



HOW TO READ THE BIBLE: EPISODE 3

Literary Styles in the Bible

STUDY NOTES



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Introduction

The Bible is a large and complex book that is unified by a grand narrative stretching from beginning to end. The Bible is not all narrative though. Each book contributes to the overall story using different types of ancient literary styles.

This means that reading the Bible requires two things: First, a sense for identifying those different styles of literature and how they work. Second, an awareness that biblical literature comes from an ancient culture different from our own.

Let's start with a basic metaphor. Think about how a grocery store is organized. A basic principle of organization gathers similar items together. In the dairy aisle you will find milk, yogurt, and cheese. In produce, there's fruits and vegetables. The meat aisle has pork, beef, chicken, etc. The bread aisle also has peanut butter and jelly. You get the point.

Now, if you go down an aisle and you see Doritos, you will automatically begin to form expectations about what else you may find there. You'll probably expect to find things like soda, potato chips, and juice. Who taught you that? Your expectation in a corner store will be different; you would probably look for soda in a back fridge by the chips and crackers.

You and I have been trained over many years to know what to expect when we walk into various grocery store aisles. What makes a new store disorienting is when they organize things by different principles. How you experience an aisle at a store and what you expect to get from it depends completely on what kind of aisle you assume it to be in the first place.

The same is true in reading the Bible. How we experience any part of the Bible depends completely on what kind of literature we assume it to be and what we expect to get from it.

Let's zoom out. There are three broad types of literature in the Bible: narrative, poetry, and discourse.

Because of the dominant perception of the Bible as a divine behavior manual (golden tablets view), we turn all of the narratives into moral tales (don't lie, always be nice), all poetry into instruction (Psalms as a how-to manual for prayer), and all discourse into moral instruction.

In our How to Read the Bible video series, we claim that the Bible presents itself as a unified narrative leading to Jesus, containing great wisdom for our modern world.

It is critical to understand that this great story is told through a variety of distinct literary genres, each one accomplishing differing purposes. Knowing the type of genre may create a whole new expectation in the reader. These different genres are employed to communicate the author's distinct meaning in a unique way. A particular literary genre may require you to learn a new skill in order to interpret it. What's more, a type of literary genre could be used to force you to see the world in a brand new way, expanding your humanity!

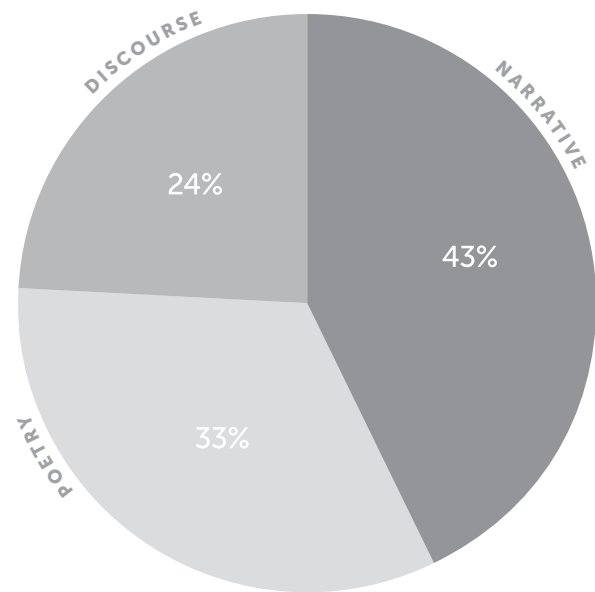
C.S. Lewis celebrated the power of distinct literary styles when he wrote,

People who have been readers all their lives seldom fully realise the enormous extension of their being which they owe to authors. We realise it best when we talk with children who haven't lived long or read widely. They are full of goodness but they inhabit a tiny world. How sad is the adult who is content to remain in that world. It's virtually a prison.

My own eyes are not enough for me, I must see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I must see what others have invented as well. I regret that the animals cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee; more gladly still would I perceive the world of smells that is charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog...

In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

TYPES OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE



AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM

C.S. LEWIS

Literary Styles

1 | Narrative in the Bible

Narrative involves characters, a setting, and a plot. In other words, narrative is people in places doing things to each other. They are usually starting a conflict that escalates until it's resolved in some way. The Bible contains a plethora of unique narratives throughout, and they amount to almost half of the content in the Bible. This is important because narrative is one of the most basic modes of human communication.

Recent research suggests that our brains are actually hardwired for narratives. Neurobiologist Mark Turner argues that "Story is the basic principle of how the human mind works. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories." Narrative structure is essential not only for effective communication but for thinking itself. When children ask to hear a story it's not simply a biological craving for amusement or a demand for attention. It arises out of a genuine human need to make sense of the disparate experiences of our lives, and that need is addressed in storytelling. Through stories we learn how to see patterns, we learn about cause and effect and discover the consequences of our choices. Our sense of right and wrong and of what's most important and least valuable in life, all these are shaped for us by the stories we hear and then live.

READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

RAY LUBECK

Every worldview is grounded in a fundamental narrative account of the world. Biblical narratives are theological history. In other words, their primary purpose is not moral instruction, but worldview and identity formation for those whose story is told. Large-scale epic narratives address five ultimate questions which every worldview attempts to answer.

SETTING

Where are we?

What is real in the world where we find ourselves?

CHARACTERS

Who are we?

What is the nature and purpose of human beings?

CONFLICT

What's wrong?

How do we account for evil and pain?

RESOLUTION

What's the solution?

What hope is there for a better future?

NARRATIVE TIME

What time is it?

Where in the storyline is the reader located?

ADAPTED FROM

**TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN IT USED TO BE:
BIBLICAL FAITH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD**

J. RICHARD MIDDLETON & BRIAN WALSH

Our identity and sense of the world are based on the story we tell of evil (what's wrong?) and redemption (what's the remedy?).

What reading stories does, ultimately, is keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating idea that life is not a random sequence of moments, but a destiny. That life has a unitary pattern that we could discern for ourselves if we could somehow lay out the whole of our experience like an epic tale... The reader of stories is an explorer of causes and effects and connections through time. She does not live in the present as others do—not quite—because of the conviction that the present is known to be a moving point in the much larger story she is living and attentive to.

**THE GUTENBERG ELEGIES:
THE FATE OF READING IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE**
SVEN BIRKERTS

2 | Poetry in the Bible

Encyclopedia Britannica defines poetry as, “a kind of literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of one’s experience or emotions by means of well-crafted language that is chosen for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.”

Poetry is a kind of human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.

SOUND AND SENSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY
LAURENCE PERRINE

Compare these two accounts of crossing the Red Sea. The first is narrative, the second is poetry.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.” Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

EXODUS 14:21-28

Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea.
The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea.
The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, Lord, was majestic in power.
Your right hand, Lord, shattered the enemy.
By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up.
The surging waters stood up like a wall;
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.
You blew with your breath, and the sea covered them.
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

EXODUS 15:4-10

The form of poetry is so fluid that it can communicate feeling and sense even through gibberish. This was the entire point of Lewis Carroll's opening line of Jabberwocky.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrab

The power of this literary style comes from its concentrated and often surprising form of language.

Poetry works to disrupt the customary ways in which we use language. Poetry stretches the ordinary uses of words, and places them into unfamiliar relationships with each other, thereby cutting fresh paths across the well-worn grooves of everyday language.

PREACHING AND THE LITERARY FORMS OF THE BIBLE
THOMAS LONG



Poetry is strategically located throughout the Bible, commonly embedded within narratives. Some poems are found at the conclusion of stories, and some books are entirely made up of poetry, including some of the prophets like Psalms, Joel, and Zephaniah. Other books are partially poetic like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. The biblical authors use poetry in a variety of contexts to open up a whole new way of seeing the world.

The prophetic poetry of the Bible is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of seeing and imagining the world.

Note: Some examples of poetry embedded within narratives are Gen 1:27; Gen 2:20; Gen 3:14-17; Gen 49; Exod 15; Deut 32-33; 2 Sam 22-23

THE ART OF BIBLICAL POETRY
ROBERT ALTER

3 | Discourse in the Bible

In contrast to poetry, which uses imagery and metaphor to engage the right brain in emotional and imaginative ways, discourse engages the left brain through logical and linear developments of thought. Discourse is prose writing that seeks to communicate information for a variety of purposes:

- **To inform** (Ephesians 1-3)
- **To persuade** (Ephesians 4-6, Deuteronomy)
- **To comfort** (2 Corinthians 1-7)
- **To inform** (Romans)
- **To challenge or warn** (Hebrews)

Discourse builds its arguments through logical development of thought. These movements of thought are connected by words like, and, therefore, because, so that, as a result, etc. By using logic and reasoning, discourse seeks to build an argument and then persuade the listener to change their behavior.

God saved you out of slavery in Egypt
– THEREFORE –
be faithful to the covenant.

FROM DEUTERONOMY 4-11

Jesus was killed and exalted for the Gospel and I [Paul] am in prison for this Gospel and Tychicus and Timothy risked their lives for the Gospel

– THEREFORE –

Euodia and Syntyche, you need to have the same mindset, in the Lord

FROM PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2; 4:2

Discourse is found throughout the Bible in its laws, wisdom literature, and the letters of the New Testament.

Intro to Biblical Genres

The How to Read The Bible series of videos explores essential literary genres and sub-genres that you will find in the Bible. Below are brief definitions of them and what to look out for.

