Biblical Literary Genres

I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to week 4 of How to Study and Teach the Bible. The plan for this morning was originally to talk about two separate issues—biblical genres and common errors people make when interpreting the Bible—but I don’t think we’re going to have time to talk about errors. We’ve touched on a number of them as we’ve gone along anyway. Next week, Andy is going to talk about how to actually put together a lesson or a Bible study.

II. WHAT IS A GENRE?

Let’s begin by asking some basic questions. **What do we mean by genre?** Genres are kinds of literature. Many years ago, before Netflix, people used to go to Blockbuster to rent movies. My family used to rent VHS tapes. You walk into a Blockbuster and the movies are arranged by genre. There are sections for action, comedy, drama, horror, and so on. That’s kind of what we mean by genre. If you pick up an action movie, you know what to expect. Literary genres are the same, just more complex. For instance, many literary genres don’t tell stories. They do other things.

Here is my definition: A genre is a grouping of similar literary works based on both structure and content (subject matter, attitude, tone, etc.).

So you’ll notice that there are two aspects to this definition—external form and internal content. Before we move into biblical genres, let’s look at a modern literary genre to illustrate this. Let’s take the genre of fantasy. So we could include Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, The Chronicles of Narnia, Star Wars, and so on. **What are the external or structural distinctive features of fantasy literature?** These are typically narratives. They often start off by introducing unexpected heroes. They build to a climactic showdown.

**What kind of content do you expect to see in fantasy?** Clash between good and evil. Supernatural elements.
III. MAJOR BIBLICAL GENRES

The Bible is most definitely a work of literature, but it is a mix of a lot of different genres. Moreover, these are genres that would have been more familiar to ancient readers than they are to us. We intuitively know how to think about modern genres like fantasy, because we have been around them all our lives. But ancient genres need a little bit more work.

Let’s look at six different biblical genres. As we look, we want to think about how these structural and content markers.

1. **Narrative.** First, we’ll start with narrative. Narratives are stories and the Bible is full of them. **What are some examples of biblical narrative?** Much of the Pentateuch. The historical books in the OT. The Gospels and Acts in the New Testament.

So, remember our definition of genres. **What are the external/structural characteristics of biblical narratives?**

**What kinds of content do we normally see in biblical narratives?**

So let me make several points about narrative in the Bible.

- **Biblical narratives are history.** This one probably sounds pretty obvious, but we need to be reminded of the fact. There are many Christians who believe the Bible to be true history, but then read it and teach it as if it were something totally ahistorical. **What are some ways people do that?** 1) We often read the stories in the Bible like inspirational fiction, like the kinds of stories you would find in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*. 2) We often read the Bible as if it were a series of morality stories. Look what happened to Solomon when he took all those wives … **Why does it matter that we remember that these things actually happened?** Our hope of salvation rests on the truthfulness of biblical narratives. Jesus was a real man who really died and rose from the dead. More than that, he was the one who fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. We need to remember those facts.
• **Biblical narratives are theology.** So biblical narratives relate true facts about history, but they are doing more than that. The authors of biblical narratives like Genesis or Acts aren’t just giving us the facts in order. They are writing history in order to make a theological point.

Turn with me to Matthew 1. **Would someone read Matthew 1:1 aloud?**

*ESV Matthew 1:1 ¶* The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

We won’t read it all, but the first sixteen verses of Matthew are genealogy. Way to hook your readers Matthew! Can you imagine a dryer, more straightforward presentation of historical facts? Yet, this pure theology. **What theological point is Matthew making here?**

He is showing that Jesus is the long awaited king in the line of David, the Messiah, and that he is the one in Abraham’s line who would bring blessing to the whole earth (Gen. 22:18). Matthew is using history to make a theological point.

Turn with me to John 20. This is even more straightforward. **Would someone read John 20:30-31?**

*John 20:30-31 ¶* Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

**So what does this tell us about the theological purpose of John’s gospel?** It’s meant to convince us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It is history or narrative with a theological point. That is how all biblical narrative works.

• **Biblical narratives are selective.** That quote from John’s gospel brings us to our next point—biblical narratives are selective. John left out the vast majority of the things Jesus said or did. The authors of the Bible are not pretending to give a comprehensive history of anything. You’ll notice that biblical narratives tend to focus on key individuals
like Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul. So biblical narratives tell a big story by focusing on the smaller story of individual men and women. But they don’t even give us full details of any of those people. Biblical authors tell us just enough to make their point.

