**Introduction**

Review: OT – 5 Lenses: Context, Covenant, Canon, Character, Christ | NT: Genre, Look to Jesus in Gospels, Indicative-Imperative in Epistles, Application

Last week we looked at various, helpful tools in studying the whole bible, OT and NT. This week, as we continue looking at the “anatomy” of the bible, we need to think a bit about genre. ***Can anyone define “genre?”***

“Genre is a way of classifying something according to its type or style rather than its specific content or storyline.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Biblical genres are normally identified by examining a book’s style, structure, form, tone, context, and literary techniques.

***What are some problems we might run into if we don’t consider genre as we read our bibles?***

Understanding genres is important because they impact our study of Scripture. Before we ever get into the actual text of a biblical passage, we need to understand what literary genre the text is in so that we can properly observe, interpret, and apply that text. The Bible is much more than a piece of literature. But it’s certainly not less. We need to understand the Bible in its literary context, just like anything else we ever read. Over the next three weeks, Lord willing, we’ll be going through each of the main genres found in Scripture.

**What Are Biblical Genres?**

You should know the genres we find in the bible are typical of the genres found in literature from biblical times. For example apocalyptic literature, like in the book of Revelation, seems strange to us now, but was normal in biblical times. The primary genres found in Scripture are narratives, histories, law, wisdom literature, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel, and epistle (or letter). In your handout is chart explaining what books of the Bible largely fall into each genre. Of course, even though most books are primarily one genre, several books contain multiple genres.

| Biblical Genres | |
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| Genre | Book |
| **Historical/Law Narrative** | Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah |
| **Wisdom** | Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes |
| **Poetry** | Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations |
| **Prophecy** | Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi |
| **Apocalyptic** | Daniel, Revelation of John |
| **Gospel** | Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts |
| **Epistle** | Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, I, II and III John, Jude |

Now, it’s important to note that the biblical authors themselves understood their writings to fall into certain genres. As you read through the Bible, you’ll sometimes find the inspired authors labeling what genre they’re writing in. Sayings, proverbs, psalms, songs, laments, oracles, and letters are all examples of that.[[2]](#footnote-2) 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.

**Many genres, one storyline**

Now, then, ***think back to week 1, who wrote the Bible?*** [you want them to get to “all inspired by the same holy spirit which in God”] That means that even though there’s a diversity of genres, there is a single, unified storyline.

This makes the Bible an anthology. Multiple authors (about 3 dozen human authors), diverse genres, yet comprehensive and cohesive.

Also we see diversity, but unity in diversity. In fact, this is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the Bible. The diversity is great—and it is rich. And yet the whole Bible fits together amazingly well. Old and New Testaments play off of each other like we discussed last week. And it seems patently clear that writings in one millennium—of Moses, for example—were intended to begin ideas that wouldn’t be completed until later.

***Any questions?***

**Narratives & Histories**

OK. Having introduced the idea of genre, let’s bite into our first one: narrative and history. One would think that a religious text would be all about dogma and rules. Yet a substantial part of the Bible is history. Why is that? Because the Christian faith is all about history. It’s all about things that happened in real life. And, in fact, if those specific historical events didn’t happen, the whole thing falls apart. Christianity isn’t simply a philosophy; it is a faith based on history. So we believe that Jesus was a real man in time and space. Even though he was not limited by those realities, he did live on earth at a certain time. Jesus was born, he lived, he died, and he was resurrected and all of these things are historical facts. If any of these facts were found to be untrue, the Christian religion would no longer be valid. Paul says this about the fact of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. He says, “If Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins, and your faith is worthless.” But Jesus did get up from the dead!

Also, the Bible is a historical record of God’s dealing with His people. And almost all of it is about three events in history. It is about the Exodus from Egypt. That is, the events leading up to and then following God’s rescuing of his people from slavery. Second, it is about the Exile in Babylon. Most of the Old Testament is either warning the people of this exile or explaining what is happening before and after the exile. And third, it is about inauguration of the church through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Very little of the Bible doesn’t deal with one of those three events.

