

READ AND UNDERSTAND: BIBLE STUDY BASICS

Session 5: The Various Genres of the Bible

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Introduction

We deal with genres all the time. Most of the time it's obvious:

- Is it, "Once upon a time..." in a book with a dragon on the cover?
- Or, "On May 3rd, twenty U.S. Senators gathered in the White House for a meeting with the President," and it's in the *Wall Street Journal*?

The Bible has a number of different genres, and we want to make sure that we adapt our reading strategy to each of these genres.

How does genre affect Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, Application?

Historical Narrative

We start with "historical narrative." A narrative is something that describes a series of events. It tells some kind of story. "Historical narrative" is giving us history in a narrative format.

The Bible's Historical Narrative is distinct by being:

- A True Narrative: Beginning, middle, end, characters, etc.
- True History: What it says really happened, *really happened*.
- True Theology: Everything it says to believe and do is 100% correct

A huge part of our Bibles is historical narrative: Just over half the Old Testament, just over half of the New Testament.

What to look for:

- The **flow** of the narrative - Where do passages start and stop? What are the large and small narrative divisions?
- Look at how the **characters** are developed: Look for clues for who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. Sometimes not easy to tell and very subtle (Isaac in Genesis).
- Look at the **dialogue**: In the Bible's narratives, a huge part of the theology and importance of a passage is carried by the dialogue.

Determine where your passage is in the history of redemption (overall storyline of the Bible):

- Adam to Abraham: Before Gen 12 promises, after creation
- Abraham to Moses: Abraham promises given but no law yet
- Moses to David: Law is given but no king yet
- David to Christ: Law is given and there's a king
- Christ's birth to Pentecost: The Christ has come!
- Pentecost to the return of Christ: The Church is born!

How does the passage connect to Christ?

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me. (John 5:39)

Our 3 big applications from Class 1 still hold:

- Be Like this (or don't be like this): A good or bad example is given, and we are to imitate the good and reject the bad.
- Do this: A command is given and we are to obey it.
- Believe this: A doctrine or truth is taught, and we are to believe it.

Law

"Law" covers a lot of material in Exodus, almost all of Leviticus, a lot of Numbers, and basically all of Deuteronomy.

All OT law is contained in historical narrative. That pictures grace: We always get *what God did* before we get *what we must do*.

The Ten Commandments don't appear until Exodus 20 in our Bibles!

The key for Laws is to Figure out what kind of law it is!

Ceremonial Laws

Laws that relate to Old Testament ceremonies, sacrifices, and the priests.

These laws are basically fulfilled once and for all by Christ's sacrifice. Christ the great high priest offered once and for all the perfect sacrifice for sins that makes any additional sacrifice unnecessary—and even blasphemous!

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Cor 5:7)

Therefore, we offer no Passover lambs...ever!

Civil Laws

These laws relate to Israel being a sizable nation and not simply a group of families and clans.

A nation needs laws to govern how its citizens relate to each other.

These laws are significantly transformed with the people of God becoming the “church” and not exclusively a “nation.”

A helpful way to read these laws is to see that the moral part is still binding, but the specific policy is not.

Laws that speak of restitution for stealing, for example. Stealing is a moral issue and still binding (“You shall not steal”). But the policy of financial restitution can be adapted as wisdom dictates.

Moral Laws

These laws are still binding for the people of God.

They are often repeated in the New Testament. These laws relate to how we are to love God and love our neighbor.

Poetry

A lot of the Old Testament is actually poetry. We get this in the Wisdom Literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes) and most of the Prophets.

With poetry, meaning is conveyed often through metaphors and very concise phrases:

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps 23:1).

That’s a **“show me, don’t tell me”** way of teaching us. The metaphor of a “shepherd” dominates the first part of the Psalm and gives us a powerful word picture.

A common device with Hebrew poetry is called **parallelism**, two lines that are repeating the same idea with variation to develop the initial thought:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps 27:1)

This isn’t exact repetition, but the lines are related and help strengthen the encouragement not to fear.

