

**Core Seminar**

**How to Study the Bible**

**Class 4: The Bible’s Genres**

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**Introduction**

Last week we considered some principles or “lenses” that help us interpret the OT and the NT. ***Can anyone name some of the lenses we talked about? (Answer: Context, Canon, Covenant, Character of Christ, Christ)***

This week, we’ll be looking at the anatomy of the bible, so we need to think a bit about genre. ***Can anyone define “genre?”***

“Genre is a way of classifying something according to its type or style rather than its specific content or storyline.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Biblical genres are normally identified by examining a book’s style, structure, form, tone, context, and literary techniques. In the verse on the front of your handout, Luke 24:44, Jesus himself points out three genres: Poetry (Psalms), Prophecy, Historical Narrative (Moses)—and we find him doing so in another genre of writing: A gospel, in this example, the one written by Luke.

***What are some problems we might run into if we don’t consider genre as we read our bibles?***

Understanding genres is important because they impact our study of Scripture. Before we ever get into the actual text of a biblical passage, we need to understand what literary genre the text is in so that we can properly observe, interpret, and apply that text.

Today, we’re going to fly at a high altitude as we look at this, so we won’t be able to explain the nuances of each genre. We’ll look through some passages of Scripture, but I want to encourage you to dive into them on your own time.

**But let’s move on to Point I on the front of your handout: What Are Biblical Genres?**

The genres we find in the bible are typical of the genres found in literature from biblical times. For example apocalyptic literature, like in the book of Revelation, seems strange to us now, but it was normal in biblical times. On the front of your handout is a chart breaking down the genres of the bible’s books. Of course, even though most books are primarily one genre, several books contain multiple genres.

| Biblical Genres | |
| --- | --- |
| Genre | Book |
| **Historical/Law Narrative** | Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah |
| **Wisdom** | Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes |
| **Poetry** | Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations |
| **Prophecy** | Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi |
| **Apocalyptic** | Daniel, Revelation of John |
| **Gospel** | Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts |
| **Epistle** | Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, I, II and III John, Jude |

Now, it’s important to note that the biblical authors themselves understood their writings to fall into certain genres. Sometimes the biblical authors will even tell us what type of genre they’re writing. What’s more, it’s clear that some of the biblical authors deliberately constructed their writings to mirror literary forms that were present around them. For example, the Ten Commandments reflect the structure of treaties that were often used by Near Eastern kings in the same time period.

**Many Genres, One Storyline**

We also have to remember that the same Holy Spirit, who is God, inspired the Bible. That means that even though there’s a diversity of genres, there is a single, unified storyline. This makes the Bible an anthology. It has multiple authors (about 3 dozen human authors), diverse genres, yet it’s comprehensive and cohesive. It’s many stories that tell one story. ***Any questions?***

**Narratives & Histories**

As we walk through these notice how we spot the genre. One would think that a religious text would be all about dogma and rules. Yet a substantial part of the Bible is history. Why is that? Because the Christian faith is all about things that happened in real life. In fact, if specific historical events didn’t happen, the whole thing falls apart. Christianity isn’t simply a philosophy; it is a faith based on history. So we believe that Jesus was a real man in time and space. Even though he was not limited by those realities, he did live on earth at a certain time. Jesus was born, he lived, he died, and he was resurrected and all of these things are historical facts. If any of these facts were found to be untrue, the Christian religion would no longer be valid. Paul says this about the fact of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

Also, the Bible is a historical record of God’s dealing with His people. The historical record revolves around three events in history: (1) the Exodus from Egypt (2) the Exile in Babylon and (3) the inauguration of the church through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But beyond simply telling us *what* happened, God tells us **why** it happened—the event’s importance to the grand storyline of redemption history. So how should we read and profit from narrative history in the Bible?

Biblical histories and narratives are rich sources of study that display God’s faithfulness to his people and his unchanging nature. This genre, however, is not intended to record and explain every detail of events; nor does it present events simply for us to mimic the characters (frequently it’s just the opposite). Instead, historical narrative provides all that is necessary to study and understand that great grand narrative of Scripture: God saving his people and judging his enemies through Jesus Christ.

With that said, let’s move on to talk about the genre of:

**Wisdom and Poetic Writings** (point III on handout)

Why are we looking at these two things together?

The poetic books of the bible are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. They all largely have elements of poetic structure, and contain much in the way of what we call wisdom literature, so they’re a mix of both. But we should ask ourselves: What is “wisdom literature?”