So in his kindness, God’s given us narrative history about these events. But beyond simply telling us *what* happened, we get theological background material too. We get the internal psychological dynamics of different characters. And we get other important clues that allow us to understand—not just what happened—but **why** it happened. Its importance to the grand storyline of redemption history. How God was preparing a people for redemption in Christ Jesus. So how should we read and profit from narrative history in the Bible? You’ll see in your handout a few different guidelines to follow.

**A. Reflect on the Reality of These Events**

I know this seems obvious—but we often miss it. When you read the Bible’s accounts of these events, take a moment to consider: these things really happened! Sometimes in our Bible study we jump too quickly to the spiritual application of a passage and miss the fact that God has acted in miraculous ways in human history. When you do this, you will be able to relate to what Moses said in Ex 15.11 after the crossing of the Red Sea:

“Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?  
    Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
    awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

Scripture is full of amazing works of God: the flooding of the earth, the crossing of the Red Sea, the sun standing still, Jesus turning water into wine, and most gloriously, the resurrection of Jesus Christ! Let’s take a look at the resurrection from Mathew 28:

**1**Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. **2**And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. **3**His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. **4**And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. **5**But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. **6**He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. **7**Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” **8**So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **9**And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. **10**Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

Brothers and sisters, what I just read really happened! (Pause and let the class silently reflect) it is the narrative of an historical event. ***Why does it matter that this really happened? What if this was just an allegory of how the church rose to life from Jesus’ death?***

**B. Recognize that not everything recorded in a history should be understood as historical.**

OK. Now you’re looking at me weird thinking I’m telling you the Bible’s not all true. That’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is that sometimes right in the middle of a narrative passage, we have a made up exemplary story or a parable. Consider II Samuel 12.1-6, right after David sleeps with Bathsheba and has her husband killed.

**1**And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. **2**The rich man had very many flocks and herds, **3**but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. **4**Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” **5**Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, **6**and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

**7**Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. **8**And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. **9**Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?

***What part of this story actually happened? What did not? What clues does the text give us that this is a parable?***

**C. Remember that not everything in a history or narrative should be emulated or affirmed.**

Take Matthew 14 as an example.

**6**But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, **7**so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. **8**Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” **9**And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. **10**He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, **11**and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.

***Did this really happen?*** (Yes) ***Was it just, or right, or good?*** (No) What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it’s just the opposite. ***So how do we know when we are reading a positive or a negative example?***

**D. Not everything in a history or narrative is explained.**

Sometimes, we’re not told by the text if a particular event is good or bad. We’re expected to judge for ourselves on the basis of what we know about God and what’s taught elsewhere in Scripture. For example, turn to Judges 14.5-6 and 8-9:

**5**Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. **6**Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

**8**After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. **9**He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.

The point of this passage actually goes unstated. ***But does anyone know why Samson didn’t tell his parents?*** [What we know from other passages, however, is that Samson’s contact with the lion carcass violated his Nazirite vow (his being set apart for the Lord).] Samson’s choice is indicative of his increasing separation from God. That’s never explicitly stated, but it *does* seem to be the point of this particular passage. Remember our interpretive rule from week 3 – let scripture interpret scripture.

**E. All histories and narratives are incomplete; and yet, fully reliable.**

The Bible’s histories include **everything that the inspired author thought was important for us to know but not everything we could possibly know**. Narratives aren’t written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific, and limited purposes and deal with only certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways. That has two important implications.