- **Biblical narratives are ancient history.** What I mean is this—biblical authors used conventions of ancient writing which wouldn’t be allowed in a history class today. They used loose quotations and round numbers. They aren’t always clear on the sequence of events or times things happened. They never once used a footnote. We can’t hold ancient writers to modern conventions of writing.

So if you are studying a narrative part of the Bible, what should you look for? You should look for the theology of the text. Why did the author include this and not something else? What point is he making?

Any questions about narrative?

2. **Poetry.** A large portion of the Bible—in particular the Old Testament—is poetry. The Psalms and the Song of Solomon are examples. Even some narrative books contain occasional songs or poems.

There is a lot we could say about poetry, but I want to focus on one literary device that is used everywhere in poetry—parallelism. **What is parallelism?** It is the pairing of two parallel elements. Hebrew poetry doesn’t use rhyme like English poetry, but it uses parallelism constantly. Let me show you what I mean by parallelism. Turn to Psalm 2. This is one of the great messianic psalms. **Would someone read Psalm 2 aloud?**

**Psalm 2:1-12** **ESV** Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” 7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
What examples of parallelism do you see in this Psalm? Virtually every verse is an example. The psalmist uses parallelism to do a lot of things.

v.10 -- "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth." There is a double, parallel command given to these kings. What is the parallelism doing here? The psalmist basically says the same thing twice. This adds emphasis and a poetic weight. The meaning is basically the same.

v. 1— “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” What is the parallelism doing here? There is added meaning. The first part tells us that the nations are raging against God’s rule; the second part goes on and tells us that their raging is vain. God will have his victory.

If you’re studying or teaching from biblical poetry, you should pay attention to the structure of the poem. Look at the parallelism. Ask how it is being used.

Any questions about poetry?

3. Wisdom. This is a genre of literature we don’t have much of anymore, but there was lots of it in the ancient world. The Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are wisdom books. What are wisdom books meant to do? They are immensely practical books meant to help us live well in the world. Wisdom literature comes in lots of forms—stories, parables, confessions, and so on.

- Context is often very important in wisdom literature. Think about the book of Job. Job is talking with his friends and they take turns giving very long speeches. At the end of it all, God rebukes Job’s friends and praises Job. You need to be careful to remember that lots of the things Job says are wrong. In the same way, parts of Ecclesiastes are difficult to understand. But the last few verses in Ecclesiastes put everything into context: Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether
good or evil. We have to read the whole book in light of those concluding comments.

- Wisdom literature often gives general teachings. We’ve already talked about this a bit in previous weeks. Not everything in the book of Proverbs can be taken as an ironclad promise or absolute command. Wisdom gives us a lot of general teachings to live by. So let’s take Proverbs 3:9-10. Would someone read Proverbs 3:7-10?

Proverbs 3:7-10  

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.  
It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.  
Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Notice the parallelism. This is poetry and wisdom literature at the same time. But notice there are two statements. First, be humble and fear the Lord, and it will heal you. Second, honor God with your money and you will prosper. What does these statements mean? How are we supposed to take them? These are generally true statements that should guide us as we go through life. Proverbs is not teaching that Christians will always be healed if they are faithful. The Bible nowhere teaches that. In fact, lots of biblical saints suffered physically. Proverbs isn’t teaching that you’ll get rich if you just give some of your money to God. But it is generally true that a life of obedience to God, humility, and generosity leads to blessings in this life. So let these be guidelines for life.

How would you teach wisdom literature to others? The focus is on application.

4. Prophecy. A large portion of our Old Testament are books written by prophets. Who were the prophets? Prophets were spokesmen for God. They received a message from God and then communicated it to the people. Sometimes the prophets got these messages in dreams or visions. In the Old Testament, they functioned mainly to call Israel to repent and return to God. Most prophecy is grim stuff—telling God’s judgment
because of spiritual infidelity. There are two key aspects to biblical prophecy that we need to understand.

- Foretelling. This is what everyone thinks about when they think about prophecy—predicting the future. That’s what prophets do, right? Well, there are certainly lots of examples of this kind of prophecy in Scripture. Perhaps the most famous prophecy in all of Scripture is Isaiah 53; there, Isaiah foretells the sufferings of Christ. We could give hundreds of other examples.

- Forthtelling. That being said, foretelling is not the main point of the prophetic books. The main point is forthtelling. In other words, the prophets were speaking forth God’s truth to the people of their own day. By and large, the message of the prophets was, “Repent and turn back to your covenant with God, because the Lord is bringing judgment.”