1. **What is Wisdom Literature?**

Wisdom literature is essentially instructions for successful living; or reflections upon the reality of human existence. Broadly speaking, we see a two types of wisdom literature in the bible:

1. **Proverbial wisdom** - short, pithy sayings that state rules for personal happiness and welfare (*e.g*. Proverbs, see 15:1 for specific example).
2. **Speculative wisdom** - monologues (*e.g*. Ecclesiastes, see 1:16-17 for specific example) or dialogues (*e.g*. Job, see 15:1-6; 16:1-5 for specific example) which attempt to delve into such problems as the meaning of existence and the relationship between God and man.

The wisdom literature contains both the moral substance of true wisdom (e.g. Proverbs) and the intellectual explorations of wise men seeking to understand the fundamental problems of human existence (e.g. Job, Eccl).

**The starting point for an understanding of OT wisdom literature is Proverbs**. The wisdom of Proverbs concerns morality—the knowledge of how to live properly. It has a theological foundation—the starting point, as for all wisdom, which is the reverence of God. The book details the fundamentals of morality, the virtues of integrity, discipline, justice, common sense, and the like, and to show by way of contrast the failure in life that awaits the fool. The book is strongly didactic–that is, it’s geared heavily toward moral instruction. Even how it’s designed lends itself to being more easily memorized than other passages of Scripture.

With Proverbs as your starting point for wisdom literature, you begin to complement it with other wisdom books that offer the same truths, but from different perspectives.

Like the booster rockets that sit on a rocket ship, and work together with the main thruster to get it into orbit, so the books of Ecclesiastes and Job serve the central book of Proverbs.

**Ecclesiastes tests the wisdom claims of Proverbs through the lens of skepticism.** Here you have King Solomon, reflecting the wisdom of a man who has lived long and seen the world from all perspectives. He describes the grief and sadness of the world from the perspective of an observer—noticing that anything lived in this life apart from God is vanity—work, knowledge, power, pleasure.

**Job, on the other hand, tests the wisdom claims of Proverbs through his own awful suffering.** His is a lived experience—Job grasps the problems from within, from the perspective of the sufferer.

***Any Questions about wisdom literature?***

1. **What is Poetic Literature?**

Much of the OT is poetic in spirit and structure—we often find passages of elevated poetry, and the use of powerful imagery. One way in which you can quickly tell if Scripture is poetic is by noticing an overlooked feature in our English bibles. If you look at the book of Psalms, for example, you will see that the typeface and spacing is different to the rest of the books of the bible—as a result, you see wider margins. This formatting is deliberate—the parallel lines help us to see the flow of the text, especially since Hebrew poetry is unlike English poetry in significant ways.

**Main Features of Poetic Literature**

[In this section, encourage folks to follow through in their bibles]

The Hebrew language was an ideal instrument for expressing poetic speech. Its simplicity of form allowed for a combined intensity of feeling and pictorial power, and allowed great play of imagination. Some of the features we see are:

1. **Figures, metaphors, and hyperboles are extremely common** (e.g. Psalm 91)
2. **The normal unit of Hebrew verse is the couplet of two (or more) parallel lines**.

Psalm 27:1

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?

**III. On the other hand, Hebrew poetry is rhythmical—one of its distinguishing features**.

Rhythm in Hebrew poetry, however, is not confined to the balance of accent or beat in a line. The meaning of the words and their position in the line are significant—a feature called parallelism.There are three basic types of parallelism:

1. ***synonymous parallelism***, where the thought expressed in the first part of the verse is repeated in the second part, in different but equivalent terms.

The heavens declare the glory of God,

and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Ps 19:1

1. ***antithetic parallelism***, where the thought in the first part of the verse is contrasted with its opposite in the second.

The light of the righteous rejoices,

but the lamp of the wicked will be put out. Prv 13:9

1. ***synthetic parallelism***, where the idea expressed in the first line of a verse is developed and completed in the following lines.

**5**I lay down and slept;

I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.

**6**I will not be afraid of many thousands of people

who have set themselves against me all around. Ps 3:5, 6

**Why poetry?**

Poetry conveys greater meaning beyond simple facts. Consider the information in the following statement: Jesus Christ, who never sinned; died for sinners, to pay the penalty they deserved. That’s a true statement.

Contrast that statement with Is 53:5:

**5** But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.

It’s clear my first sentence doesn’t come close to the perfect Word of God, but do you see the point? The imagery conveys feeling, something tangible, something vivid and haunting—something worth remembering.

A case in point is the Psalms—the psalms were meant to be used for the purpose of worship. They were to be sung with musical accompaniment. Many are private prayers, while others were composed for public worship, especially hymns of thanksgiving sung at the tabernacle or temple.

