

Understanding Genres and Literary Forms

As mentioned previously, the Bible is composed of many individual books—a library of books. The types of books in the Bible vary one from the other. The writing style of each book is different and there can even be a variety of literary forms within one book. Therefore, understanding the type of literature that you are reading is essential to grasping the author's intention. All of the books of the Bible have something to say to us today about God's relationship with people. Understanding the genres, literary forms, and literary techniques used by the biblical authors will be helpful for interpreting the deeper meaning of the Scriptures.

The concept of genre and literary form is not new. Bookstores organize books according to their genres. In general, the term *genre* is used to describe categories of literature, art, or music. The first step in correctly interpreting literature is to know its genre. For example, fiction (invented narrative) must be read and understood differently than a computer manual (technical writing), or an autobiography (a written account of one's own life). Literary forms are categories of smaller units of text that can be used within a particular genre. For example, the newspaper genre contains many literary forms, including national news stories, editorials, obituaries, sports stories, and classified ads. Even if you do it unconsciously, you must recognize the literary form of the newspaper item that you are reading in order to understand it properly. This is also true of the biblical text, which contains many different genres and literary forms such as prose, poetry, myth, law codes, historical narrative, didactic (teaching) narrative, parable, and miracle stories. It is valuable to examine the major genres and literary forms that are used in the Bible.

Genres and Literary Forms Found in the Old Testament

Sacred Myths, Etiologies, and Legends

Most people have only one definition for *myth*, assuming that it is a story once thought to be true, but now proven to be false as in the example of the ancient belief that the earth was flat. Defining *myth* this way would then imply that this type of literature would never appear in the Bible because the Bible contains the truth revealed by God.

However, myth can be understood in more than one way. One of the most helpful definitions is provided by Margaret Nutting Ralph: "A myth is an imaginative story that uses symbols to speak about reality, but a reality that is beyond a person's comprehension. Societies compose myths to orient themselves in a moral and spiritual world" (*And God Said What?*, p. 29). In the opening eleven chapters of Genesis (also called the primeval history), the authors employ this notion of myth for understanding Creation—not how it happened but why and for what purpose. The authors use symbols and images that are comprehensible to their own people in their own time to explore a truth that is beyond human comprehension. There are actually two Creation accounts in the Book of Genesis. The first appears in Genesis 1:1—2:4; the second is Genesis 2:4—25. These two stories are very different and yet the meaning and message is the same. At the heart of both of these Creation myths is a sacred truth, namely, that God is the source of all Creation, that all Creation was made good and beautiful, that human beings are created in the "image and likeness" of God, and that God commanded humanity to be good stewards of God's Creation.

Etiology is a literary form that is employed regularly in Genesis. In their book *The Old Testament*, Stephen Harris and Robert Platzner define etiologies as narratives that are intended to explain the origin



or cause of some social custom, natural phenomenon, or religious ritual. However, etiologies should never be understood as historical or scientific facts but as narratives that explain the meaning or significance of something. For example, the tower of Babel story (Gn 11:1–9) explains the origin of languages, not historically, but symbolically. In the beginning, the biblical author writes, all peoples spoke the same language, but when they built the tower of Babel in an attempt to go up to God's dwelling place, God confused their languages so they would never again be able to work together to do such a thing. Thus this story of the origin of languages teaches a profound truth: God is God and humans are not. Likewise, God's resting on the seventh day of Creation (Gn 2:2) is intended to emphasize the significance of the Sabbath as a day of rest.

Etiologies are also used to explain the origin of names and places. For example, Genesis 19:30–38 recounts the narrative of Lot and his daughters. The daughters ply their father with wine so that they can lie with him. The daughters both conceive and give birth to sons, Moab and Ammon. Conceived by deception, these boys are the progenitors of the Moabites and the Ammonites who become the rivals of Israel. There are many other examples of etiologies found in the Old Testament.

Another narrative form that appears with frequency in the Hebrew Bible is legend. Legends are based in history. However, legends are different from history insofar as history involves the retelling of past events about which there is a written record or the details can otherwise be documented as factual, whereas legend does not. Many of the legends that are found in the Hebrew Bible are based on oral traditions and, for the most part, they could be described as folktales. These stories were passed on orally through many generations, so the telling and retelling also affect the nature of the stories. Legends are characterized by exaggeration, the use of magical details, etiologies, and the folk customs of the storytellers. Thus, legends are not necessarily factual. However, they were preserved because they convey important truths. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, legends are frequently a means for God's revelation.

The stories of Israel's ancient ancestors recounted in Genesis chapters 12 through 50 have all the characteristics of legends. They contain the stories of betrothal and hospitality, of the naming of sacred places, and they recall the origin of family tribes. More important, God is revealed in these stories. The relationship of God and God's People is established through a sacred Covenant, which is renewed with each of the great patriarchs and matriarchs—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and his wives and sons. These wonderful stories speak to us of God and set the stage for what is to follow in the Scriptures.

