

TYPES OF LITERATURE IN THE BIBLE

An introduction to the different types of literature in the Bible and some suggestions on how to interpret them.

- 1) Epistles or Letters
- 2) Gospels
- 3) Parables
- 4) Eschatology
- 5) Apocalyptic
- 6) Law
- 7) Historical Narrative
- 8) Hebrew Poetry
- 9) Prophecy
- 10) Wisdom

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EPISTLES OR LETTERS

The Epistles written by Paul are: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

The authorship of Hebrews is unknown.

The General Epistles are: James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

WHAT ARE THEY?

We usually write letters with a specific purpose in mind but also add other pieces of information that we might think are important too. The New Testament letters are similar; there was a specific reason why each one was written. The authors of the NT letters used a Christian version of a Greek style of letter writing that was used throughout the ancient world. Most include the following characteristics in this order:

Salutation (name of the author)

Addressee (name(s) of the recipient(s))

Greeting/Blessing

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Body

Final Greeting and Farewell

Note: Not all of the epistles will include each of these characteristics (and missing elements may be significant!)

WHEN OBSERVING REMEMBER TO READ THE EPISTLES AS A WHOLE JUST AS YOU WOULD A LETTER. ASK:

- 1) Who was the letter written to?
- 2) What problems are addressed in the letter?
- 3) What was going on in their church?

WHEN INTERPRETING EPISTLES REMEMBER TO INTERPRET THEM IN THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

- 1) Why was the letter written to the original readers?
- 2) How was it written specifically to their situation?
- 3) How would they have responded when they first heard the letter?

APPLY THE ETERNAL TRUTHS TO THE SITUATION OF OUR WORLD AND CHURCH TODAY.

Look for what would apply to all times and all people.

Remember the cultural gap between when and where the letters were written, 2000 years ago in the Mid-eastern culture.

THE GOSPELS

WHAT ARE THEY?

They are narratives describing the life and teaching of Jesus recorded by his followers. The Greek word *evangélion* originally meant a reward for bringing good news but then it came to mean the good news itself.¹ So the Gospels are a proclamation of God's gift of Salvation through Jesus

WHY WERE THEY WRITTEN?

The purpose of each gospel was not to give a full biography of Jesus, nor to give an exact chronology of events, dates or sayings, but to give witness to who Jesus was and to explain the nature of the kingdom He brought. From the reading of the OT, the Jews were expecting a physical and political kingdom with an all-conquering king, so the writers of the gospels tried to clear up this misunderstanding about the Kingdom of God. Each writer selected, from tremendous resources, the material that portrayed Jesus the best for his audience, and writes in a way his hearers will understand.

WHO ARE THEY WRITTEN TO?

The usual suggestions for the original readers for each of the gospels are:

<u>Matthew</u>	Jews Jesus is shown to be the fulfillment of messianic prophecy Jesus is the Messiah
<u>Mark</u>	Romans Suffering often mentioned which may be intended to encourage the persecuted believers in Rome under Nero Jesus is the Suffering Servant
<u>Luke</u>	Gentiles An orderly account with themes including prayer, the Holy Spirit, the oppressed, the poor, and women Jesus is the Saviour of Sinners
<u>John</u>	All people Written that, "We might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (John 20:31) John includes 7 signs, and 7 "I am's" about Jesus Jesus is the Son of God

Note: each gospel is anonymous, but there are clues in each one which indicate who wrote it.

¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Tenney, p. 318.

PARABLES

WHAT ARE THEY?

Parables are a comparison of 2 objects for the purpose of teaching.²

THREE TYPES OF PARABLES ARE:

1) The true parable

A story with a beginning, a plot and an ending
E.g.: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

2) A similitude

A picture, taken from everyday life, to make a point
E.g.: The Sower and the Seed (Mk. 4:1-20)

3) Similes and metaphors

Simile: The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed (Mt 13:31,32)
Metaphor: You are the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13)

WHY DID JESUS USE THEM?

To stress a particular point and demand a response from the hearer. They were not meant to be obscure or have hidden meanings. For example:

In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard found in Luke 20, Jesus is addressing the scribes and chief priests and they knew it so then they begin to plot against Jesus.

Remember, Jesus never told parables in a vacuum, but to a particular audience. Also note that Jesus revealed the true nature of the kingdom of God through parables.

WHEN OBSERVING PARABLES LOOK FOR:

- Look for the main point
- The literary context in which Jesus was telling the parable
- Who was listening
- Details of the pictures Jesus used
- Unexpected turns in the story, which often reveals heart attitudes. An example of this in the Prodigal Son is the resentment of the older brother towards his younger brother when he comes home and is welcomed gladly without any mention of his time of going astray (Luke 15:25-31).

