God’s world and in light of God’s character. Wisdom is the fruit of the fear of the Lord, which means being correctly oriented toward God and the creation He’s made, including other people. It speaks of what is generally true, but it also addresses what appear to be the exceptions to that general truth.

- We need to recognize that wisdom literature comes to us in multiple forms, or sub-genres.
  - Drama (Job, Song of Solomon)
  - Sayings (Proverbs 9-31)
  - Autobiographical confession and admonition (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs 1-8).
- Whatever the form, the key in interpretation is to read it in context and according to its stated purpose.
  - Job intends to address the problem of unjust suffering.
  - Ecclesiastes intends to realistically address the point of life.
  - The Proverbs intend to engender the fear of God and then show how that fear demonstrates itself in all sorts of contexts.
  - Song of Solomon is a celebration of human love in marriage that points beyond itself to God’s love for his people.

**Prophecy** – The prophetic books contain both narrative and poetry, but what sets them apart as their own genre is the presence of the prophetic oracle – “Thus says the Lord” – and the function these oracles play in Scripture.

- The basic feature - and problem - of interpretation is the promise-fulfillment dynamic. When, where, and how a prophecy is fulfilled helps us understand its meaning.
- One important aspect of prophecy is the prophetic foreshortening of events. The prophets see the mountains on the distant horizon as a single, two-dimensional line. Once we actually get there in history and travel into those mountains, we discover that there are multiple ranges broad distances apart. This means that most, if not all, prophecies have multiple horizons of fulfillment.
  - For example, in the flow of Isaiah’s narrative, the “sign of Immanuel” in Isaiah 7 is fulfilled in Isaiah 8 with Isaiah’s own son. But that’s just the first range of mountains. Behind and towering over that range is the text’s ultimate fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ.
- A common feature of prophecy is to use the language and images of the past in order to describe the future.
- Not all prophecies are unconditional. The most famous example of this is Jonah preaching to Nineveh. He prophesied that in three days Nineveh would be overturned, unless the people repented. The people repented, so the prophecy was not fulfilled.
- Quite a bit of prophecy is not predictive, but descriptive. For example, the New Testament understands that much of King David’s life anticipated the coming Messiah.
- As always, context is king. In the case of prophecy, the shape of the story of the Bible as a whole is crucial.

**Epistles** – Epistles are the most straightforward of the genres, because they are letters written to the people in the exact same part of the story as we are – believers living in between the resurrection of Christ and his second coming.

- As always, context is extremely important. These letters are occasional documents, not abstract theological treatises intended for a library. They were written by the apostles to real life Christians facing real problems, either moral or doctrinal or both.
- Since these letters were almost always motivated by a problem(s) or conflict(s), the author is attempting to apply the truth of the gospel in order to address the issue(s) at hand. This means his basic form of speech will be logical argument. Because of this, we must pay attention to both the flow of the argument and its details.

**Apocalyptic** – Without doubt, apocalyptic is the most intriguing but also the most difficult of all the genres. The point and purpose of apocalyptic literature is to give God’s people hope in the midst of present sufferings based on God’s certain victory over their enemies, both now and in the future.

- Two main examples of apocalyptic in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. But neither is merely apocalyptic. Daniel is prophetic literature and Revelation is a prophetic epistle.
- Literary context is important. Biblical apocalyptic draws specifically on biblical images from the Old Testament (Babylon, plagues), as well as “stock” images from the wider genre (the horn, celestial bodies, etc).
- Apocalyptic provides a schematization of history, but that scheme is not necessarily chronological. For example, each series of seven plagues in Revelation (seals, trumpets, bowls) ends with the end of the world. And yet, it would be easy to read the series as sequential.
- Without going into a detailed treatment of the various approaches to interpreting Revelation, we can all agree that the main point is clear. God’s people can endure present suffering because of their confidence that God wins. And they know he wins, not because of prophetic revelation, but because of what Christ has already accomplished in the past, through his death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Take from *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, by Michael Lawrence and Thomas Schreiner.