

Bible Basics – Genres

Sunday, April 8, 2018

Presentations: Parables – 3 Minutes Maximum (each person)

What does A.D. and B.C. mean?

Years are designated based on a traditional reckoning of the year Jesus was born.

- A.D. stands for *Anno Domini*, Latin for “in the year of the Lord. It refers specifically to the birth of Jesus Christ.
- B.C. stands for “before Christ”

In English, it is common for A.D. to precede the year, so that the translation of “A.D. 2014” would read “in the year of our Lord 2014.”

What is a genre?

The genre (ZHAWN-ruh) Genre is a way of classifying something according to its type or style rather than its specific content or storyline. Biblical genres are normally identified by examining a book’s style, structure, form, tone, context, and literary techniques.

The Bible is not one book; it is a library of sixty-six books that were written over a period of more than 1,500 years by many different authors. These authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit in their thinking and writing. Thus, the Bible is the inspired Word of God without error. It also has the human touch from its authors. Paul is different from David, who is different from James or Moses. In their writings, their style and personality come out.

To communicate His Word to all human conditions, God chose to use almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.

To interpret properly the “then and there” of the biblical text, you must not only know some general rules that apply to all the words of the Bible, but you also need to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms or genres.

Why should we know genres of biblical text?

Although we rarely acknowledge their presence, genres inform our entire lives. From the way we interpret movies to other literature works, genre is at work in the background. Let’s take a closer look at genres:

Imagine: There are five books in front of you and none of them have a cover or title page. In order to tell the genre of each book, we must look for clues from the authors. Let's try it:

1. Once upon a time _____
2. Harry Potter _____
3. ...And still, I Rise! _____
4. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times _____

We have just identified four genres! Let's look at some characteristics of each genre:

_____ Set in the past, use some form or variation of "once upon a time", contains fantasy or make-believe elements, enchanted setting, good and evil characters, and magical elements.

_____ One key element is fantasy, characters are usually wizards, unicorns, etc., the setting or location of the story is make-believe.

_____ Rhyming words to create a certain effect, rhythm and repetition to create a musical effect, shape (the layout).

_____ Longer than a short story, ordinary or realistic structure, natural flow of speech, a strong plot that poses a problem or set of problems that may or may not be resolved in the action of each the novel.

From this exercise, we see that as we look through a book or work of literature, we can pick up more subtle clues that would help us decide the genre. Then too, publishers give us genre clues through cover design, topography, and even the size of the pages. When it comes to the Bible, nearly all the genre cues are removed for the modern reader. This is because of the dates the Bible was written and the languages in which the Bible was written.

When we understand biblical genre, it transforms everything about our Bible study. It helps us understand the difference between one biblical book and another. It bridges the cultural and historical conflicts. It brings us closer to what the ancient reader would have naturally understood.

Biblical Authors Understood the Genres of Their Time

The Bible was written in everyday language and used the conventions of the genres that were current at the time. As you read through the Bible, you will sometimes find the inspired authors labeling what genre they were writing in. Sayings, proverbs, psalms, songs, laments, oracles, and letters are all examples of that.

Even more, it is 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. Paul's letter to the Romans, while clearly an epistle, also takes the form of a Roman legal argument.

With over 40 different authors, the Bible is made up of a variety of writing styles. Literary genre describes the type of literature that is similar in content, tone, or structure. By knowing the literary genre, one is more prepared for observation, and verses are better understood within their context. Several literary genres may exist in each book of the Bible.

A look at genres in the Bible

This list of genres isn't meant to be complete, but it's a good start.

Historical narrative. Much of the Bible is history of one form or another: epic or "history of origins" (Genesis–Deuteronomy), royal records and national history (1 Samuel–2 Chronicles), or biography (Ezra, Nehemiah). Some of this historical narrative is etiological—it explains the distant origins of something familiar in the present day. The Gospels form an important sub-genre of historical biography; they are the story of Jesus' life, but with a strong emphasis on what His life, death, and resurrection mean to us.

Law. Rules and regulations are found all over the ancient Near East, and much of the biblical law conforms to the laws of neighboring nations in form (if not in content). Covenant law has a strict format in the ancient Near East, and biblical covenants (e.g., Genesis 15) usually adhere to the established form.

Wisdom literature. These works aren't usually meant to be thought of as history (even if they recount historical events), but as philosophical excursions into the nature of the universe and our place in it. The tone of these works is higher because they deal with life's big questions. For example, Job and his friends don't have conversations in the usual sense; instead, they take turns speechifying at one another.

Songs and poems. Sometimes poems and songs tell a story (in a non-narrative fashion), and sometimes they are expressions of a single emotion: joy, sorrow, praise, or lament. Some memorable songs and poems include the Psalms, Lamentations, The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), The Song of Deborah (Judges 5), and The Annunciation (Luke 1:46–55).

Prophetic. Sometimes prophets, like Isaiah and Micah, foretell the future, and sometimes they just tell the truth about the present that nobody wants to hear. Much of the prophetic content of the Bible is cast as poetry with vivid imagery and carefully crafted parallel lines that characterize all Hebrew poetry.

Parables. A parable is a narrative. Jesus used parables to demonstrate or teach a spiritual truth. It also means in a more generic sense, any story that is used to teach a moral lesson or just instruct in general. Since stories are easier to grasp and remember than abstract ideas, the parables helped to preserve Jesus' teachings.

Gospels. The Gospels are best described as historical-theological documents. They are most like Greco-Roman biographies or history texts. Once we step into the world of the first century and study what history looked like then, we discover that the Gospels are not all that removed from the standard of history writing for the time. Luke especially follows some of the conventions for writing good history in the first century.

