

What Type of Literature is This?

In a Preface to *Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis writes:

“The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them. The first thing the reader needs to know about *Paradise Lost* is what Milton meant it to be.”

The same could be said for the Word of God. Before ever launching into a study of a book in the Bible, the first thing a reader needs to know is what that book's author meant it to be. In other words, what kind of literature was he writing? What literary form did he employ?

You see, literary genre is crucial to interpretation. Suppose I randomly pick a text from the Scripture: "O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God" (Psalm 139:19). Or, "Whatever you devise against the Lord, He will make a complete end of it" (Nahum 1:9). Or, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus" (Luke 16:24). Or, "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven" (Revelation 4:1). Unless you know what types of literature those are taken from, you are in no position to determine their meaning.

BIBLICAL GENRES

In this chapter I want to give a brief introduction to six kinds of writing that appear in the Bible and how they influence our understanding. There are more, to be sure, as well as subsets of the ones I'm going to mention, and many of these overlap. But here are the major literary genres that God used to communicate His message.

EXPOSITION

An exposition is a straightforward argument or explanation of a body of objective truth. It is a form of writing that appeals primarily to the mind. The argument usually has a tight structure that moves from point to point in logical fashion.

Paul's letters are outstanding examples of the expositional form in Scripture. The book of Romans is a tightly reasoned explanation of the gospel. Paul argues like a lawyer presenting a case before a court, which is no surprise because we know that as a young man Paul had extensive rabbinical training, including the oratorical arts. For instance, he links his paragraphs and chapters together with transitional, connective words such as for, therefore, and, and but. He makes extensive use of the rhetorical question (for example, 2:17-21, 26; 3:1, 3, 5; 4:1, 3, 9). He uses long, elaborate sentences (for example, 1:28-32; 9:3-5). On the other hand, he also employs short, rapid-fire passages that buffet the mind (for example, 7:7-25; 12:9-21).

Expositional books are ideal if you're just getting started in Bible study. Their meaning lies close to the surface. They appeal to the average person's preference for logic, structure, and order. And their purposes are easy to grasp; they practically outline themselves. Yet they also make for exciting in-depth analysis because their truths are inexhaustible.

The key to understanding a work of exposition is to pay attention to its structure and the terms it employs. We'll look at an example from Romans when we get to chapter 37.

NARRATIVE AND BIOGRAPHY

Narrative means story. The Bible is full of stories, which is one reason it is so popular.

For example, Genesis relates the story of God's creation of the world, the story of the Flood, the story of the tower at Babel, and the story of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Exodus continues the story by

recounting Israel's departure from Egypt, led by Moses. Ruth tells the story of Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David.

In the New Testament, the four gospels tell the story of Jesus from four different points of view. One of them, Luke, continues the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles, as we have seen. Within the accounts of Jesus, we find stories that He told to His followers (more on that in a moment).

So the Bible is heavily composed of stories. That makes for interesting reading, but it also makes for interesting interpretation. What are we to make of the stories in the Bible? How do we determine their meaning and significance?

"There is no method except to be very intelligent," remarked T. S. Eliot. Perhaps, but let me suggest three things to pay attention to.

First, what is the plot? In other words, what movement is there in the story? This could be physical, as in the case of the Israelites moving across the Sinai Peninsula in Exodus; it could be spiritual, as in the case of Samson in Judges, or Jonah in the book of Jonah; it could also be relational, as in Ruth, or political, as in 1 and 2 Kings. The question is, what development is there in the story? What is different at the end of the book, and why?

Another thing to study is characterization. Who is in the cast of characters? How are they presented? What roles do they play? What decisions do they make? How do they relate to each other, and to God? What progress or regress do they make? Do they fail? If so, why? Why are they in the story? In what ways are they individuals, and in what ways are they representative of others? What do we like or dislike about them? What would we do in their place?

A third element to consider is, in what ways is this story true to life? Remember, that was one of the clues to look for under Observation. It's also a doorway to understanding. The stories of Scripture show us life as God wants us to see it. So we can ask: What questions does this story raise? What problems do the characters have to deal with?

What lessons do they learn or not learn? What things do they encounter that we should be sure to avoid? Or how do they deal with things in life that are unavoidable? What do they discover about God?

There is much more to the narratives in Scripture. But if you start by asking yourself these kinds of questions, you'll go a long way toward understanding what the stories are all about.

PARABLES

Closely related to narrative is the parable and its cousin, the allegory. A parable is a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle. Most of the parables in Scripture come from the teaching of Jesus. In fact, we can infer from Matthew's account that the parable may have been His preferred method of communication (Matthew 13:34).

It's easy to see why. Parables are simple, memorable, and entertaining. Most are rather easy to understand. They deal with everyday matters such as farming, fishing, travel, money, and human dynamics. Parables can have a powerful impact. They make use of basic ethical principles such as right and wrong (the sower and the three kinds of seed), love and compassion (the prodigal son, the good Samaritan), justice and mercy (the Pharisee and the tax collector).