Hebrew Poetry

Examples of Hebrew poetry abound in the Old Testament. Scholars suggest up to one-third of the Hebrew Bible is written in poetic form, and some of the most beautiful examples are in the Book of Psalms. The Psalter (Book of Psalms) contains one hundred and fifty individual psalms composed over a span of approximately six centuries. They reflect the prayerful expressions of their authors— at times ecstatic praise and at other times the depths of despair. Scholars categorize the psalms into several types: hymns or songs of praise, psalms of thanksgiving, laments (both individual and communal), royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Although the psalms originated as Jewish prayers, Christians today regularly use them in their worship services as well.

In addition to the psalms, several other books of the Old Testament contain a great deal of poetry. They differ, however, in the fact that they do not share the same subject matter. For example, the psalms were used for temple worship, but the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) is an erotic love song about a woman searching for her beloved. Other books like Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach, often called wisdom literature, deal with universal human concerns like



the problem of suffering, how good people are rewarded, how the wicked are punished, and what it means to be wise or what it takes to be successful in God's eyes.

Like the poetry of other cultures of its day, Hebrew poetry has some distinctive characteristics that are different from our own poetry. Unlike our classic understandings of modern poetry that includes certain rhythms and rhyming sounds, Hebrew poetry uses thought parallelisms. Biblical scholars have identified three commonly used thought parallelisms: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic. Synonymous parallelism consists of a phrase or sentence followed by a phrase or sentence that has the same meaning, even in each of its parts. Here is an example:

Have pity on me, LORD, for I am weak;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are trembling (Ps 6:3).

Antithetical parallelism consists of a phrase or sentence followed by a phrase or sentence that is its opposite:

The lips of the wise disseminate knowledge,
but the heart of fools is perverted (Prv 15:7).

Finally, synthetic parallelism consists of two lines, the first of which is completed by the second. Here is an example of two synthetic parallelisms, one following the other:

A shield before me is God
who saves the honest heart.
God is a just judge,
who rebukes in anger every day (Ps 7:11–12).

(For more examples see the introduction to the Book of Proverbs.)

Prophetic Literature

There are fifteen prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. Christians include the Book of Daniel among the prophets, but in the Hebrew Bible it is included with the writings, since, for the most part, it is an apocalyptic work. In addition, several of the historical books (1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings) contain stories about some of the earliest prophets like Elijah and Elisha, as well as some of the forms most often associated with prophecy—the oracle and symbolic acts.

The books of the writing prophets, of which Amos is probably the earliest, are purported to contain the words of the prophet himself as he or his secretary had written them. Biblical scholars think that these oracles oracles—brief, poetic utterances that contain a message or pronouncement from God—first circulated as collections of sayings, which were later rearranged, edited, and expanded by the addition of narrative. After decades and centuries of this kind of literary work, the writings that we now call the prophetic books came into being.



The primary purpose of prophecy is to make known God's will for the people. Prophets serve as spokespersons for God or intermediaries between God and the people. God delivers the oracle to the prophet, sometimes in answer to a question or as a response to a request for a sign, but always on God's initiative alone. That is, the prophet does not control God's word. At times prophecies have a predictive character, but that is not their primary or exclusive purpose. Rather, their messages fall into two categories: oracles of judgment or oracles of salvation. In an oracle of judgment, the prophet brings accusation against God's People for failing to keep the Covenant. In an oracle of salvation, the prophet delivers God's message of consolation in times of trouble and God's promise to rescue them from their suffering.

Often oracles are obscure and difficult to interpret, because their meaning depends on the historical and social situation in which they were given. Oracles can be as brief as a word or sentence, or they can be quite long. They can also take the form of reported visions or dreams (Is chapter 6). They sometimes appear as songs of lament (Jer 14:1–10) or songs of love (Is chapter 40).

Some prophets used symbolic actions to reveal God's message. In the opening chapters of Ezekiel, the prophet engages in several eye-catching actions. He dramatically cuts his hair and beard, scattering some of the hair to the wind, some he throws into the fire, some is attacked by sword, and finally a remnant is sewn into the hem of his garment. The reader is told that the hair represents the fate of the people of Judah (see the introduction to Ezekiel). In a second striking display, Ezekiel is told to make a drawing of the city of Jerusalem on a clay brick, build siege walls against it, and arrange camps and battering rams around it, once again acting out the fate of Israel. Later the prophet carries all that he has in a sack as he crawls in and out of the city through a hole in the wall. Each of these actions is intended to tell the people what will happen to them if they fail to return to living faithfully the Covenant.

Other Literary Forms

The writers of Old Testament literature used a variety of literary forms to evoke a response from the reader and to express deep feelings. In addition to the ones we have already mentioned, we should add simile (comparisons using *like* or *as*), metaphor (comparisons that do not use *like* or *as*), parables (fictional narratives that involve a comparison and that contain some sort of surprising twist), allegory (objects or actions in a narrative that function as a symbol of something else), and personification (giving human attributes to an idea or abstract concept).

There are many more literary forms that appear with some regularity in the Old Testament: genealogies, narratives (fictional and didactic), sagas, and debates. While this is not a comprehensive list, it highlights the importance of considering the literary form when interpreting a passage from the Scriptures. If you read carefully, you will recognize when the biblical author is using one or more of these literary forms and you will be able to interpret the text accordingly. Then you will see the richness of this ancient literature and appreciate how it can be read with new eyes in every generation.