² *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Tenney, p. 137-138.

WHEN INTERPRETING PARABLES...

Think about what the unexpected turn of events in the story would communicate to the original hearers.

Also try to figure out the purpose of each of the parables. In *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, A. B. Bruce classifies parables as didactic (teaching), evangelic, and prophetic.³

Prophetic: The Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-35)

Evangelic: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son, (Luke 15)

Teaching: The Talents (Matt. 25: 14-30), The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

HOW NOT TO INTERPRET THEM

Do not allegorize them, or try to find deep spiritual significance in each detail of the parable. They were intended to make ONE main point and demanded a response by the listener.

Note: The Parables of Jesus are found in all the gospels except John.

³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Tenney, p.622

ESCHATOLOGY

WHAT IS IT?

Eschatology is a Greek word meaning the study of the last things, Jesus' second coming, the final judgement and the new heaven and new earth.

WHEN INTERPRETING ESCHATOLOGICAL LITERATURE, KEEP THESE 7 PRINCIPLES IN MIND:

- 1) Start with the clear passages. Then with that understanding approach the more difficult passages. Don't start with Daniel and Revelation, but with the gospels and Paul.
- 2) Remember that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament
- 3) Keep in mind the purposes of teaching eschatology:
 - A call to a holy and blameless life (2 Peter 3:8-14)
 - A comfort to those suffering in this life (Revelation 2:2,9,10,13; 7:9,10,14-17)
 - To correct false teaching about eschatology (1 Cor. 15:22-28)
- 4) Remember that prophecy is always clear *after* its fulfillment. The prophecies concerning Jesus' first coming were not fully understood until *after* the event. In looking at eschatology, we are looking to the future – so *no one* can be dogmatic. *No one* knows exactly what is going to happen.
- 5) In studying Daniel, Revelation and other difficult books, as in all books, remember the basic principle of interpretation. What did this mean to the author and the original readers?
- 6) Be aware of apocalyptic language within the context of the eschatological literature, where symbolic language is used to describe spiritual things.
- 7) Do not build a big doctrine on something that is mentioned only once, or only obscurely. For example, the Millennium is only mentioned ONCE. Build your doctrine from things that are mentioned frequently and consistently in more than one book, and in NT as well as OT.

Remember our goal is to have our ideas about end times founded on the Bible, rather than books, tapes, magazines or teachings from people. These ideas need to be tested (1 Thess. 5:19-22). Our knowledge and prophecy is imperfect (1 Cor. 13:9-12).

Note: "Eschatology" a subgenre of the "Apocalyptic" type of literature.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

WHAT IS IT?

A type of Jewish literature popular between 200 BC and 100 AD, where the message was expressed in vivid and bizarre symbolism, claiming to be a revelation from an angel to a great figure of the past like Moses, Abraham, etc. They sought to express the conviction that although times were currently difficult, God will eventually intervene and destroy evil. Most of Revelation and parts of Daniel are considered to be apocalyptic literature, yet they differ from non-canonical apocalypses in that they are genuine experiences rather than imitative literary works.⁴ Apocalyptic literature uses symbols to convey deeper meanings than everyday language. Symbols are used to express truth, not to frighten or confuse, but to aid in understanding.

WHEN OBSERVING THE BOOK OF REVELATION ASK:

Who is the book about? Rev. 1:1 states, "The revelation of Jesus Christ"

What type of literature is found in that passage...?

if it is apocalyptic:

- 1) Look at the context of the symbols to understand them
- 2) Look for John's explanations of some of the symbols within the book and use them as a basis for interpretation

if it is prophetic:

- 1) What does it tell the church to expect in the future in order to comfort and encourage them?
- 2) Does it refer to itself as a prophecy? 1:3, 10:11, 22:10, 18, 19

if it is written as an epistle:

- 1) What characteristics of an epistle does it have? (Salutation, Greeting, Blessing, etc.)
- 2) Who does John say that this book is to?

Look for key words referring to the readers experiencing suffering and martyrdom because of their faith.

Notice also that the people of God experience tribulation in the world, but not the wrath of God, which is reserved for unbelievers and those who persecute the church.

Notice the calls of faithfulness to Jesus.

⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Tenney, p. 50.

WHEN INTERPRETING REVELATION:

Start with the most important question: "Why did the author write this? What would this mean to the original reader?"

John and the first readers must have understood the book.

Ask what truth is being conveyed by the symbols used.

