Hermeneutics Workshop 07
Grammatical Interpretation:
Literary Genre
For the Bible Institute at GCBC **Fall 2026**
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Introduction/Review:

Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is divine revelation. God has chosen to communicate through human authors to specific audiences. God's Word has meaning, and it is meant to be understood. Proper hermeneutics allows us to better understand God's Word. However, interpretation is not always an easy task. There are many challenges to interpretation because we are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. These challenges are often ignored or overlooked, and that can lead to poor interpretation of Scripture. We should seek to identify these challenges, and then apply good principles of interpretation to these challenges in order to find the true meaning of the text. Following certain principles of interpretation leads us to developing a system of interpretation. Good biblical interpretation always emphasizes biblical context and cultural context. Good biblical interpretation also emphasizes grammatical interpretation. Grammatical interpretation includes studying the literary genre.

Why Is Genre Important?

The genre of a biblical passage influences how its language should be understood. Faithful interpretation requires recognizing the kind of literature we are reading and interpreting its language according to the conventions of that genre. Genre is a category or type of literature characterized by recognizable conventions, structures, and purposes. We should understand what kind of literature we are reading, the characteristics of that genre, and how those characteristics help us understand the authorial intent of the passage. There are many different literary genres in Scripture, and these genres cause us to read different passages with a different point of view. The major biblical genres are historical narrative, poetry, and prose discourse.

Historical Narrative:

Historical narrative makes up the largest percentage of any biblical genre at 40%. Therefore, being able to rightly interpret historical narrative is especially important. Identifying historical narrative is usually pretty straightforward because it has characteristics that stand out immediately when reading the passage. This genre describes people, events, place, and actions. It often follows a sequences of events. It often includes dialogue, conflict, character development, and outcomes. It sometimes includes speeches, songs, poetry, or other genres embedded into it even though the passage is primarily historical narrative. Many books of the Bible are almost entirely made up of historical narrative. Some of these books are Genesis, Joshua, Judges, the Gospels, and Acts.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the genre of historical narrative. What events happened within the narrative? What people were involved? When and where did this take place? What circumstances led up to the events? How does the narrator present the events? Does the passage explicitly approve of an action, or does it simply report that it happened? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the narrative multiple times along with its context.

Biblical narrative reports events that include both righteous and sinful behavior. The reader must distinguish between what the text records and what it endorses. For example, the Bible does record lies and deception. However, that does mean that the Bible is endorsing those lies or deception. The Bible is truthful and accurate even when it is recording lies or other sinful actions. Scripture records the lies of Jacob, but that does not mean that Scripture endorses those lies. Scripture may also record a righteous action, but that does not mean that we are expected to replicate every righteous action that is recorded. It was right for Old Testament saints to offer sacrifices, but that does mean that we should replicate that action. It was right for Moses to lead Israel into the wilderness, but that does not mean that we need to go on a journey into the wilderness. It was right for the early church to meet daily, but that does not mean that we are mandated to meet daily. Not every action is meant to be replicated even if it was a good action. Many people try to read historical narrative and look for instructions for our action. However, that is not consistent with the overall purpose of historical narrative. Sometimes there is a moral lesson, but not every narrative explicitly states the moral lesson. Historical narrative is primarily for information and context rather than instruction for our action. Interpretation of historical narrative requires attention to the narrator's comments, the broader account, and the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

Poetry:

Poetry makes up the second largest percentage of any biblical genre at 33%. Therefore, being able to rightly interpret poetry is very important as well. Identifying this literary genre is also usually straightforward because it has unique characteristics compared to other literary genres. It often includes figurative language and imagery. Parallelism is common in Hebrew poetry. Poetry often includes metaphors, similes, personification, and other figures of speech. It often contains emotional expression and carefully structured language. Many books of the bible contain poetry. Some of the books that contain a lot of poetry are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, and some portions of the Prophets.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the genre of poetry. What pictures or images does the author use? Is the language literal or figurative? Is there parallelism? How do the lines relate to one another? Does the second line repeat, contrast with, illustrate, or develop the first? What emotions and ideas are being emphasized? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the passage multiple times along with its context.

Biblical poetry reveals real theological truths through figurative language. Figurative language does not make a passage untrue. It means that the human writer is communicating truth through an image or picture rather than a literal description. The blessed man in Psalm 1 is compared to a tree planted by rivers of water. The man that is focused on the right things has stability, fruit, and growth. The psalmist is communicating this truth through poetic imagery.

Law:

There are large portions of Scripture, particularly within the dispensation of law, that fit into the literary category of law or legal literature. This literary category is usually easy to identify because of its lists of direct commands and prohibitions. It also often contains moral, civil, and ceremonial regulations. It often contains instructions about worship and sacrifices. It has many conditional statements establishing consequences for breaking the law. It contains covenant stipulations between God and Israel. Some of the larger portions of law are found in Exodus 20-23, Leviticus, Number 5-6, and Deuteronomy.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of law. Who originally received the command? What covenant was the command given under? Was the command moral, ceremonial, or civil in nature? What was the purpose of that particular law? Does the New Testament reaffirm, modify, fulfill, or otherwise address this command? Is there any underlying principle that could be understand and applied today? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the command multiple times along with its context.