Narrative: Biblical stories are not merely historical reports. They are carefully crafted stories that teach and communicate profound truths about God, ourselves, and the world. Through character and plot development, the author invites us into a view of the world where God is involved and has purposes for human history. The characters' speech and actions, the plot line and consequences of their decisions, and also the repetition of key themes all contribute to the theological message the biblical storytellers wish to communicate.

Psalms: Poetry is written to express emotion rather than logical argument. Biblical psalms have many forms (thanksgiving, praise, lament, petition), and they make heavy use of metaphor and imagery.

Law: These are the commands and decrees given by God to Israel at or around Mount Sinai. The laws formed the terms of Israel's covenant agreement with God and cover all aspects of their community life. Ritual commands concern Israel's worship in the temple, and other laws cover Israel's social and moral life.



- Prophecy:** Prophecy is divine speech given through an appointed figure in Israel's history. Prophets primarily wrote in poetry, but they also wrote in discourse. The prophetic books contain a fair amount of narrative as well. Their mission was to accuse Israel of covenant failure and warn them of the consequences, either divine judgment or redemption. Prophetic poetry uses a lot of poetic metaphor, symbols, and rhetorical persuasion. It lacks a linear or logical flow, but it communicates through imagery and symphonic repetition, appealing to both the imagination and intellect.
- Wisdom:** The wisdom books are a diverse collection of poetry and discourse books that are unified by their main theme: the journey to live wisely and well in a way that honors God and others. Wisdom books use poetry, proverbs, and poetic dialogue to invite readers to listen to the wisdom of the ancients.
- Gospel:** The four Gospels are a form of biography. These are carefully designed narratives about the life, mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are meant to both explain Jesus' significance and challenge the reader's thinking and behavior. Each one has a unique set of themes to emphasize about Jesus, reflected in the different arrangement and content of their four accounts. They all focus on Jesus' announcement and teaching about God's kingdom, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection. They then present all of this as "good news" which demands a response.
- Parable:** Parables are short, fictional stories drawn from daily life that are used by a teacher to illustrate a main point. Parables usually have a simple surface meaning that invites reflection on a deeper more profound reality. They can range from short metaphors to elaborate allegories, but they often involve some level of surprise or reversal at the end.
- Epistle:** These are letters from the apostles written to specific church communities, and they are almost always in discourse. The authors tend to make their point through logical forms of communication or argumentation, introducing a topic which is developed in a linear train of thought. New Testament letters usually have a combination of teaching followed by a challenge or exhortation.

Apocalyptic: The authors recount visions or dreams that reveal a heavenly perspective on historical events and their meaning in light of the consummation of history. They typically culminate in God's defeat of evil and transformation of the world order into the coming Kingdom of God. These books have a universal focus and a strong emphasis on God's direction over the course of history. Apocalyptic literature often uses strange symbols and metaphorical imagery, almost always drawn from the Old Testament, that require patient reflection. Because these books culminate in God's defeat of evil, their purpose is to encourage worship and faithfulness despite suffering and hardship.

Conclusion

Reading the Bible wisely and effectively means learning the skills necessary to comprehend a variety of ancient literature. Each book in the Bible contains unique combinations of literary styles that can sometimes be confusing if the reader is unfamiliar with literary types, genres, and forms. But fear not; there are many ways to become more acquainted with the diverse forms of literary expression in the Bible. When you're ready to dive deeper into understanding its literary types, check out one of the books listed below.

FURTHER READING:

Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change: Understanding and Responding to God's Word*
Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*
Robert H. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*

Discussion Questions

- 1 | The Bible was composed over a vast period of time by many different authors. How is this advantageous in understanding the grand story of God and humanity? On the other hand, what problems can arise by having so many authors and literary genres in the Bible?
- 2 | Look closer at Exodus 14:21-28 and Exodus 15:4-10 quoted above. Why is parallelism and metaphor such an integral part of poetry? What other attributes in these two texts make them unique to their genre of literature?
- 3 | Take a look at how Genesis 1 is formatted in your Bible. Does your translation format this chapter as poetry, prose, a combination of the two, or something else? What decisions do the type-setters and translators of your version of the Bible have to make when they format the text?
- 4 | What is written in the law, and how do you read it? Answer this question with whatever comes to the top of your mind first. Does this question make an inference to our understanding of literary genre? Meditate on Luke 10:26m and place yourself in the shoes of the Bible expert as he answers this question.
- 5 | What role does the Holy Spirit play in our understanding of biblical literature and the words of Jesus? Look up 1 Corinthians 2:13-14 and John 14:26 for talking points.
- 6 | How can misreading a genre of literature lead to incorrect interpretation? Look up 2 Peter 3:16 and 2 Timothy 2:15. Is an understanding of literary genre inferred to in these passages? Why or why not?