Genres and Literary Forms Found in the New Testament

The Gospels

The New Testament also contains a variety of genres and literary forms. The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represent a unique literary genre whose origin is unknown. Although it



has some superficial similarities with the biography and the history, the Gospel genre is quite different. The Gospel is historical but the Gospel writer was not intending to write a history. Some scholars think that the *gospel*—the term means “good news”—was developed by the early Christian community to proclaim faith in Jesus Christ by telling the story of his life, death, and Resurrection, and how Jesus’ life and ministry had affected theirs. The Gospels as we know them evolved in stages over several decades. Beginning with oral traditions, the stories of Jesus were gathered together, written down, and eventually arranged and edited into the Gospels we have today. The Gospels in their final form contain a variety of literary forms, some of which will be explored here.

Parables and Allegories

One literary form that appears frequently in the Gospels, especially in Matthew and Mark, is the parable. A parable is a fictional narrative (story) that functions like an extended simile or metaphor. Jesus’ parables often begin, “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” (e.g., Mt 13:31). Since parables are essentially riddles, the story also must include an unexpected twist of events. This surprise ending is meant to bring the listener to a moment of discovery, but sometimes it is difficult for us to appreciate the riddle because we do not understand the cultural world in which the parable was originally told. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32), the graciousness of the father is shocking. This is a man who apparently had wealth and great status in his community, and here he is waiting for and even running after his wayward son who had earlier told him that he was as good as dead in his eyes because he asked for his inheritance while his father was still living. The son had shamed his father by asking for his inheritance, and then the father shamed himself by receiving back his son in such a generous way. Jesus used parables like this one as a very effective means of teaching.

On occasion parables can be interpreted as allegories. Allegories are stories with deeper levels of meaning, in which every character or event is a symbol for something else. Among the Gospel parables, the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3–9; Mk 4:3–9; Lk 8:5–8) is a good example of an allegory. After Jesus tells the parable to the disciples, the narrator of the Gospel explains it to his disciples, demonstrating its allegorical nature. The seed that is sown is the word of God. The places where the seed falls represent the hearts of believers and nonbelievers. One who has faith will see the true meaning of this story. Both parables and allegories are powerful teaching tools that Jesus uses effectively in his ministry. They invite us to deeper faith.

The Letters

The New Testament contains twenty-one letters. Thirteen of them are attributed to Paul. Of those thirteen, seven are considered to be authentic letters of Paul (Pauline). The others were written anonymously, but attributed to Paul as a way of extending his memory to later generations of Christians (Deutero-Pauline). Still others are attributed to various apostles and leaders of the early Church, including Peter, James, Jude, and John. The letter genre follows a basic stylistic pattern that has four elements: the opening formula, the thanksgiving, the body of the letter, and the closing. This letter-writing format is not unique to the New Testament. Rather, it was used by Jews, Greeks, and Romans for all types of written communication.

In the opening formula of a letter, the letter writer first identifies himself, and then the intended recipients, followed by a blessing. The thanksgiving section is next. In it, the letter writer comments on his relationship to the recipients as a way of establishing rapport, and he also introduces the themes of the letter. The body of the letter contains the letter writer’s message. It may contain a teaching, answers to



the recipients' questions, or even ethical exhortations. The conclusion of these letters contains personal greetings, travel instructions, and a blessing.

Most of the New Testament letters were intended for the entire congregation, to be read publicly when the community was gathered together. However, one letter, the Letter to Philemon, has as its primary addressee an individual within a community. Some letters are considered to be circular letters, because the letter writer expected that they be copied and shared with other church communities. Our closest parallel today would be bishops' pastoral letters that are circulated within a particular diocese or among dioceses for the benefit of all who wish to read them.

Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic (derived from the Greek word meaning "revelation") literature was rather common in the third century BC through the second century AD. In general, this type of literature involves the revelation of secrets of the cosmos (literally, "the world"), including the workings of the heavenly bodies, the fixing of the calendar, the names and activities of angelic beings, and the places of reward and punishment. They also include secrets about the future like political and historical events, the destiny of God's people, and so on. Sometimes the seer is allowed to journey to heavenly locations. In those cases, the apocalypse also describes the details of the heavenly journey. Most apocalypses also include a command to the seer to seal the written account of the visions for some future time.

Because of its link to the end-times, apocalyptic literature is frequently referred to as "crisis literature," because it generally appears in the context of historical, political, or religious turmoil. However, modern readers sometimes mistakenly interpret the Book of Revelation as a roadmap or itinerary of the end-times. In fact, although much of the text is written in future tense, the historical author intended it to be a critique of situations in his own day. In particular, it addresses the problem of evil in the world by asserting that God is all-powerful and just and that God will indeed reward the righteous and punish the wicked. It's just a matter of time!

(The quotation labeled *And God Said What?* is from *And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms*, revised edition, by Margaret Nutting Ralph (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), page 29. Copyright © 1986, 2003 by Dr. Margaret Ralph.)

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