* First, we don’t need to fear that we’re missing something that the narrator left out. For example, I’d love to know how the Ninevites repented so dramatically in response to Jonah’s preaching and yet were invading Israel not too many years later. Or what happened to the Ark of the Covenant. Or practically any detail at all about this mysterious figure of Melchizedek. How did Abraham know him, and why is he so prominent in Hebrews if Genesis tells us so little about him? But if it’s not in the text, it’s not something God thought I needed. Digging through commentaries to figure out historical background can be useful—but I should never feel like I can’t understand an inspired text without the help of an uninspired one. Commentaries can be wrong. Archeological discoveries can be misleading. The Bible, though, is entirely reliable.
* Second, there are no “disposable” sections of Scripture. I really need to stare at a passage until I understand why it’s there. *Every* passage. So the genealogies at the beginning of 1 Chronicles. I’ll admit, they don’t have the same concentration of insight as, say, Romans 8. But they’re there for a reason! They are telling us that even after the Exile, God’s lineage of promise that leads to the Christ is still in tact. The people are still God’s people—just as much as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Until I understand why those genealogies are there, I won’t understand why 1 Chronicles is there.

Again, we need to trust that what’s in the Bible is what we need to know, no more and no less.

**F. Histories and narratives often illustrate, but do not directly teach, doctrine.**

Consider Jesus’ baptism in Matthew chapter 3:

**13**Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. **14**John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” **15**But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. **16**And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; **17**and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Here, we have an illustration of the trinity but not an explicit teaching of Trinitarian doctrine. This baptism is a historical event, captured in narrative form, but its theological significance and implications largely go unstated. It would seem, according to Jesus’ own words, that the main point of this recording of events is to demonstrate how Christ fulfilled everything that’s needed for “all righteousness.” Yet we also see a personal interaction between all three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So it illustrates that doctrine even though it doesn’t actually state it[[3]](#footnote-3).

**G. The meaning of the text is likely linked to what it says about God**

This final point is simple, and yet so powerful. Take the story of David and Goliath for example. Turn to 1 Samuel 17 for a moment. Often, this story is used to talk about how we can take on our biggest foes. The goliath of debt, for example. That if we just have enough faith in God, he’ll deliver us. But God never promises to get you out of debt, does he? So that interpretation lead to a false promise. Well, to understand this narrative correctly we need to find where God is.

***Where is God mentioned or implied in this account?*** [eventually get the class focused on verse 26. Then help them see that this confrontation is really about God and the promises he’d made to Israel. David’s confidence isn’t faith generally, but faith in some very specific promises of God. And the hero isn’t David, it’s God. Now that we’ve found God in the passage, how can we apply this to our own lives?]

**Conclusion**

OK. So let me summarize what we’ve looked at so far. First, genre. Understanding the various genres in Scripture is another way to frame and direct your personal Bible study so that the time and effort you put forth is both effective and profitable. And an awareness of genre will help you avoid *false* interpretations of Scripture.

And second, the specific genre of narrative history. Biblical histories and narratives are rich sources of study that display God’s faithfulness to his people and his unchanging nature. These genres, however, are not intended to record and explain every detail of events that are to be unquestionably mimicked. Instead, they provide all that is necessary to study and understand that great grand narrative of Scripture: **God saving his people and judging his enemies through Jesus Christ**.

***Any final questions?***

Close in prayer.

1. Beynon, Nigel and Andrew Sach, *Digging Deeper: Tools to Unearth the Bible’s Treasure*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 2005, pp. 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Biblical studies, genres are usually associated with whole books of the Bible, because each of its books comprises a complete textual unit; however, a book may be internally composed of a variety of styles, forms, and so forth, and thus bear the characteristics of more than one genre (for example, chapter 1 of the book of Revelation is prophetic/visionary; chapters 2 and 3 are similar to the epistle genre)—more on this later.

   Unfortunately, there is not a 100% accurate way of deciding the genre of a passage and this sometimes leads to debate. For example, many Bible believing, Christ loving, honorable Christians have disagreed on if we should interpret Genesis chapter one as six literal “days,” or if it is a poetic way of describing God’s carful ordering of creation. Even so, most of the time, it is fairly obvious when Scripture intends for us to understand a passage as literal or figurative (Jesus, “I am the door” and “I and the Father are one”). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Other examples – Doctrine of Providence – Joseph and his brothers, Acts 2  
   Doctrine of Sin – that it leads to death – so and so lived X amount of years and then he died. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)