When looking at numbers in Revelation be careful to not be over-literal in your interpretations. In apocalyptic literature numbers had standard meanings. They were used to express concepts rather than statistical units.

3 – the divine number, and number of the Trinity

4 – the created world, or universe, four corners of the earth

7 – the perfect number (3 + 4) God's completeness, perfection, fullness or totality

6 – falling short of perfection

12 – God's covenant community, (3 x 4). There were 12 tribes, 12 apostles, 12 gates into heaven

CONSIDER THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES AND THE PROBLEMS THEY FACED:

- Jewish hostility towards Christians
- Infiltration of the church by false teachers
- Worship of Caesar. The cult of Caesar worship was strong in the late first century in Asia. The Roman emperor was claimed to be an incarnation of a god, and all citizens were required to worship the emperor.

LOOK FOR THE MAIN IDEA OF THE BOOK

Even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge his enemies and save his people. The book of Revelation brings the encouraging message to those being persecuted that despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church.

(See also the dedicated SBS Revelation manual)

THE LAW

WHAT IS IT?

In the NT, references to “The Law” sometimes refer to the first five books of the Bible (The Pentateuch), sometimes to the whole of the OT, but mostly to the body of laws contained in the Pentateuch from Exodus 20 through Leviticus and Numbers and then to the end of Deuteronomy.

WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

The law shows us that God set apart a people for Himself to fulfill a special role in His plan of redemption, from them He would bring the Messiah. Therefore, God wanted His people to be different, not superior, but different from all others, and to be a light to the Gentiles, so He gave them the Law. The Law was not written to enable people to gain salvation but to show there need for it. The Law was designed to show:

- How sinful people are and their need for God
- How people cannot keep the law on their own
- How merciful and gracious God is to humankind for even in the OT they did not get what they deserved

THE LAW CAN BE DIVIDED INTO TWO MAIN CATEGORIES

These reflect the two greatest laws, to love God and love your neighbor:

Ritual Law: show how to worship God (Ex. 29:10-12)

Civic Law: show how to treat others, food laws, etc.

THE LAW WAS WRITTEN IN THE TERMS OF COVENANTS. THERE ARE THREE DIFFERENT TYPES OF COVENANTS.

- 1) The **PARITY COVENANT** is a covenant between equals. Two parties negotiate and arrive at the terms of the agreement. It is a partnership, like the marriage covenant.
- 2) The **SUZERAINTY COVENANT** is a covenant imposed on the lesser party. A king would take certain obligations and the people would take on certain obligations. The book of Deuteronomy is structured after this type of covenant. This was not between equal parties, for it is a commandment and if the lesser party breaks it they are a transgressor. In Exodus 24 Moses reads the Covenant to the people and in 24:7 the people take an oath to obey it.
- 3) The **PROMISSORY COVENANT** or **COVENANT OF GRACE** is a legally binding promise given from one side only and in the case of the Abrahamic and the New Covenant it is from God's side. God is the one who makes a promise to man. It is not a two-way agreement but one sided, God-sided. God makes it, fulfills it and man just receives the benefits of it.

GUIDELINES FOR READING THE LAW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

- 1) It is God's inspired word, not God's direct command to you.
- 2) It is the basis for the Old Covenant and Israel's history, but not binding for Christians unless specifically renewed in the New Covenant.
- 3) It is a model providing examples for a full range of expected behaviors, but do not consider it complete for all situations, for technically it is not comprehensive.
- 4) It is a generous gift to Israel, which brings many blessing when obeyed, not a group of arbitrary, annoying regulations limiting people's freedoms.
- 5) Observe God's justice and high expectations towards all people, but also observe his love, patience and mercy towards all.

HOW DOES THE LAW APPLY TO CHRISTIANS?

We must see the Law as a custodian until Christ came, as Paul says in Galatians 3:23-24. Since Christ has come it is no longer our custodian or disciplinarian. Jesus has fulfilled the Law (Matthew 5:17) and states the two laws upon which the whole Law is based in Matthew 22:34-40. The entire book of Hebrews is dedicated to showing that Jesus is superior to the Law.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

40% of the Old Testament is made up of historical narratives. Traditionally Bible Scholars categorize the following 12 books as the history books of the OT: Joshua, Judges, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ruth, and Esther.⁵ Other books from the OT that are partly written as narratives are: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jonah.⁶ In the New Testament, Acts is the only book written completely as a narrative.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

They are stories about certain events and people; above all they are about God at work in His creation and among His people. He is ALWAYS the hero. These stories are true, and since the word “story” is often used to describe fiction, the word “narrative” is used.

