

BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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BIBLICAL LITERATURE I

Introduction

The Bible, as we know, is unlike any other book in the history of mankind. Because it is inspired by God, it can't be treated "like any other book." On the other hand, because it was written by human beings, there is a sense in which it can be treated like other books. Our ability to understand its message can be greatly enhanced if we are able to recognize the literary techniques used by its authors and place those techniques within the cultures to which the authors were writing. Our task in this course is therefore to study the Bible as literature, not in a way that is independent of its divine authorship or message, but in a way that will help us to understand that message more fully. Today, we will look at some background issues, some related to the question of literature in general and others connected with biblical literature in particular.

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

This is not as easy a question as it may appear to be on the surface. Is all writing literature? Certainly one would be reluctant to classify a grocery list or a check register in the same category that includes the plays of Shakespeare. In general, it is possible to define literature as consisting of those written texts that demonstrate the exercise of imagination (note that this is not the same as saying they must be fictional - history may also be literary) within the confines of a particular form. Knowledge of that form and its conventions, as well as an understanding of the imaginative process of the author, is essential to the proper understanding of literature.

WHAT IS THE DETERMINATIVE FACTOR IN LITERARY INTERPRETATION?

In recent years, this question has been the subject of considerable debate among literary scholars. Three principal factors may be isolated as crucial to the interpretation of literature.

The first of these is the author. Throughout most of the history of literary interpretation, it has been assumed that the task of the literary scholar was to determine what the author intended a particular work of literature to mean. Such a determination required knowledge of the author's life and times, as well as some understanding of chronology and the mental and emotional state of the writer. It was generally assumed that the more people knew about these things, the more capable they would be of interpreting a particular literary work.

The second key factor is the text itself. Within the last fifty years, some literary scholars have begun to insist that knowledge of the author is irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. Instead, they argue that the text must be treated as an isolated artifact and analyzed only with regard to its own internal structure and conventions. While this has the advantage of requiring that the text be treated as a unified whole (contrary to liberal biblical scholars, who have had a tendency to ignore the actual text while speculating about its true authorship, sources, and history), it obviously cuts the text off from any objective basis for understanding in history.

Even more radical is the suggestion, popular in some modern circles, that the key factor in the interpretation of literature is the reader. These scholars argue that a work of literature means whatever the reader gets out of it. Thus Marxists and feminists are quite willing to assert meanings

of literary texts that are completely isolated, both from the life and times of the author and the structure of the work itself. While their work contains a grain of truth, namely that every reader brings his own agenda to the reading of any work of literature, the complete relativizing of literary interpretation would, needless to say, have devastating effects on the interpretation of Scripture.

For our own purposes, we merely need make the common-sense assertion that no faithful interpretation of literature is possible without considering all of these factors. Focusing on one to the exclusion of the others leads to unbalanced and often fanciful interpretation, whether applied to literature in general or to the Bible in particular. Understanding a work of literature requires that we understand the life and times of the author (to the extent that this is possible), analyze the structure and conventions of the text, and recognize our own needs and biases as readers.

TO WHAT EXTENT MAY THE BIBLE BE TREATED AS LITERATURE?

Next, we must discuss the extent to which the Bible may be treated as a work of literature. As a written work that incorporates the personalities of the human authors within the confines of certain forms of writing, it certainly qualifies as literature. The key to treating the Bible as literature, however, is to recognize its dual authorship. It was not only written by a variety of men over an extensive time period in a number of different cultural contexts, it was also written by God. Thus the ultimate context for the study of Scripture as literature must be its divine authorship. Any approach to the literature of the Bible that ignores this fact is bound to produce misinterpretation rather than enlightenment.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF TREATING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE?

The primary danger involved with treating the Bible as literature is that, by focusing on the human characteristics of the text, we too easily lose sight of its divine character. In short, studying the Bible as a human literary work often leads to considering it as *no more than* a human literary work, fundamentally indistinguishable from other great works of literature, though certainly to be classified as among the greatest. Once people begin viewing the Bible in this light, it is easy to begin to assert the existence of errors, thus undermining the entire doctrine of inspiration. No one would be so foolish as to claim infallibility for a work of literature.

