

How to Study the Bible

Unit 5: Genre – Lesson 3: Genre Laboratory

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:

- Use a passage’s 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

- So far, our class has discussed four major categories of genres, with some sub-genres.

- A knowledge of genres and other literary techniques greatly assists in discovering the writer’s intent.

Laboratory

1. Numbers 23:19

"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

Those who deny that Jesus has two natures, the divine and human, will often quote Numbers 23:19 as proof that Jesus cannot be God in flesh. Note that this passage also claims that God is not “a son of man”, which is also a title used by Jesus (Luke 24:7; etc.). By using our elementary exposure to genre so far, how could one answer this challenge?

a. The passage says, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent." In other words, the verse is dealing with the issue that God does not lie nor does he repent (of his sins). The verse isn't denying that the Word becomes incarnate later on (e.g., John 1:1, 14). Instead, it is intending to convey the idea that God is not like people because he does not lie, nor does he need to repent from sin. Therefore, in this passage, “man” is a metaphor for lying and sin, and “son of man” is a Hebrew idiom for being human, along with its attributes. Also note the synonymous parallelism here, which should flag the reader that we are reading poetry, which is never meant to be understood literally.

b. Also, by using our previous lessons on Systematic Theology, we know that the verse does not literally mean that God does not repent, because plenty of Old Testament passages say otherwise (Gen 6:6; Ex 32:14; Amos 7:3; etc.). So, if Numbers 23:19 is not intended to literally mean God’s lack of repentance, then the passage as a whole is not a literal one. This is further evidence that we are in some figurative genre, such as poetry.

2. You are gods...

In John 10:33-34, Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6 when challenged by the Jews concerning His claim of deity. Mormons use this verse to support their belief that they will eventually obtain deification, and Jehovah’s Witnesses use this passage to support their translation of John 1:1 (Jesus was only a god, but not the God). Also, some “Word of Faith” teachers use this to support their claim that they and other believers are “little gods”.² Using genre, how would you respond?

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

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith#'Little_gods'_controversy.

First, Psalm 82 is part of the poetry genre, so it is safe to lean toward figurative meanings, thereby avoiding a literal translation that believers are gods. In fact, the very next verse clearly demonstrates that the Psalm is discussing mere mortals. So then what could Psalm 82:6 mean? Perhaps the poetic genre could flag us to look for metaphors, such as the object of this psalm (the unjust rulers) being compared to a god because they have the power of life and death in their judgments.

To support this translation, Psalm 82 is what's called an imprecatory Psalm (a Psalm of condemnation and judgment against the unrighteous). The word "rulers" in verse 1 is the Hebrew word for God: *elohim*. It is translated as "rulers" in the NASB and ASV. It is translated as "gods" in the ESV, KJV, NKJV, NIV, and RSV. The Hebrew word *elohim* is also translated as "judges" in Exodus 22:9. We can see that the word can be used in reference to rulers and judges because they were those who had great power and authority. Verse 2 addresses the unjust judgment and how these rulers were showing partiality to the wicked. Verses 3-4 are an admonition to deal with people with fairness. Verse 5 speaks of the rulers' ignorance and lack of understanding. Verse 6 is where God refers to the unrighteous rulers as gods, not that they are divine, but that they have the power of life and death in their judgments. Psalm 82:7 says, "Nevertheless you will die like men, and fall like any one of the princes." Then verse 8 is a request for the real God to judge the earth.

Therefore, when Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34 as a response to the Jews, he was condemning their leaders as unrighteous judges while simultaneously confounding them by using the same word, *elohim*. Therefore, based on a poor understanding of genre, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and "Word of Faith" teachers are greatly mistaken when they think that Jesus is claiming to be one of many gods.³

3. Gamaliel's Logic: A famous "Word of Faith" teacher taught, "It amazes me, and not only does it amaze me, it aggravates me. These people who think they've got a ministry of exposing what's wrong with everybody else...Why is it that people think that it's their call to go around and find out what's wrong with everybody else and print it? Do you know when people were trying to stop Jesus, finally some very wise man said, 'Why don't you just leave us alone? If it's of God, you're not gonna stop it. And if it's not God, it won't last too long anyway.' Hallelujah! I mean, that's just the way I feel about it"⁴

a. By using our elementary exposure to genre so far, how could one correct this teaching?

This teacher is using a descriptive account (Acts is a historical narrative) as a prescriptive action (as one would find in an epistle or law genre).

b. By using our previous lessons on Systematic Theology, how could one correct this teaching?

(1) Looking for false doctrine is prescribed in NT (Rom 16:17-18; Matthew 7:15-20; 2 Tim 3:1-9; etc.)

(2) In Acts 17:10-12, the apostle Paul allowed the Berean's to question what he spoke to them. Is this "Word of Faith" teacher above the apostles?

(3) Christians are admonished to be humble and teachable, submissive to one another's correction (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5). One could easily turn this teacher's charge around to say, "Why is it that people think that it's their call to go around and teach ANYTHING they want publicly and not allow anyone else to examine whether or not it is correct?"⁵

c. By using mere logic (more in a future class), how could one correct this teaching?

³ Adapted from Slick, Matthew, "Psalm 82:6, the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses", Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, <https://carm.org/psalm826-mormon-jehovahs-witness>.

⁴ Meyer, Joyce, "Like a Mighty Wind" audio recording (date unknown), found at <http://www.christianfallacies.com/articles/false/meyer.html>, and by Johnson, Christopher J. E., "Wolves in Costume: Joyce Meyer", <http://www.creationliberty.com/articles/wolf-jmeyer.php>, 30 June 2015.

⁵ Adapted from Let Us Reason Ministries, <http://www.letusreason.org/Popteac17.htm>, 2010.

(1) “[Gamaliel] concludes that a genuine work of God will succeed, but a religion of human origin will fail. Gamaliel’s logic is seriously flawed because he allows for only two possible sources or explanations for these religious movements—Human or Divine [know as a “false dichotomy”]...The Scriptures [also] warn of a demonic or Satanic origin to much counterfeit religious belief, and even miraculous phenomena. Using Gamaliel’s logic, we would have to conclude that religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and modern cults such as the Mormons, Baha’i, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are all inspired by God because they have not ‘failed.’...Gamaliel is not a model of godly wisdom that Christians should emulate. His counsel, both in terms of what he advised the Sanhedrin to do and believe, was seriously flawed...”⁶

(2) This “Word of Faith” teacher’s reference to Christians who are “looking for what is wrong with everybody else” is an improper use of hyperbole. This exaggeration is an unfair charge because these Christians are focusing only on that which they deem as unsound teaching (as the previously mentioned Scriptures prescribe) and not “everybody else”. This is also an example of the “strawman” logical fallacy (misrepresenting someone’s argument to make it easier to attack), the “*tu quoque*” (Latin for “you also”) logical fallacy (avoiding engagement with criticism by turning it back on the accuser—answering criticism with criticism), and even the *ad hominem* (Latin for “to the person”) logical fallacy (an argument directed against a person rather than the position they are maintaining).

⁶ Banner Ministries *Mainstream Newsletter*, Spring 1995, p. 10.