It’s in the Psalter that the soaring spirit of Hebrew poetry rises to a level never achieved by Israel’s pagan neighbors; for the Hebrew worshiped God in spirit and in truth, and as he did so he was giving expression to a personal experience of the living God in his soul. ***Any questions before we move on to our next set of genres?***

Alright, let’s continue on to our next four genres to look at:

* + The Gospels and Acts
  + The Epistles
  + The Prophetic Writings
  + Apocalyptic Literature

We’ll go quickly through the gospels, acts, and the epistles and we’ll spend most of our time on Prophecy and the Apocalyptic genres.

1. **The Gospels (and Acts)**

All four Gospels and Acts together provides a comprehensive understanding of Jesus, His life, and the early church. Yet each of these books were originally written to stand on its own as independent and sufficient accounts of Jesus and his followers. Though we can’t dive into each book, let me make a few overall comments about all of them.

A. *Genre?*  The Gospels and Acts are slightly different genres.

*Bios*—The Gospels mirror a genre from the ancient world called *bios,* an ancient biography. Unlike modern biographies that trace physical, psychological, and personal development, *ancient biographies* focused on *key events* in a person’s life and his teaching.

*Legitimization—*Acts, however, is an example of the *legitimization* genre, a document intended to defend and bring legitimacy to the early church and its development.

*B. Chronology?—*While the Gospels are historical accounts, they are not always arranged chronologically. Some are organized topically. For example, Mark tells of five controversies in a row (2:1-3:6) that are spread out between chapters 8-12 in Matthew. This is the way bios were often written at that time. If we assume the gospels are written like 21st century histories, we will likely be confused.

*C. Harmony—*While each of the Gospels offer varying points of view, they all make the same point, that Jesus is the promised Messiah who died for our sins. The Gospels are also typically divided into two groups. Does anyone know what these groups?

* *Synoptics* (overlap at many places)—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three tell the story of Jesus “from the ground up,” gradually revealing the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah.
* *John*—John, however, tells the story “from heaven down.”
  + How does John begin his Gospel? *In the beginning was the Word—*He directly and explicitly presents the pre-incarnate Word becoming flesh!
  + John differs from the Synoptics because it approaches the question of who Jesus is from a different point of view.

*Acts*—The book of Acts literally picks up where the Gospels leave off and records how this rag-tag group of disciples becomes the Christian Church. Acts is the story of the Gospel penetrating the Roman Empire, despite stiff opposition, through the boldness of witnesses drawing on God’s Spirit. In Acts, we find *missionary speeches:* a call to believe the gospel and *defense speeches:* explanations of the Christian faith.

So those are some general statements about all five of these books. In the 13-week version of this class, we talk more about how these books are different, but we need to move on to studying the Epistles.

**II. Epistles**

Epistles deal with established churches and their issues. What is an Epistle? Just another word for “letter.” Understanding *how* to study these letters is significant since they constitute 21 out of the 27 NT books! Paul wrote 13, John wrote 3, Peter wrote 2 and James and Jude (Jesus’ brothers) each wrote 1.

Epistles are generally structured in three parts: an opening, a body, and a closing. The parts vary widely depending on which letter we’re looking at, so what we need to do is carefully trace the flow of thought in each individual letter

**A. Studying Epistles:**

The key thing about the epistles is that they were all written *after* Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven. So they are looking back on all of these events as completed—which no other books in the Bible save Revelation can do. As a result, they’ve played a major role in the formation of Christian Theology throughout Church History. They’re also crucial to our understanding of the OT. By studying OT allusions/citations in the Epistles, we come to see how God fulfills his OT promises in Christ!

OK. So how do we interpret them? Well, for the most part interpretation is fairly straightforward since they’re written from the same side of Jesus’ earthly life as we live in. The one challenge you might face is that they were all written in a specific context that we’re not always privy to. For example, 1 Corinthians seems to be written in response to a letter Paul received from the church in Corinth. But we don’t have that letter! Sometimes, reading these letters feels a bit like constructing a full conversation by listening to just one part of it. So there’s two things to keep in mind when interpreting an epistle:

* Some understanding of context is useful in interpreting these letters. In our next class, we’ll talk about tools you can use to help determine that context, things like commentaries. For now, remember that *the opening of the letter often helps set the context.*
* At the same time, these letters speak with amazing power right to *our* context without much need for interpretation. It’s as if God caused them to be written knowing we’d be reading them today! (Which of course, he did.)