The Old Testament Law is one area that people often struggle with when it comes to interpretation. People often try to apply certain laws, but then ignore other laws. Understanding the purpose of the Law is helpful in understanding how or if it applies today. Galatians 3:24-25 says, "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster." The Law exposed man's sinfulness and his inability to live righteously. The Law exposed man's need for salvation from his sin. The Mosaic Law was never intended to be permanent, but rather it served a specific purpose for a specific time in God's plan. We are not under the Mosaic Law today. It is true that the Mosaic Law addresses many commands in the area of morality that are repeated to New Testament believers. Stealing was a sin in the Old Testament, and stealing is still a sin in the New Testament. However, it is important for us to recognize that keeping the Law does not justify us or sanctify us. Sometimes people try to pick certain parts of the law to try to impose upon believers today. Leviticus 19:27-28 says, "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard. Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD." People often use verse 28 when they are trying to argue why tattoos are wrong, but they usually do not address any of the verses around it. To be consistent, we should recognize that we are not under the Mosaic Law, and that instead we should live by the instructions given to the church in the New Testament. We can still learn much about God's character from the Law, but we need to be careful in how we apply those passages to our practice.

Wisdom Literature:

Wisdom literature has some overlap with poetry. Poetry is a literary form, but wisdom literature is primarily a literary category defined by its purpose and subject matter. Much of the Bible's wisdom literature is written in poetic form. Poetry describes how something is written, while wisdom literature describes what kind of teaching the literature communicates. Wisdom literature in the Bible contains some unique characteristics that make it worthy studying as its own literary category. Wisdom literature contains practical instructions about life, character, relationships, and the fear of the Lord. It contains general observations about how life ordinarily works. It contains observations about human behavior. It is often characterized by short, memorable sayings. It frequently uses comparisons and contrasts. It sometimes contains reflections on suffering, justice, and the meaning of life. Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes contain much wisdom literature.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of wisdom literature. Is this a general principle or an unconditional promises? What kind of behavior is being commended or condemned? Does the surrounding passage qualify the statement? How does the book's larger message contribute to its meaning? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the wise saying multiple times along with its context.

Wisdom literature often expresses general principles for living wising. General principles for wise living are different than unconditional promises. Proverbs 12:21 says, "There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with mischief." This is the same general principle that Job's friends were using to question his integrity. It is true that those that live a righteous life tend to keep themselves out of trouble, but it does not mean that righteous people will never experience evil. Living a just life can protect you from paying stupid tax for your sin, but it will not keep you from ever experiencing evil. Proverbs 16:7 says, "When a man's ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." It is true that living a life that pleases God will tend to you being able to be more peaceable with all men. Godly conduct can often reduce hostility and promote peace, but it does not guarantee that everyone will respond favorably. Proverbs 10:4 says, "He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich." It is true that a hard worker is much more likely to become rich, but it is not accurate to say that every hardworking person will become financially wealthy. Proverbs contains principles that are generally true that are wise principles to live by, but they are not unconditional promises. This does not dimmish the authority of Proverbs, but Proverbs requires interpreting its statements according to their literary purpose.

Prophecy:

Prophecy is the primary genre of some of the largest books of the Bible. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all contain much prophecy. The minor prophets also contain much prophecy. The literary category of prophecy can sometimes have overlap with the literary form of poetry, but its unique purpose and characteristics make it worthy identifying as its own category. Prophecy is often a message delivered directly by a prophet of God. It often contains calls to repentance and warnings of judgment. It often contains promises of restoration and future blessing. It often contains poetry, symbolism, imagery, and sometimes visions. It often contains references to historical circumstances and future events.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of prophecy. Who is speaking, and to whom? What historical circumstances surround the prophecy? Is the passage warning, promising, rebuking, or announcing judgment? Does it use figurative language? Does the passage identify a fulfillment? What relationship does the prophecy have to the surrounding chapters and the rest of Scripture? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the prophecy multiple times along with its context.

Prophecy must be interpreted in light of its historical setting, literary features, and biblical context. Prophetic expression can be literal or figurative. We must determine what the text is actually communicating. For example, Isaiah 11 contains many messianic prophecies. Isaiah 11:1 says, "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." Then Isaiah 11:10 says, "And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious." There are three different prophetic pictures connected to Jesse. The rod, a branch, and a root are prophetic pictures connected to the line of Jesse. These are literal prophecies that use figurative language. These prophecies are not referring to an actual rod, branch, or root; but they are creating a picture of where the Messiah will come from and what He will be. The figurative language does not take away from the fact that the prophecy has a literal fulfillment.