With Hebrew poetry, especially in the Prophets, it's helpful to have some access to a study Bible. What typically gets us is all the references to people and places that are unknown to us.

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom Literature includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes.

A dominant issue in Wisdom Literature is given in the name, "Wisdom." **Wisdom is skill in right living according to the fear of the LORD.**

You never want to think it's simply "skill in living," as if it's about practical "best practices." It always has this idea as the foundation and goal and governing truth:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:7)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Prov 9:10)

There is no such thing as "wisdom" that is separate from "the fear of the LORD."

Here we remember what we said above about poetry.

A challenging aspect of Wisdom Literature is the way that it does so many things at the same time, especially in the Psalms.

The multifaceted glory of **the Psalms**:

- The Psalms are rightly called "Wisdom Literature," and you can hear that in places like Ps 111:10, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!"
- Psalms at times it gives authoritative and binding moral laws (Ps 4:4 cited in Eph 4:26 as a command to obey).
- At times it gives us words to express our grief, but at times it gives us foundational theology we need to understand (Ps 51:4, "Against you, you only, have I sinned"; Ps 110:1 and the Trinity).
- At times they give us history, but it's history with a sharp point—Ps 106 tells the history of Israel as God redeems, the people forget, God redeems, the people forget...
- The Psalms sometime speak prophetically about Christ and his redemption (Ps 2; 22).

Prophetic Literature

Here we're referring to the Major and Minor Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi).

These are written by men who God raised up during the era of the kings of Israel/Judah. They are like the conscience of the nation while the kings ruled the nation.

In the Prophets we get both **foretelling** and **forth-telling**.

Foretelling is "telling before," giving us what God is going to do in the future.

Forth-telling is where the prophet is "telling forth" what God is saying to his people right now, at the time of the prophecy. It's for us, too! But it was originally a word of encouragement or rebuke to that particular generation.

Foretelling is Isaiah 40–66. The foretelling speaks of Christ's sacrifice (Isa 53) and the new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17).

Forth-telling is found in Amos where there's a repeated rebuke "for three transgressions, and for four..." (Amos 1:1–2:4). At first he rebukes the nations surrounding Judah. But then he rebukes Judah in the same manner (2:4).

With the prophets we get a great new emphasis on the future Davidic King. The earthly fulfillments of kings haven't delivered. Even David and Solomon themselves didn't deliver. A new king is coming!

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jer 23:5)

Apocalyptic Literature

The Bible's own fantasy genre!

The word "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek *apocalupsis*, which means "revelation." That's why John's "Revelation" is sometimes called "the Apocalypse."

Apocalyptic literature is very symbolic and typically related to the future.

In our Bibles, parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation are apocalyptic.

This is the ultimate "show me, don't tell me" literature. We're often given word pictures instead of didactic material.

E.g., Jesus in Rev. 5:6 is "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes" (5:6).

“Lamb” refers to his redemptive and sacrificial work.

“Seven” is a number of perfection, connected to the seven days of creation. “Seven horns” means “all power.” “Seven eyes” means “all knowledge.”

Epistles

21 of the 27 New Testament books are “epistles”: Romans to Jude!

An “epistle” is a fancy way of saying, “letter.”

A letter is a personal communication sent by someone to someone (or groups).

Unique for NT epistles: *they're the only books in our Bible where the contents deal entirely with the post-Pentecost church.* This helps with applying them. They're for us in a very direct way.

One challenge with the epistles is their theological density. A lot is packed into each chapter and verse. It pays to read them slowly.

One help: Read the sentences, not the verses! Verse breaks are often awkward. Read the whole sentence and try to untangle all the phrases and clauses.

An example from 1 Peter 1:3b–5:

....According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

If you had to trim away all the extra phrases and clauses, what is the basic sentence here?

Conclusion

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16–17)