

How To Study The Bible (#15)

What Is Genre? - The Bible As Literature

Introduction

Genre is defined as “a category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.”

(NOAD) Worthy of note are the following key principles:

Genre is a broad category. As a category, there are multiple, and varied, styles that fall under the general heading of that category. The Psalms, for example, are often classified as a single category, but there are many different types of Psalms. Do not assume that identifying a specific category constitutes identifying a single/identical style of writing or a single/identical system of interpretation.

Genres are similar in form. As just noted, there are distinctive traits within a category that help us classify writing styles, but this does not mean that those distinctive traits are not also part of another genre. Traits within certain genres are often found in other styles of writing. What delineates one genre from another are the combinations and relative weights of those traits.

In the 1200s Roger Bacon stated that religion communicated theology well, but neglected to make the biblical text “come alive in people’s imaginations.”(9) Wiersbe, in his book, *Preaching and Teaching With Imagination*, makes the same argument. Our job is not to read/teach the biblical text solely for informational content. Information without the motivation and rationale to implement its truths can be nothing more than interesting facts. Surely, God’s word is interesting. And surely, it is factual. But it is much more than that.

The biblical text definitely emphasizes information, but the way that information is presented demonstrates that God is concerned with getting us to be changed by that information, to become more like him because of it.

It is for this reason that the Bible uses various literary forms to impact the reader, specifically, to prompt the reader’s response. Literary genres, and the distinct traits that identify them, are employed to make the strongest case for as an informed, and as motivated, and as obedient reader as possible.

Learning what these various genres are and how they function in the dissemination of God’s message will make us better Bible students and, hopefully, motivate us to practice what we read.

With this in mind, let’s consider some basic principles of the Bible as literature.

We must focus on: (1) the literary genres of the Bible,(2) the Bible as a textual whole,(3) literary styles as well as theological terms,(4) appreciation for the “art” of biblical literature, and (5) how the Bible relates to everyday experience. (11)

Examining the Bible as literature is not an attempt to denigrate the nonliterary (expository, explanatory) aspects of God’s revelation. (12) Approaching the Bible as literature is an extension of “what is commonly known as the grammatico-historical method of the vocal interpretation.” (12) That method focuses on the language (syntax, grammar, semantics) of the text and the historical setting in which it first appeared. We must realize, though, that part of the setting in which it first appeared often determines the style of writing initially used when the text was inspired/revealed. That historical writing style sets the stage for our approach to understanding the message.

Consider these remarks about the parable of the good Samaritan: “not only is the parable inherently literary; its effect on the reader is also very literary. The story does not primarily require our minds to grasp an idea but instead gets us to respond with our imagination and emotions to a real-life experience. It puts us on the scene and makes us participants in the action. It gets us involved with characters about whose destiny we are made to care. Literature, in short, is *affective*, not cool and detached.” (15)

Literature: The Voice Of Human Experience (17)

Why does this work? Because: “It is a commonplace that the subject of literature is human experience— not abstract ideas or propositions, but experience.” (17) This is not to say that the Bible does not reveal explicit propositional truths—it does. The Bible reveals truth via *both* literary (implicit) methods and propositional (explicit) propositions. “The commandment ‘you shall not kill’ is expository in its approach to moral truth. The story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16) embodies the same truth in the distinctly literary form of a story (a story that implies but nowhere states that it is sin to murder someone).” (18) [Note: The account of Cain and Abel must be understood within the context of the entire Pentateuch, not Genesis alone. The initial readers of the account, Moses’ contemporaries, were privy to the 10 commandments *and* the historical record of Genesis. Both the literary and the propositional statements against murder would have been part of their understanding.]

The Concreteness Of Literature (19)

“The chief means by which literature communicates the very quality of human experience is concreteness. In literature we constantly encounter the sights and sounds and vividness of real-life.” (19, cf. Acts 3:1-5 and the account of Peter and John meeting the lame man at the temple gate)

The importance of biblical concreteness: “It means that we should read the Bible with our imaginations (image-making capacity) as well as with our reason. If we are to read the Bible as literature, we must be active in re-creating the experiences and sensations and events it portrays. We must be sensitive to the physical and experiential qualities of passage and avoid reducing every passage in the Bible to a set of abstract themes.” (20-21)

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus did not have to add a definition of “neighbor”; the meaning of the parable is complete if we *recognize* and *experience* the neighborly behavior of the Samaritan. This has big implications for what might be called the devotional reading of the Bible. The stories and poems of the Bible achieve their devotional purpose whenever they reinforce a readers general sense of the reality of God, or produce an awareness of what is moral and immoral, or influence a persons estimate of what is valuable and worthless.” (21-22)

Literature Requires Interpretation (22)

Literature, more so than exposition or explicit propositional statements, demands interpretation. The directness of the latter is countered, in part, by the indirectness of the former. “The statement that ‘our neighbor is anyone whom we encounter in need of our help’ is direct and requires no interpretation. By comparison, Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan requires a reader to determine what the details in the story add up to.” (22-23)

The Artistry Of Literature (23)

Though literature is more artistic than not, it still reflects “pattern or design, team or central focus, organic unity (also called unity in variety, or theme and variation), coherence, balance, contrast, symmetry, repetition or recurrence, variation, and unified progression.” (23-24)

What is accomplished by these varying elements? “Artistic form serves the purpose of intensifying the impact of what is said, but also the purpose of pleasure, delight, and enjoyment.” (24)

“Literary analysis is capable of showing why the Bible is an interesting book rather than a dull book to read.” (24)

The existence of artistic literature as an ingrained part of the biblical revelation demands that we learn to “identify and enjoy the elements of literary form we find.” (24)

Literary Genres (25)

In coming weeks we will concentrate on the following biblical genres: Biblical "Stories," Law, Psalms, Proverbs, Prophecy, the Gospels, Parables, Acts, Letters, Apocalyptic Language and, finally, Understanding Principles.

Each style of writing has unique characteristics and its own special set of interpretive principles. (25) As readers and interpreters of God’s word we must learn to identify each style of writing and then bring the appropriate set of tools to the table as we begin to mine a particular writing for its meaning and application.

We must be mindful that some traits function one way in one genre, but may function completely differently in another one. “For example, exaggeration in a story that purports to be factual history is a form of untruth, while the same type of exaggeration in lyric poetry (or a parable, jla) is called hyperbole and is a standard way of expressing emotional truth.” (25)

Meaning Through Form (28)

Biblical literature reveals truths through specific “forms and techniques” that are indigenous to a specific genre. “Stories, for example, communicate their meaning through character, setting and action> The result is that before we can understand what a story says we must first interact with the form, that is, the characters, settings, and events.” (29)

Looking For Literary Wholes (29)

“The most basic of all artistic principles is unity. The literary approach to the Bible accordingly looks for literary patterns and wholeness of effect.” (29)

Some of this material was adapted and summarized from the book How To Read The Bible As Literature (... and get more out of it) by Leland Ryken (Zondervan, 1984) Page citations for that material is provided.