Parables:

Parables can be found throughout the Gospels because Jesus used them in His teaching. They are often short narratives or illustrative stories. They illustrate spiritual truths through familiar situations. There are often comparisons between the story and the subject being taught. Sometimes parables are accompanied by an explanation from Jesus. Parables concealed truth from the unbelieving, but parables also prompted the believing to ask more questions in order to understand.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of parables. What prompted Jesus to tell the parable? What question or issue does it address? What central truth does the parable communicate? Does Jesus explain the parable? Who does Jesus explain the parable to? What details contribute to the central teaching? Am I assigning significance to details that the text does not assign significance to? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the parable multiple times along with its context.

Jesus used parables to conceal spiritual truth from the unbelieving. Matthew 13:10-11 says, "And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." This is right after Jesus spoke the parable of the sower to the multitudes. The multitudes essentially just got a story about how farming works, but only the disciples got to hear the explanation about the spiritual truth that Jesus was illustrating. Parables only provide clarity if we know what spiritual truth is being illustrated. An illustration without a point typically leaves us with more questions than answers. It is also important with parables to not automatically assign spiritual meaning to every character, object, or action within the parable. Identify the central teaching of the parable and the explanation supplied by the text. The context surrounding the parable is often key for determining the central teaching of the parable.

Epistles (letters):

The New Testament epistles are of great significance for the church. The majority of instructions for our practice our found in the epistles. These are usually pretty easy to identify because they are written to particular people or churches. They often address theological questions and practical problems. They often develop arguments through explanations, commands, contrasts, and conclusions. They frequently contain direct commands for believers. They are extremely practical for the Christian life.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of epistles. Who wrote the letter? Who received it? What issue is being addressed? What is the author's main point? How does each paragraph contribute to that main point? What words connect the author's reasoning? Which instructions are directly addressed to the original recipients, and how should they be applied today? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the whole epistle through multiples times.

Epistles are especially suited to close examination of argument structure, connecting words, commands, explanations, and theological reasoning. There are many opportunities for deep studies within the epistles. Because the epistles contain many practical instructions it can sometimes be tempting to ignore biblical, historical, cultural, and grammatical context in order to get straight into application. However, we must still follow the principle of determining the meaning for the original audience before jumping into application. This will help protect us from projecting our modern viewpoints and circumstances into the text. This type of deep study

into the epistles produces much more fruit than just reading a few commands and trying to jump straight into application.

Apocalyptic Literature:

Apocalyptic literature often contains poetic form and fits within the larger literary category of prophecy, but it still has a few characteristics that make it unique. This is the type of literature found in Daniel 7-12 and Revelation. The literary category contains many visions and symbolic imagery. Beasts, spirit beings, cosmic disturbances, and other dramatic pictures stand out as frequent details that make apocalyptic literature unique. There are often strong contrasts between good and evil. There are messages about God's sovereignty, judgment, and the ultimate triumph of His purposes.

The interpreter must answer interpretive questions that are specific to the literary category of apocalyptic literature. Is the author describing a vision? Does the text explain the symbols? What does the immediate context reveal about the imagery? Are there parallels with imagery elsewhere in Scripture? What would the original audience have understood from the vision? What details are explicitly interpreted, and which remain disputed? Being able to answer these questions involves reading the passage multiple times along with its context.

Apocalyptic literature uses imagery to communicate real truths and real events. It is important to not treat every image as a literal description, but is also important not treat every detail as an invitation to invent symbolic meaning. Apocalyptic literature is a category of biblical literature that is often disagreed upon by interpreters. This area of literature requires specific attention to the explanations that the text itself provides. Apocalyptic literature does not answer every question we have about timing, appearances, and all the specific details of how everything will play out. Therefore, it is important to not go beyond what Scripture actually says. There is a temptation to dive into every wild theory when it comes to end times, but we should remain focused on the things that Scripture has actually explained to us.

Homework – Analyze Literary Genre:

You should have picked a passage, identified challenges, established interpretive principles, considered systematic/theological assumption, identified the key aspects of the biblical and cultural context, and now you need to dive deeper into the literary genre of the passage. What kind of biblical literature is the passage? Is it a single genre, or does it contain more than one literary form? What features of the passage support your classification? Are there recognizable patterns, images, structures, or conventions? How does the genre influence the way you understand the passage? Should particular expressions be understood literally, figuratively, or according to another convention of the genre? What are common interpretive mistakes in this genre that you need to be sure to avoid? What does the passage appear to communicate when interpreted according to its genre and context?

Conclusion:

Understanding the various biblical genres is a foundational aspect of proper interpretation. We must interpret Scripture according to the kind of literature God inspired the human author to write. We must understand how the human author is using particular words within that particular kind of literature. Genre works alongside historical context, biblical context, systematic theology, and grammatical observation in order to help us understand the text accurately.