Why do we need to keep this distinction in mind? What is wrong with reading the prophetic books as a series of predictions about the future? We miss the intent of the authors. That is the main thing we’re trying to get at when we read the Bible. Now, interwoven with the forthtelling is a great deal of foretelling. We don’t want to minimize the fact that many prophecies are fulfilled in the future.

Many people are tempted to read the prophetic parts of Scripture as detailed blueprints for all of human history. They’re not. I don’t think that very much prophecy deals with current events. Prophecy shows us God’s wrath toward sin and his willingness to be merciful (that is the forthtelling) and it points us ahead to Christ (that is the foretelling). We should let the text speak for itself.

Any questions about the genre of prophecy?

5. Apocalyptic. This is the genre of Scripture that is most foreign to modern readers. The name comes from the Greek word “to reveal.” Revelation is apocalyptic literature, as are parts of Daniel, 2 Thessalonians, Matthew, and a few others.
Apocalyptic literature is a kind of drawing back of the veil to let us see the great spiritual conflict which is generally invisible to us. It allows us to see the true meaning and destination of history.

**What are some of the characteristics of this kind of literature that jumps out at you?** Let me list a few of the characteristics common to much apocalyptic literature. 1) A prophet who sees a vision. 2) Revelation brought by an angel. 3) Strange symbolism and numbers. 4) Message of judgment on the present age. 5) Expectation of future salvation.

So let’s look briefly at one example of this kind of text. In Daniel 7, Daniel receives a vision of four beasts. **Go ahead and turn there.**

Daniel 7:1-3  
¶ In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter.  

Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.  

And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

We won’t read the whole thing now. But notice the features of apocalyptic we’ve already talked about. A prophet sees a vision. Here there is no angel mentioned, although in 7:16 Daniel asks a bystander to explain it to him. That is likely an angel. There is this weird symbolism of these terrifying beasts which represent four great empires. These empires will all be destroyed in turn, so there is a message of judgment on the present age. And there is a future salvation—in verse 13, one like a son of man who will come and establish a kingdom of peace. So that’s an example of this kind of literature.

**What are the common mistakes you see people making as they interpret these texts?** This is probably the genre of Scripture that is most abused and misunderstood. If you hear someone saying something really crazy about the Bible on the radio, there is a good chance it has to do with his understanding of one of these apocalyptic texts. And that isn’t surprising, as these are the hardest texts in the Bible to understand.

I can’t resolve all of your questions about the book of Revelation right now but let me give you a few guidelines.
• **Read these texts with humility.** God’s word is true and unchanging, but we should always be willing to change our understanding if we learn something better. We should work hard to try to understand what these texts are saying. Some parts aren’t too hard. I think Daniel 7 is manageable. But other texts are quite difficult. Let’s acknowledge our limitations and do the best we can to understand, but not feel bad if we don’t have perfect knowledge.

• **Read these texts with good resources.** It’s always helpful to learn from good teachers and read good books when we study the Bible, but it is particularly helpful to do that when you read apocalyptic literature. I might be able to help you with recommendations. The best thing to do is to compare a few different books on the subject.

• **Read these texts theologically.** This is really the most important thing I’ll say about apocalyptic literature. The primary purpose of these books is to teach us to trust in God. The message of books like Revelation and Daniel is that God is in control even when things are at their worst. We can trust him and persevere in the faith even when it is difficult, because we know he will set things right in the end. It would be nice to know exactly what 666 means and what the thousand years in Revelation 20 is all about, but that isn’t the main point. The main point is God. If you get that, you’re doing okay.

Any questions about apocalyptic literature?

6. **Epistle.** Our last genre is the epistle. That is just a fancy word for letter. Much of the NT is epistolary literature. Epistles are great because they are probably the most straightforward books in the Bible. They are logical.

• **Realize that epistles were written to specific audiences and occasions.** Some epistles seem like they were written for the church at large, but others are written to specific churches facing specific issues. If you take some time to try to understand the historical context for the letters, you’ll understand the letter much better.

• **Work to understand the logical development of the letter.** More than any other biblical books, epistles often make a sustained argument. So we
don’t want to just rip out individual chapters or verses, we want to understand the whole flow of argument in a book. You could even read the whole epistle in one sitting and then try to outline the argument.

Any question about epistles?

V. CONCLUSION