

How to Study the Bible

Unit 5: Genre – Lesson 2: Types

Course Goal: To equip the believer to “Rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

At the conclusion of this lesson, the believer should be able to:

- Match a particular Bible passage with a specific genre
- Use the genre to help with the understanding of that passage

A Brief Review

- “Genre is a way of classifying something according to its type or style rather than its specific content or storyline.”¹

- Review of previous homework assignment.

Major Types of Genre

1. Narrative: Descriptive, purposeful stories in the form of biography, history, or even fiction.

a. Historical _____ Narrative _____ teach us about history... the events, the people, the relationships, and the places of Biblical history. They were one step above oral tradition... a manner by which the writer intended to pass-down historical fact.² Almost every book in the Bible contains some history, but examples of those written predominantly with the intent of providing historical fact are 1 and 2 Kings, The Gospel According to Luke, and The Acts of the Apostles. Additionally, knowledge of secular history is crucial, as it dovetails perfectly with biblical history and makes interpretation much more robust.³

b. Parables _____ are sometimes interspersed throughout a narrative with the intent of enhancing a teaching. “It would be wrong, however, to assume that every story in Scripture describes a real historical event. As an obvious example, Jesus’ parables take the form of narrative, but they do not discuss events that take place in real space and time. If someone had asked Jesus the date on which the ‘sower went forth to sow’ (Matthew 13:3), that person would have shown that he had completely misunderstood the point of the parable of the sower. Parables do communicate truth, as all Scripture does; but that truth is not the representation of historical events.”⁴

c. Similes _____ and metaphors _____ may also be interspersed throughout a narrative, but again, the author’s intent is not for a literal interpretation. Similes (e.g., Matthew 13:44) may be expanded into parables (e.g., Matthew 13:24-53), and metaphors (e.g., John 6:35; Matthew 5:14) may be extended into allegories (e.g., Mark 12:1-11)... all within a “narrative”. When an entire book is comprised of similes, metaphors, parables, and allegories, the book genre becomes “proverb” or poetry instead of “narrative”.⁵

2. Poetry _____: “These include books [and passages] of rhythmic prose, parallelism, and metaphor ...we find a similar use of idiom, comparison, and refrain in this genre as we find in modern music.”⁶ Therefore, we should expect *figurative* language to convey the intended meaning by evoking emotion.

¹ Beynon, Nigel and Sach, Andrew, *Digging Deeper: Tools to Unearth the Bible’s Treasure* (Leicester, England, InterVarsity Press, 2005), 111.

² Smith, Carol, *The Everyday Guide to the Bible: A Friendly and Informative Guide to the Old and New Testaments* (Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2002), 72-73.

³ McCracken, Randy, “Why Genre is Important in Bible Study”, October 15, 2015, <http://www.biblestudywithrandy.com/2015/10/why-genre-is-important-in-bible-study/>, accessed 28 Feb 2018.

⁴ Frame, John M., *The Doctrine of the Word of God: A Theology of Lordship, Volume 4* (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2010) 196-197 (emphasis original).

⁵ Virkler, H. and Ayayo, K., *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 1981), 147-150 (synthesized and summarized).

⁶ McCracken.

- a. Example of parallelism: Psalm 120:2; Proverbs 17:25; Proverbs 10:1; Isaiah 53:5
- b. Example of idiom: “And it came to pass” (e.g., Matthew 7:28)
- c. Example of refrain: Psalm 136

3. Epistle: An epistle is a letter, usually in a formal style. There are 21 letters in the New Testament from church leaders to other Christians. These letters have a style very similar to modern letters, with an opening, a greeting, a body, and a closing. The content of the Epistles involves clarification of prior teaching, rebuke, explanation, correction of false teaching, and a deeper dive into the teachings of Jesus (i.e., prescriptive). The reader would do well to understand the cultural, historical, and social situation of the original recipients in order to get the most out of an analysis of these books.

4. Prophecy and Apocalyptic Literature: The Prophetic writings are the books of Isaiah through Malachi, and most the Revelation. They include predictions of future events, warnings of coming judgment, and an overview of God’s plan for Israel. Apocalyptic literature is a specific form of prophecy, largely involving symbols and imagery and predicting disaster and destruction. We find this type of language in Daniel (the beasts of chapter 7), Ezekiel (the scroll of chapter 3), Zechariah (the golden lampstand of chapter 4), and Revelation (the four horsemen of chapter 6). The Prophetic and Apocalyptic books are the ones most often subjected to faulty eisegesis and personal interpretation based on emotion or preconceived bias. However, Amos 3:7 tells us, “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.” Therefore, we know that the truth has been told, and it can be known via careful exegesis, a familiarity with the rest of the Bible, and prayerful consideration. Some things will not be made clear to us except in the fullness of time, so it is best not to assume to know everything when it comes to prophetic literature.⁷

Class Exercise

1. The following verses were used by the Roman Catholic Inquisition in 1633 to challenge Galileo’s hypothesis that the Earth revolved around the sun. How should these be interpreted? Why?

a. Psalm 93:1; Psalm 96:10; Psalm 104:5 - Because these are found in a book intended to be poetic, they should therefore be interpreted figuratively (showing God’s might; faithfulness), not literally.

b. Psalm 104:22; Ecclesiastes 1:5 - Because these are found in books intended to be poetic, they should therefore be interpreted figuratively, and from man’s point of view, not as a literal, objective fact.

2. Some claim that the Hebrew word for “day” (*yom*) should be interpreted in Genesis 1 only as “24 hours”. What biblical evidence exists that could point to other possible interpretations?

Yom is often translated as an idiomatic expression for “a period of time” in the very next chapter (Genesis 2:4) and elsewhere (e.g., Zephaniah 1; Isaiah 7:17-25; Isaiah 9:4; Ezekiel 30:9; Zechariah 14:8).

3. Cessationists (those who claim that “sign gifts” have ceased) like to point to the narrative genre of Acts and the Gospels to support their claim, stating that narratives are descriptive, not prescriptive. How could a Charismatic Christian respond by also using an argument from genre?

One could point to the sign gifts mentioned in certain Pauline epistles (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12 and 14).

Epistles have a purpose for the audience... a *prescription* for them to obey, not simply descriptive history.

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-genres.html>, accessed 28 Feb 2018.