III. **Prophetic** **and Apocalyptic Literature** (part VI on handout)

When people think of “prophecy,”they tend to think of *foretelling* the future. But that’s actually not the bulk of prophesy in the Bible. Instead, prophecy begins with *forthtelling,* being forthright with God’s people.

Prophets function to shine a light on Israel’s disobedience, and highlight how their sins are against God’s law, and *in some cases* tell how their sins were predicted by previous prophecies. In other words, the prophets are the *prosecutors* of God’s covenant.

And we do ourselves a disservice by ignoring the one book of the bible that all the prophets depend upon – Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, Israel are told about the blessings that come with keeping God’s Law, and the curses that come with breaking it. When the prophets declare God’s judgment upon Israel for their idolatry and adultery, they’re essentially reprising the curses from Deuteronomy.

But then, the prophets DO turn to *foretelling* the future, looking forward and promising one of either salvation or judgment.

Admittedly, prophecy can be a difficult genre to read, given its numerous literary forms and writing styles. Also, their predictions can be difficult because they have multiple levels of fulfillment (e.g., Isaiah 7’s virgin giving birth seemed to be fulfilled short term in Isaiah’s fiancé eventually having a child, but we also know that it is fulfilled in the virgin Mary bearing Jesus.) In this sense, prophecies are like a mountain range—what looks like one range, will actually have several mountains behind it!

In your handout, I’ve included 8 tips for interpreting OT prophecy; I’m not going to go over them now for the sake of time, and I’ve mentioned some already. But I did want you to have some of those principles. That said, ***are there any questions about this before we move on to apocalyptic literature?***

* 1. **Interpreting** **Apocalyptic Literature**

While portions of Daniel are apocalyptic, John’s Revelation is by far the best example of this genre. Revelation is probably subject to more commentary, speculation, and interpretation than any other book of the Bible. In this book we find everything from angels to the lake of fire and dragons.

What are we to make of these things?

Some fearfully read Revelation as the book where God finally unleashes his wrath on mankind, while others simply avoid it because it’s too confusing or just not important enough to be deliberately studied—but Revelation is God’s word, which is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

That’s important for us to remember given that Revelation can quickly become a mere matter of debate about the role of ethnic Israel or the millennium; those matters can be helpful to look into, and if you would like more information on those topics, we have a whole class on Revelation in both the NT overview class and in the Systematic Theology class on the end times. But Revelation has greater themes that can encourage any believer. If we keep three tips in mind, I think we’ll better grasp those themes. So here are three tips to help you understand Revelation:

1. **Understand** **background**

By the time John writes Revelation, the gospel has been preached throughout the whole Asian province, as well as much of the Roman Empire! Many have believed and are now Christians.

They all recall what Jesus promised right before he ascended—that he would return and establish his kingdom! The church has been LOOKING and LONGING ever since for the consummation of God’s plan of salvation.

But, in the view of many, “nothing was happening.” As a result, wickedness began to grow in the church and persecution was on the rise. Some conformed to the ways of the world. And some began questioning God’s ability to make good on his promises. The church was asking questions like:

Does God really care about us?

Can he do anything about our suffering?

Will he do anything about it?

This is the context into which John writes Revelation! So if we’re trying to understand suffering or God’s sovereignty, this is a wonderful book to delve into; we need not fear it or mystify it.

1. **Understand genre (those present and not present**)

This book spans at least 3 genres:

Apocalyptic

Prophetic

Epistle/Letter

*Apocalypse* is Greek for “to unveil.” Revelation was not written to confuse, but to serve as a clear unveiling of God’s plan to bring judgment on the wicked and to bring the faithful in Christ into His eternal kingdom.

Also, apocalyptic literature functions as **prophetic,** speaking of what will happen in the future. While OT prophecies tend to foretell using realistic and literal language, apocalyptic literature tends to use *highly* symbolic language to foretell future events. So we need to be careful to read this book according to its genre, not interpreting symbolic language too literally. This is *not* history. Many read it as if it were tomorrow’s newspaper printed in advance. But when you do that, you risk taking conclusions out of it that God never intended.

1. **Understand** **purpose**

Finally, Revelation is also an Epistle, written to specific congregations (see Rev. 1:10-11), so we need to understand its purpose. John’s letter was meant to be distributed to 7 specific churches, addressing the particular problems of those churches. It’s not an abstract treatment of the end times, but a practical book for local churches facing persecution. Its message is that we should understand our present trials, not in light of this earth, but in light of heaven.

Keeping these things in mind helps us to be careful readers, not only of Revelation, but of the Bible. Next week we will look at specific interpretive tools that will help our interpretation. For now, we’ve run out of time, so let’s pray to close our time together.

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