POETRY

The Bible contains some of the finest lines of verse ever composed. Indeed, some have become icons in our culture: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1); "God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1); "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, KJV); "Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Matthew 6:9, KJV).

The distinctive feature of poetry is its appeal to the emotions, as well as the imagination. That's why the psalms are so popular. They express some of the deepest feelings, longings, rapture, and pain of the human heart.

But when you study biblical verse, make sure you understand the dynamics of Hebrew poetry. In the first place, most of the psalms were meant to be sung, not read. They were composed for worship, and many include prefatory notes on what kinds of instruments were to accompany them. So even though we no longer have the music to which they were sung, you should still listen for how they sound (which is true of all poetry).

One of the main features of Hebrew poetry is its extensive use of "parallelism." If you look through the psalms, for instance, you'll notice that the majority of the verses have two lines. The two lines work off of each other to communicate meaning. Sometimes the second line will reinforce what the first line says by repeating its thought. For instance, Psalm 103:15 says,

As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

Sometimes it will extend the thought by adding new information, as in Psalm 32:2:

How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!

And sometimes the second line will oppose the first with an alternative thought:

How blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust,
And has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood.
(Psalm 40:4)

Another key to appreciating Hebrew poetry is to recognize "hyperbole," extreme or exaggerated language that makes its point through overkill. Earlier I cited a line from Psalm 139. Here's the larger context:

O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. For they speak against Thee wickedly,
And thine enemies take Thy name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee? I hate them with the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies.
(vv. 19-22)

This is strange language to find in the Bible. What's going on here? The answer is to notice who David is talking about—"the wicked," people who have shed blood, spoken against God, taken His name in vain, (all violations of the Ten Commandments), and otherwise demonstrated that they hate the Lord. In becoming God's enemies they have become David's enemies. In a formal, ritualized way, he denounces them with the strongest language he can find. Here are some other interpretive questions to consider as you approach the poetry of the Bible: Who composed this material? Can you determine why? What is the central theme of the poem? What emotions does the verse convey, and what response does it produce? What questions does it ask? Which ones does it answer, and which does it leave unanswered? What does the poem say about God? About people? What images does the poet use to spark the imagination? Are there references to people, places, or events that you are unfamiliar with? If so, what can you find out about them elsewhere in Scripture or through secondary sources?

THE PROVERBS AND WISDOM LITERATURE

One of the richest quarries to mine in the biblical material is the broad category known as wisdom literature. In this genre, the writer assumes the role of a wizened veteran of life prepared to share his insights with a younger, inexperienced, but teachable reader.

The book of Proverbs obviously belongs to this category. A proverb is a short, poignant nugget of truth, typically practical, and often concerned with the consequences of a course of behavior. Like the poetry of the psalms that we saw above, proverbs make strategic use of parallelism, especially the pairing of opposites. For instance, Proverbs 15:27:

He who profits illicitly troubles his own house,
But he who hates bribes will live.

And Proverbs 20:3:

Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man
But any fool will quarrel.

The Proverbs come right to the point. Of all the biblical material, they are perhaps the easiest to understand, though sometimes the hardest to apply. If you need a "spiritual vitamin" to perk up your way of life, chow down on the Proverbs. It will be a feast for your soul.

PROPHECY AND APOCALYPTIC

The final and perhaps most challenging type of literature in the Bible is the prophetic. We tend to think of prophecy as a prediction for the future. And certainly the prophetic books look ahead. But a more striking feature is their tone of warning and judgment and the use of a formula to denote direct words from God: "Thus saith the Lord!"

The role of the prophet in Scripture was not to tell futures but to proclaim the words of the Lord; not to foretell but to "forth-tell," as someone has well put it. God raised up prophets in Israel when it became clear that the people were determined to resist Him. Their thankless task was to warn the nation of the dire consequences of continued disobedience, in hopes of sparking repentance and a return to the Lord.

In reading the prophets, it is critical that you re-create the situation. It is absolutely critical that you bombard the text with the six questions of selective Bible reading—who, what, where, when, why, and wherefore. Answering them will give you an invaluable data base for considering these additional issues: What is the main problem that the prophet is addressing? What images does he use to describe it? What is the response of the people? What does this prophet's message tell you about God? What happens after this prophet delivers his message? Why do you think God included this book in His Word ?

A special category of prophetic literature is apocalyptic, of which Revelation is the primary example. As the term implies, apocalyptic literature deals with cataclysmic events of global proportions having to do with the end of the world. The language of apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic, and the events unfold in quick, dazzling displays of light, noise, and power.

This makes the genre fertile ground for speculation and subjective interpretation. To avoid that, I suggest that when you study Revelation, pay close attention to the structure of the book. What movement is there from the opening to the close? What changes come about? Also, who is the material written to? What was the historical and cultural context in which the writer was working? How might that have influenced his method of communication? In terms of understanding the book's symbols, look carefully at the Old Testament for insight into what the author is describing. Rather than worry about a time line for future events, ask what implications this book would have had for Christians in the early church.