



The Bible as Jewish Meditation Literature

the BIBLE PROJECT

STUDY NOTES

HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF LITERATURE

00:00 – 0:46

Jon: So the Bible is a collection of books written in different literary styles like narrative, poetry, and prose. And most of us are familiar with these kinds of literature.

Tim: Yeah, we all know a narrative when we see one, like *The Hunger Games* or *The Great Gatsby*.

Jon: And most people can recognize poetry whether it's Walt Whitman or the songs of Bob Dylan.

Tim: And every day we're surrounded by prose in news articles or essays.

Jon: Now all these examples are modern American literature in that they came from this time period and this region of the world.

Tim: But there's also medieval English literature from another place and time or ancient Greek writings from this place and time.

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Jon: So each time period produces its own unique kind of literature.¹

Tim: And in order to read the Bible well, we need to keep in mind that it comes from this part of the world and was produced in this basic period of time.²

DETAILS IN JEWISH LITERATURE

00:46 – 01:25

Jon: So what's unique about ancient Jewish literature?

Tim: Well, a key feature is that it lacks a lot of the details that modern readers have come to expect in stories and poems.

Jon: And this makes it seem really simple.

Tim: But actually it's very sophisticated literature. Every detail that is given matters.³

Jon: And that's great, but the lack of detail means the stories are often loaded with ambiguities. I mean, take one of the first stories: Adam and Eve in the garden. Where did this talking snake come from, and why did God allow him there? Why didn't Adam and Eve die on the spot like God said they would?⁴ And who's this offspring of the woman who will destroy the snake but is bitten by it?

1. **DISCUSS:** The Bible is a library of diverse literature composed over a vast period of time by many authors. How does this knowledge help us to understand the grand story of God and humanity? On the other hand, what problems confront a reader when navigating so many different authors and literary genres?

2. Check out Episode 1: What is the Bible?

3. "The Greek storytelling tendency of loading the story with details is one that modern literary practice has by and large adopted and developed. Precisely for that reason we have to

adjust our habits as readers in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the rather different narrative maneuvers characteristic of the Hebrew Bible. The underlying biblical conception of people's character is that they're unpredictable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into ambiguity. Thus, biblical narrative style is marked by the art of reticence."

THE ART OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE
ROBERT ALTER

4. Read more in Genesis chapters 2 and 3.



AUTHORIAL INTENT

01:25 - 02:52

Tim: Yeah, so many puzzles in this story. And some of these are questions that we have—and that are not important to what the author is focusing on—but some of these ambiguities are intentional.

Jon: Intentional? Won't that lead to bad interpretations? People filling in the gaps with their own answers?

Tim: Well, that's a risk the biblical authors took in writing this way. We all tend to impose our own cultural assumptions onto the Bible,⁵ but they apparently thought the risk was worth it. These oddities are really invitations into an adventure of reading and discovery.

Jon: What do you mean?

Tim: Well for example, the strange promise about the offspring of the woman crushing and being bitten by the snake. That word offspring is a clue to pay attention to genealogies which, lo and behold, run through the whole biblical narrative. They trace the lineage of Eve all the way through King David and his offspring, and in the New Testament, Jesus is connected to the offspring of this royal line.⁶

5. For an example of this, check out our blog post, "Animal Sacrifice? Really?"

6. See Luke 3:23-38 for a genealogy spanning all the way from Adam to Jesus.

Now, when you read the prophets, Isaiah connected this king to the suffering servant⁷ who would die on behalf of his people. And then in the book of Revelation, there's this symbolic vision, and can you guess? It's about a woman and her offspring.⁸ It's Jesus and his followers who conquer the dragon by giving up their lives.

Jon: Yeah, so each part of the story there is loaded with ambiguities, but all together it makes sense.

Tim: And this is the literary genius of the Bible. It forces you to keep reading and then interpret each part in light of the others.⁹

Jon: This is feeling complicated. I don't know if I can do all that.

Tim: Well, you're not expected to notice all of this by yourself or all at once. This dense way of writing forces you to slow down and then read carefully, embarking on this interactive discovery process through the whole biblical narrative over a lifetime of reading and re-reading.

Jon: Ah, okay, meditation literature.

7. Read more in Isaiah chapter 53.

8. Read about this in detail in Revelation chapter 12.

9. Consider the interpretation of Gideon in Judges 6:36, "...if you will deliver Israel by my hand, look I will lay out a fleece of wool on the threshing floor..." By itself, we read Gideon's need to discern God's will. He asks God for a sign, and God provides the sign. The interpretation? Gideon is an example

for us! In context (Judges 6-8), we see a bigger, clearer picture. The entire story highlights Gideon's distrust of God (6:13: "The Lord has abandoned us!"). God already provided signs in the angels appearance and the fire on the altar (6:20-27). The interpretation? Gideon is "testing God" (6:39), which isn't good or exemplary. What's the point then? A story can communicate opposite meanings depending on the reader's awareness of larger plotlines.

Tim: Yeah, in Psalm 1 we read about the ideal Bible reader.¹⁰ It's someone who meditates on the Scriptures day and night. In Hebrew, the word meditate¹¹ means literally to mutter or speak quietly. The idea is that every day for the rest of your life you slowly, quietly read the Bible out loud to yourself and then go talk about it with your friends, pondering the puzzles, making connections, and discovering what it all means.¹² And as you let the Bible interpret itself, something remarkable happens; the Bible starts to read you. Because ultimately the writers of the Bible want you to adopt this story as your story.¹³

Jon: So this ancient Jewish writing style, it must create unique types of narrative, and poetry, and discourse.

Tim: Yes, and we'll explore all those literary styles starting next with biblical narrative.

10. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and
whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

PSALM 1 (NIV)

11. **HEBREW:** Meditate = הָגָה (hagah)
12. **Meditating on the Scriptures in solitude has profound value in fostering growth. On the other hand, so does listening to the Scriptures being read aloud with others. Watch the "Public Reading of Scripture" video to learn more about how important this is for both ancient Israel and us today.**
13. **DISCUSS:** Describe what you felt when you walked out of the cinema immediately after being totally immersed in a great movie. Similarly, what was it that you experienced after the final page of your favorite novel? Discuss overlapping differences and similarities between biblical narrative and all the other narratives we encounter in daily life. What makes the Bible so unique? Share a moment of personal revelation you had while reading the Scriptures. What was happening? How was Scripture orientating your location and relationship with God and our world?