

# Literary Genres in Scripture

Space does allow us to include more than a very brief introduction to the different types of literature found in the Old Testament. For further detail the reader is referred to the excellent book *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* by Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart (Scripture Union, 1994) or the more technical *The Hermeneutical Spiral* by Grant R Osborne (IVP, 1991). Other useful resources, especially for preachers, are Graeme Goldsworthy's *preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (IVP, 2000) and *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical exegesis for preaching and teaching* by Walter C Kaiser Jr (Baker, 1981).

It should be noted that each individual book of the Bible does not necessarily contain only one literary genre. For example, the book of Daniel contains both narrative and apocalyptic. Isaiah includes narrative and prophecy. Numbers includes narrative and law. In addition, the labels we conventionally attach to sections of the Old Testament can be confusing. The books from Isaiah to Malachi are often bracketed together as prophecy. In reality a number of these books include narrative portions (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Haggai, ) and one is almost entirely narrative (Jonah). The book of Lamentations, although found in this section, is actually poetry similar to the psalms, as is Jonah's prayer (chapter 2). Psalms are also found embedded in other books (see Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32, I Chronicles 16). It is important to consider the overall literary genre of each book and the specific genre that is being used in the passage we are studying. Within the Old Testament there are six major literary genres:

## Narrative (History)

These parts of the Bible record stories about people and events. They include over 40% of the Old Testament (Genesis, much of Exodus and Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and parts of the prophets including large parts of Daniel). Key principles for reading narrative include:

- Remember that it is historical – these books are not written as history books, but they do claim to be historically accurate, they are not myths or made up stories
- The stories are primarily intended to show us God's plan in working with people and to teach us what God is like, rather than as examples to us (although we can learn either positively or negatively from the examples of the people in the story)
- The stories record what actually happened, not what should have happened, so we should not always look for a moral (a teaching point for what we should do) in the story
- The stories do not aim to tell us everything that happened – they are interested in telling us the important things so that we can see how God worked through that situation
- We should be careful not to read the stories as allegories (in other words reflecting another meaning that is not in the text), but to try to understand the clear meaning of the text. However, some parts of Old Testament narrative have a typological significance – in other words, they point forward to Christ through example.

## Law

These parts record the Law of God given to Israel by God, and include large parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Key principles for reading these parts of the Bible are:

- We should not read them as God's direct words to us, since they were given to the people of Israel and many parts no longer apply to Christians.
- The Law can teach us a great deal about God – His holiness, justice, love and mercy (protecting innocent people) – and about ourselves – our sinfulness and need of a perfect sacrifice to receive forgiveness.
- The Old Testament Law centred on the principles of loving God with our entire being and loving others as we love ourselves – this was how Jesus summarised it – and these two cannot be separated. The core issue in sin is wrong worship, but this shows itself in wrong actions towards others.

## Poetry

These parts of the Bible are poems or songs written to describe the experience of God's people or to praise Him. The key poetry book is the book of Psalms (a psalm is a kind of song intended for use in prayer and praise), but there is also some poetry in some of the prophetic and narrative books, and Song of Songs is a poetry book. Key principles for reading poetry are:

- Psalms include a range of emotional conditions and can be used to understand what a relationship with God looks like as well as what He is like. We can use psalms for three key purposes:
  - a) As a guide to worship – they can teach us how to pray and sing praise
  - b) As a guide to an honest relationship with God – the psalms show us that we can tell God exactly what we think and how we feel, even if it is not right
  - c) As a reminder to reflect and meditate on what God has done and who He is
- Hebrew poetry does not rhyme, but uses parallels and repeated ideas for emphasis.
- We must be careful not to take individual verses out of the context of the whole psalm.
- Psalms may also contain prophecies about Christ.

## Wisdom

The wisdom parts of the Old Testament include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job as well as a few psalms. These books are intended to teach us how to make godly choices in life. Some important principles for reading the Wisdom books are:

- To understand a wisdom saying we must understand the terms used in it correctly (e.g. “fool” in Proverbs means someone who ignores God, not someone with a low intelligence).
- Wisdom statements tell us what should be, not always what actually is, the case. Often two extremes are presented in a wisdom statement, giving us a principle that we have to apply wisely in our decisions. These statements preserve the ideals and force us to make a choice.
- Wisdom teaches us firstly that God has created the Universe with moral order and that everything we do has consequences, with God ultimately in control, but secondly it also gives us skills for life.

## Prophecy

This type of literature includes 16 Old Testament books (from Isaiah to Malachi). The prophets were God's spokespeople to the nation of Israel. These books record prophecies or visions given to the prophets by God for His people (some of the Old Testament “prophecy” books also include narrative portions telling about the prophet's ministry – in the case of Jonah, virtually the whole book is narrative!) Some important principles for reading prophecy are:

- The words of the prophets are the words of God – He literally gave His words to them to proclaim to the people.
- The Old Testament prophets' role was primarily to call the people back to obedience to the Old Covenant.
- Many of the Old Testament prophets also saw forward to the New Covenant and the Messiah. Sometimes they were not even aware of this, and the prophecies about the future can seem to merge with the prophecies about the immediate situation.
- Some parts of the prophets (e.g. Ezekiel or Revelation) are highly figurative and cannot be taken literally. However, the underlying reality they picture is true.
- The prophets only had incomplete glimpses of God's overall plan – none of them claimed to record every detail of how God would work, and the ultimate hope of the Messiah and the New Heaven and New Earth was only seen partially by them.

## Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic is a type of literature found in the second half of Daniel and much of Zechariah in the Old Testament (it is also found in the New Testament book of Revelation and the words of Jesus in His so-called “Olivet Discourse” recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). This type of literature has a narrative framework but contains imagery that is allegorical

of spiritual realities. The revelation is often conveyed to the writer by an angel and gives an insight into the spiritual realities that lie unseen behind the visible world we inhabit. Some important principles for reading apocalyptic literature are:

- The imagery is not intended to be taken literally, but represents real events, movements or individuals. This is the only genre of biblical literature where an allegorical scheme of interpretation is appropriate.
- Although these passages are allegorical we should not try to understand the meaning of every detail. The aim of the revelation is primarily to impress upon us the sovereign purpose of God and to reveal His ultimate victory over evil.

## Gospels

Four books in the New Testament are called Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In fact these books are “*The gospel according to*” each of the four authors. They tell one story, the good news about Jesus, from four different perspectives. The books are written to record the life and teaching of Jesus in the context of leading up to the central focus on His death and resurrection. For more comment about the four Gospels see the section on Christ below.

## Epistles (letters)

These books (from Romans to Jude in the New Testament) are letters written by apostles to individuals and churches to encourage and challenge them and to teach them the truth and correct wrong perceptions of the Christian message. Key principles for reading these letters are:

- As with any letter it is helpful to understand who is writing, who they are writing to and what caused them to write. We can usually see these three things by reading the letter carefully.
- To understand the letter correctly it is also helpful to ask what questions might have been in the minds of the readers causing the writer to give these answers (this is especially true for a book like I Corinthians which was written in reply to questions this church had asked).
- The apostles who wrote these books had the same authority that Christ had – He trained them and gave them authority to lay down the foundational teaching of the Church.
- We should not take verses from the epistles out of context, but must try to understand each phrase in the context of the book.
- Many of the points in the Gospels are directly applicable to us today, but some were specific to the culture of the time, and in these cases we must try to understand the underlying principle and apply it to our own cultural setting.