An even worse danger that can result from a literary approach to Scripture is the consequence of equating literature with *fiction*. Too many scholars have blithely assumed that, because the Bible displays many of the characteristics of literature, that it must be treated as fiction, and therefore must not be thought to have any objective validity. Because the Bible is literature, they assert, it cannot in any objective sense be *true*.

Because of these fallacies, all of which have been asserted by liberal scholars at one time or another, evangelicals have often shied away from any literary treatment of Scripture. It is not necessary for a literary approach to Scripture to undermine either its inspiration or its objective validity, however, as we hope to see in this course.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF TREATING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE?

How often in the past has the church been led astray by those who allegorize the text of Scripture in order to proclaim some tradition of which the Bible knows nothing? How many of us have been confronted in the past by those who insist on treating the figurative language of biblical poetry as if it had been part of some future newspaper article? Both of these errors have had serious consequences in the history of the church, and both stem from the failure to treat the Bible as literature. Knowledge of the literary conventions within which the authors of Scripture were operating prevents us from reading their work as if it were the product of our own times, and thus reading into it either popular philosophies or modern social and political conditions. Application to our own times and circumstances is only possible as we become able to read the Bible in the context of its own times and circumstances. As we pursue this course, we will look specifically at the various literary forms used by the writers of Scripture and discuss, both in general and with reference to specific passages, how knowledge of these literary genres can enable us to be more faithful interpreters of the Word, better able to apply it rightly to our own lives.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE II

The Question of Genre

When someone picks up a piece of written material, he almost automatically classifies it in his mind according to the type of literature it represents. Is it a newspaper article? a history book? a novel? a short story? a play? a poem? These classifications obviously make a difference in the expectations we bring to a piece of literature and the manner in which we interpret it. We don't expect to find the same type of material in a newspaper article that we find in a novel, nor do we read a poem in the same way we read a short story. These classifications by which we determine both expectations and methods of interpretation are known as *genres*. The ability to apply genre categories is a tremendous help in the interpretation of literature, no less so with the literature of the Bible than with the reading matter we encounter daily.

GENRE CATEGORIES ARE CULTURALLY DIFFERENTIATED

Genres are not universal categories that fit any time or place. Instead, the literature of each culture and each era takes on certain conventions that allow it to be classified, but these conventions may not fit the writings of another time or place. For instance, the novel is a type of literature that is popular in the Western world today, but we would look in vain for novels among the literature of the ancient Greeks, however. In fact, the novel is a fairly recent innovation in English literature, dating back only a few centuries.

Even when genres from one time or place may be related to those of another, the conventions are likely to differ. For instance, poetry is a form of expression that has characterized many cultures throughout the years. Yet the poetry of the Japanese differs markedly from the poetry of the Germans, and poetry of the Renaissance follows conventions that are entirely foreign to those observed in modern Western verse.

GENRE CATEGORIES FUNCTION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Within any given literary genre may be found a wide variety of sub-categories. For example, this morning's paper was made up of many pieces, all of which may broadly be classified as newspaper articles. Yet the news articles differ in style and conventions from the editorial columns, which differ from the sports articles, which in turn differ markedly from the obituaries, the advertisements, and the comics. Each of these may be broken down still further into more detailed sub-categories. Thus any given piece of literature may fall within a large number of genre categories, from the general to the specific.

GENRE CATEGORIES MAY BE EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT

In many cases, an author writes with a particular genre in mind. In doing so, he makes an implied covenant with the reader in which both agree to follow certain conventions in writing and interpreting the piece of literature. In a sense, this makes matters easy for both, since the conventions are assumed to be equally known and understood. Many authors, however, being creative types, enjoy violating the conventions of a genre in order to challenge their readers or stretch the boundaries of popular expectation. Such an approach requires some adjustment by the reader,

but still operates within the fundamental conventions of the genre in question. One cannot stretch the boundaries of something without functioning within it.