Letters/Epistle. Many of the New Testament books are letters (e.g., Romans, 1 Peter, Philemon). They are either personal letters sent from one individual to another, or letters sent to whole communities—meant to be read in public and circulated among the churches.

Apocalypse. If much of the historical narrative of the Bible is concerned with the beginnings of things, apocalyptic literature is concerned with the end. Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation employ extended metaphors, imagery, and allusions to the past, present, and future to tell the story of where everything is going.

Table of Literary Genres. Some Books may be listed more than once.

Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Law/Legal	Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	<p>-This represents a treaty with Israel <i>after</i> God establishes their relationship and just prior to entering the Promised Land.</p> <p>-The treaty is the agreement of the blessings and punishments for loyal or disloyal behavior.</p> <p>-Numbering over 600 laws, there are three categories of Old Testament Law that God instructed Moses: 1) moral, 2) civil, and 3) ceremonial.</p> <p>-While the Old Testament Law is the Word of God, not all is a command to Christians.</p> <p>-Some laws, which Jesus repeated, have been renewed and are commands to Christians.</p>	<p>-What does each law reveal about God’s standards, and justice?</p> <p>-Which laws do the prophets and Jesus repeat?</p> <p>-How is the Old Testament Law used to lead people to Christ? The Old Testament Law reminds us of our privileged status; the Law no longer dictates our behavior.</p>

Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
<p>Historical Narrative / Biographical</p> <p>Major Prophets</p> <p>Minor Prophets</p>	<p>Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,</p> <p>Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel,</p> <p>Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Johah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>	<p>-These are stories of what God did to and through people.</p> <p>-The stories may not have a moral or direct teaching as they record history whether good or bad.</p> <p>-The stories emphasize God’s nature and revelation and teach in a manner that no other literary genre can.</p> <p>-God is the heroic central character!</p> <p>-Some stories will be difficult to understand; we are not always told how and why God did things.</p>	<p>-Read each story as a unit.</p> <p>-Understand the plot.</p> <p>-Study the character(s). Note that the characters may be bad examples but observing what not to do can be just as important as what to do.</p> <p>-Compare the same story that may be narrated elsewhere in a different book.</p> <p>-Because the stories are so true to life, they can help us understand our own lives.</p>

Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Poetry	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	<p>-Hebrew poetry is supposed to be sung. It is worshipful, intensely emotional, and appeals to the imagination.</p> <p>-About 40% of the Old Testament is poetic.</p> <p>-Lacking the traditional elements found in poetry, Hebrew poetry is essentially parallelism (similar in structure, meaning, and sound).</p> <p>Much of Hebrew poetry cannot be appreciated because of the loss of its subtleties through translation.</p>	<p>-Read poetry slowly and in short sections.</p> <p>-Study the imagery.</p> <p>-Look for literary characteristics.</p> <p>-Look for a central theme.</p> <p>-What is being said about God?</p> <p>-What is being said of God's people?</p>
Poetry/ Proverb / Wisdom	Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	<p>-There are two types of wisdom: practical and speculative. Practical wisdom refers to guidelines that will lead to a holy and happy life. Speculative wisdom refers to the deeper issues such as the meaning of life and the existence of evil.</p> <p>-Poetry teaches wisdom in a concise and compressed language.</p>	<p>-Observe this as you would poetry.</p> <p>-Examine the metaphors and similes (used to make comparisons).</p> <p>-Look for the behavior and their consequences.</p>
Gospels/ Parable History of the Early Church	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John Acts	<p>-These short stories are loved for their simplicity and memorable morals.</p> <p>-They are the hallmark of Jesus' teachings.</p>	<p>-Understand the characters in the story.</p> <p>-Who heard Jesus' parables? How did each identify with the story?</p> <p>-Compare the different Gospel accounts of the same parables.</p>

Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Letters/ Logic	Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-2-3 John, Jude	<p>-These were expository (intended to explain or describe) letters written to either a friend or church usually in response to something brought up by the reader (except Philemon and possibly James and Romans).</p> <p>-While principally not a theological thesis, the letters exhort with a logical presentation of truth or doctrine for particular action to a church problem.</p>	<p>-Read the whole letter in one sitting.</p> <p>-What prompted the letter?</p> <p>-Who are the recipients of the letter?</p> <p>-What is the mood of the letter?</p> <p>-What does the letter exhort?</p> <p>-Do a syntax or grammar study.</p>
Prophecy / Apocalyptic	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Revelation	<p>-Most prophecy dealt with the future of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them. These prophetic predictions were largely fulfilled. Some prophecies have yet to be fulfilled.</p> <p>-Prophetic predictions are not its primary function. Instead it is to proclaim the words of the Lord for the sole purpose of bringing people back to Him. The prophet is the spokesman for God.</p> <p>-The message of the prophets is similar in content as when God spoke to Moses.</p> <p>-The tone of warning and judgment is gloomy and there are many words directly from God.</p> <p>-These books are challenging to understand, but typically end with hope and restoration for God's people and promises.</p>	<p>-What's the main problem</p> <p>-What images are used?</p> <p>-What does it say about God?</p> <p>-What happens?</p> <p>-Why did God include this in the Bible?</p>

Group Work

Finding Genre Characteristics in an Epistle

The genre of Colossians is _____. It presents authorship, recipient, a greeting, blessing, body of letter, and farewell address. These are each a component of the epistle genre of biblical writing.

Let's "pull" these components out of Colossians. Beside each component listed below, write the chapter and verse(s) where the component is found.

Authorship:

Recipient:

Greeting:

Blessing:

Body:

Farewell address