THREE LEVELS OF NARRATIVES

	OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
1) Universal Plan of God:	creation, fall/sin → plan of redemption	→ Christ → Eternal life
2) God's Community:	History of Israel	→ Church
3) Individuals:	Abraham/Moses	→ Paul

WHAT NARRATIVES ARE NOT

They are not just stories of events, which happened in the past, but records of how God worked through and with people to bring about His purposes. Each story does have main characters and a plot, but the hero is ALWAYS God.

They are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings.

They do not always teach explicitly (directly), but implicitly (indirectly) through the experiences of others. For example: David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11-12) shows the pain of disobeying the command, “You shall not kill and you shall not commit adultery,” (Exodus 20:13,14).

They should not be dissected so that each episode has a moral of its own, or a special message to the reader. Rather they should be looked at as a whole. Look for the main point of the narrative.

They were not written to answer all our theological questions – they have specific, limited purposes.

Remember God's ultimate purpose is to have relationship with His people, and for His people to have relationship with Him. These narratives describe the working out of this purpose.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF OT NARRATIVES

⁵ *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible*, 1984 p. xii.

⁶ *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fee & Stuart, p. 78.

Observe: What is going on? Read the Narrative as a whole. Do not select verses at random and put them together as they were never intended to be.

Remember these 10 principles when interpreting narratives:

- 1) There is only one main interpretation, and that is what the author understood and what he meant the original audience to understand.
- 2) They do not usually teach doctrine directly.
- 3) They usually illustrate doctrine(s) taught elsewhere.
- 4) They record what happened, not what should have happened, so there is not always a moral to the story.
- 5) What people did was not always a good example for us.
- 6) Most characters in the OT are far from perfect.
- 7) We are not always told whether the actions in the narratives are good or bad – we are expected to judge from teachings elsewhere.
- 8) All narratives are selective and incomplete , so don't impose a meaning if you can't see one.
- 9) When dealing with a passage that teaches implicitly. Take time for prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit. We must take out of the narrative, not read into it.
- 10) God is the hero of all biblical narratives.

Apply what you have learned to your own life. There are many possible applications. For example: the narrative of David and Bathsheba reinforces the commandments against adultery and murder, but it can also remind us how easy it can be for us to judge others while being blind to our own sin.

Note: The suggestions in this section can also be applied to the book of Acts, which gives a selected account of the growth and spread of the early church from a totally Jewish base in Jerusalem to a predominantly Gentile church centered in Rome.

HEBREW POETRY

More than 1/3 of the Old Testament was written in poetic form. Only Leviticus, Ruth, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi contain no poetry. Hebrew poetry was first recognized in 1753. Before then no distinction was made between poetry and prose, so poetry was not recognized in the King James Version. The Revised Standard Version was the first English version of the Bible to print poetry formatted as poetry.

WHY POETRY?

- It is easier to remember than prose.
- It is the language of the heart, expressing struggles and joys in life.
- It is the means of expressing more directly, emotionally and intensely the longings of the human heart.
- It is often used to create images in the mind using figures of speech such as metaphors or hyperboles, which are not meant to be taken literally.
- Poetry and songs were most often the author's response to a situation in his or her life. In 2 Samuel 1:19-27 we see David's lament when he heard of Saul and Jonathan's tragic death.
- Poetry has helped people express their feelings to God (both negative and positive). Questions often asked by the poetry we read in the Bible are whether God has become silent, if He is ignoring the author, or if His love has ceased. These are exactly the type of questions we ask when we are going through hard times.

PARALLELISM

Hebrew poetry is not written in metre or rhyme but according to parallelism. Parallelism is when a poetic line consists of 2 parts which run parallel to each other. It can be known as "thought rhyme," balancing thought against thought. The 2 basic forms of parallelisms are:

Synonymous: The second line of a poetic verse repeats the thought of the first line in different words.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Psalm 19:1

Antithetic: Two lines contrast each other. Often the first line is a positive statement and the second line is a negative statement starting with "but"; common in Proverbs.

"A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger." Proverbs 15:1

Isaiah 1:3 shows both of these forms in one verse:

"The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand

ACROSTICS

In the first 4 chapters of Lamentations and Psalm 119, the stanzas are arranged in an acrostic in alphabetical order using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This was probably done to help the readers and hearers remember the poems better.

(See also the dedicated booklets for both Psalms and Proverbs)

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

WHICH ARE THE PROPHETIC BOOKS?

Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel

Minor Prophets (the last 12 books of the OT): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

The terms major and minor only refer to the length of the books and not with how important their messages are for they are all important. Prophetic books mainly record the words of the prophet, but some also give us glimpses of their life history.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF PROPHECY?

The prophets exhorted God's people to remain faithful to the Covenant, and so be blessed, and to warn them of the punishment if they did not. Much of the work of the prophets was to remind God's people of the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28. The prophet acted as a spokesman from God to His people, to speak God's word of:

- 1) Judgment on the ungodly – sword, famine, disease – calling for heartfelt repentance.
- 2) Promise of future hope to the faithful remnant. The promise was:
 - a. Physical restoration after the exile.
 - b. Spiritual restoration when the Messiah came.

WHAT DOES PROPHECY MEAN?

Prophecy does involve predicting future events; future to the original readers, but this was only a small aspect of prophecy, and not the prophets' main purpose. The following shows how dangerous it can be to look to the prophets for predictions about what is still to happen:

- Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant age.
- Less than 2% of OT prophecy is Messianic (about Jesus).
- Less than 1% concerns events yet to come.

So, most prophecies have already been fulfilled.⁷

⁷ *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fee & Stuart, p. 166

HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET THE PROPHECIES?

We must look at them within their historical context, knowing what state Israel and Judah were in politically, economically and spiritually. Remember that they were words from God into a specific historical situation in the nation of Israel or the surrounding nations and can only be understood in that context. To find out the historical background, first read the relevant chapters in Kings and Chronicles, then look in Bible Dictionaries or the introduction notes in commentaries.

Four things to remember about predictive prophecy:

- 1) Most have already been fulfilled
- 2) The NT interprets the Old. Look for passages where the NT shows the fulfillment of OT prophecy, especially concerning the nations and Israel (Amos 9:11-12, Acts 15:16-17)
- 3) They addressed the situation of the people of the time they were written and pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah
- 4) Most prophecy is written as poetry, containing many figures of speech (similes, metaphors and hyperboles)

WISDOM LITERATURE

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are considered wisdom literature. It is also found in parts of some other books like Psalms, Habakkuk and James.

WHAT IS WISDOM LITERATURE?

It was written as a result of one's life experiences to pass on what one had learned. It was common in countries in the East other than Israel, where wisdom was discussed and argued from observations about life. Yet, wisdom in the Bible includes a fundamental understanding of God and His Ways. The biblical authors sought to become wise in practical living, not theorize about it, so the wisdom literature of the Bible contains their results.

HOW DO WE READ WISDOM LITERATURE?

They should be read as a whole to see their context. There are three types of wisdom literature to consider:

PRACTICAL WISDOM – PROVERBS

Proverbs are short forceful sayings giving observations or practical guidelines for successful every-day living. Proverbs are observations of life, not promises of prosperity and health. They essentially ask the question WHAT or HOW? Each proverb does not give the whole truth as they were written to be memorized. The same subject is covered again and again, each time with a slightly different slant.

SPECULATIVE WISDOM – JOB AND ECCLESIASTES

The perplexities of human existence are contemplated at a deeper level. More difficult questions are asked about the meaning of life or the problem of suffering. These books essentially ask the question WHY?

Job – a long argument about suffering. The “friends” of Job state that he is suffering because he must have sinned. Job says he has not sinned, but he doesn't know why he is suffering. In the end God honors Job's honesty and condemns the friend's platitudes. There are many lessons to learn on how to be alongside someone who is suffering.

Ecclesiastes: a monologue about a man looking for the meaning of life. He has tried just about everything and nothing satisfies his longing for fulfillment. The climax of the book sums up the search for the meaning of life: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man,” 12:13.

LYRIC WISDOM - SONG OF SONGS

Song of Songs is a love song written in the style of ancient Near Eastern lyric poetry. It is a ballad about human romance. This book answers two questions about love: who we are to love and how to love. Early in church history people began to interpret this book allegorically to describe God's love for his people as is done in some of the prophets. For example in Hosea chapters 1 & 2, God compares Israel's unfaithfulness to that of a whore, but the text specifically says in Hosea 1:2 that the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord. In Isaiah 5:1-7 Isaiah gives a song for his beloved describing his vineyard. This can be interpreted allegorically because in vs. 7 Isaiah explains that the vineyard is the house of Israel. He is showing God's care over His

people.⁸ In the Song of Songs there is no mention of Israel or the Church or of the poem being an allegory about either one, so it would be a mistake to interpret it this way, thus missing the intended message of a practical story about human love.

⁸ *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fee & Stuart, p.226-227.