A much more difficult situation is faced by the reader, however, when the conventions within which the author is operating are unknown. Such a situation may occur because the author is so creative that his writing doesn't really fit any known pattern (in which case he may find it difficult to communicate at all), or, more frequently, when the reader lacks sufficient knowledge of the author's conventions to categorize the work accurately. This problem occurs most frequently in efforts to classify works from distant times or places, particularly those that lack explicit statements that might help in literary classification. In many such cases, the scholar is forced to develop categories on the basis of perceived similarities. Such genre-building is always at least somewhat speculative, though such classifications may be useful aids to understanding.

GENRE CATEGORIES AND THE BIBLE

These basic principles of genre apply to the Bible as well as to other works of literature. The genre classifications applicable to the writings found in Scripture are not the same ones we find in modern literature. The Bible contains no novels or short stories, and even the poetry of the Bible is not self-consciously designated as such (there is no Hebrew word for *poetry*, though it is clear that the passages of Scripture that we recognize as poetic follow conventions that differ from those that we speak of as prose). On the other hand, the Bible contains examples of literary genres that are not found in modern literature, including gospel and apocalyptic.

Even where genres overlap modern forms, conventions differ. Hebrew poetry is nothing like English poetry, either ancient or modern. Biblical history is pointedly didactic, while modern history prides itself (inaccurately) on its objectivity. Even the epistles found in Scripture follow a format that differs significantly from letter-writing in the Western tradition.

It is certainly true that genre categories function on different levels in Scripture. The broadest genres are the classifications into which we commonly divide the books of Scripture - such types as law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, and epistles. Within these categories we make distinctions such as those among different types of psalms or different types of prophetic utterance. Within books, we identify narrower classifications of passages such as parables, miracle stories, genealogies, and stories that explain the origins of place names.

Finally, we must note that most of the genre categories of the Bible are implicit rather than explicit. The author rarely communicates directly to the reader the type of literature he intends to write. Most classifications are therefore the result of observed similarities over years of study rather than natural groupings relating to deliberate and overt stylistic choices. It is also worth pointing out that liberal scholars over the years have been very free with their speculation concerning the literary genres within which the biblical authors operated, and have often used such speculations to undermine the truth value of what is clearly intended to be understood as factual in nature.

In the weeks to come, we will devote ourselves to the study of some of the major genres of biblical literature, examining general conventions as well as illustrative examples of each. If done

with respect for the integrity and inspiration of the text, such study can enable us to be more faithful interpreters of God's Word.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE III

Historical Narrative - Principles

The Bible is full of stories. Any child who attends Sunday School regularly will soon encounter the variety of fascinating narratives found in the pages of God's Word. Adults, too, like good stories, and the authors of Scripture were master storytellers. The fact that they largely worked in the realm of fact rather than fiction (we will look at fiction in the Bible in two weeks) does not in any way undermine the artistic skill with which the biblical narratives are woven together. Today, we will look at some of the principles that underlie historical narrative in the Bible, and next week we will examine one of the Bible's best stories in the light of these principles.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Several basic principles are at work in the narratives of Scripture. The first of these is common to all good narrative literature, and that is that a good story draws the reader into the action. The reader identifies with characters and events and is thus able to generalize on the ideas contained in the narrative. While Bible stories are about unique individuals who existed in real space and time rather than literary stereotypes, Scripture emphasizes that, in some fundamental way, these people are *like us* (James 5:17), and therefore their experience is meaningful in our lives.

This leads to the second principle; biblical narrative is explicitly didactic. It is intended, not merely to entertain and delight, but to instruct in foundational spiritual truth (I Corinthians 10:11). Thus the authors of Scripture not only choose stories with didactic purposes in mind, but structure those stories to maximize their instructive value. Two common examples of this didactic purpose may be found in the selectivity of the Gospels, which completely ignore Jesus' early life and focus the overwhelming bulk of their attention on the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection because they are intended to accomplish an evangelistic purpose (John 20:31), and the narratives of historical books like Kings and Chronicles, where the former emphasize God's covenant with Israel and how rulers keep or violate it, while the latter give their chief attention to the Temple and the extent to which rulers are faithful in their worship of God and adherence to the ceremonial law.

A third principle is not universal, but is found in the vast majority of biblical narratives and contributes to the didactic purpose already mentioned. The stories in the Bible are almost always told in the third person, by someone who is not personally involved in the story, but has an omniscient perspective, not only being privy to private conversations and secret councils, but also giving insight into thoughts and motives, though these are most frequently demonstrated through words and actions rather than explicitly described by the author.

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS

The fundamental elements of biblical story-telling are the same as those found in all stories everywhere - those of setting, character, and plot. The way the biblical writers manipulate these elements illustrates further the didactic purposes of their narratives.

1. SETTING

Settings for biblical stories are rarely described in detail, yet are usually included in abbreviated form and contribute to the purpose of the narrative in a number of ways. First of all, settings provide necessary background information required to understand the action of the story, culturally, temporally, and geographically. Secondly, settings contribute atmosphere to draw us into the narrative, and thus increase its impact. Thirdly, settings contribute to the structural unity of narratives - we often have in Scripture a series of events that are tied together by occurring in the same place or time.

A good example of the importance of setting can be found in the book of Ruth. It is important to the narrative to know, for instance, that it took place in the time of the judges, when the land was in a state of political and moral chaos. Within this environment, we see not only the faithfulness of an alien Moabitess, but also the rise of the line that will eventually produce, not only David, but also the Messiah. Our knowledge of the bad blood that existed between the Israelites and the Moabites enhances the impact of the story, while the fact that it occurs in a semi-rural setting during harvest time both helps us to understand it within the context of customs such as gleaning and harvest practices, and creates the sort of pastoral atmosphere conducive to a love story.

2. CHARACTER

There are several principles that operate within the biblical narratives with respect to their use of character. First of all, Scripture rarely engages in significant character description. We are only told about a character's appearance if it directly affects the understanding of the story (e.g., Goliath and Saul were tall, Zacchaeus was small, Joseph was handsome, Esther was beautiful). We are rarely told directly about a character's motives, thoughts, or even emotions; the authors of Scripture prefer to illustrate these things through actions.

Secondly, the biblical narratives often incorporate significant amounts of dialogue, allowing us to gain insight into a character through the words he speaks. Perhaps the greatest example of this is Jesus Himself. A large portion of the Gospels is made up of the words He spoke, often with relatively little editorial comment on the part of the author.

Thirdly, we learn about characters through the ways in which other characters respond to them. Daniel is known to be a man of integrity, not only because he is trusted by a long series of Babylonian and Medo-Persian rulers, but also because even his enemies grudgingly admit that there is no basis upon which to bring about his downfall apart from his worship of God.

Fourthly, authors of stories in the Bible highlight character through the selectiveness of their narrative choices. We hear nothing of Ahab's great military triumph at Qarqar, but instead are treated to the picture of a king pouting on his bed because he can't have Naboth's vineyard. We are told nothing of the great building accomplishments of Herod the Great, but gain insight into his true character through the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem.

Fifthly, biblical narrative frequently leaves the interpretation of character in the hands of the reader. Many times actions and characters are clearly pictured as good or evil, but there are also

numerous instances in which the behavior of a character is left open to the reader's interpretation. What about Rahab's lie, or Ehud's assassination of Eglon? While both unquestionably produced good results, we are left to judge the morality of these actions on a considerable paucity of evidence, with little evaluative help provided by the author.

3. PLOT

The plot of a story is simply the action that takes place within it. Several principles are at work in the plotting of biblical narrative, many of which are found in other narratives as well. Firstly, all plot must contain conflict. Without conflict, there is no reason for the reader to be interested in the story, and thus he cannot be drawn into it. This conflict may be physical (warfare or obstacles), psychological (dealing with grief or disappointment), moral (dealing with temptation), or spiritual (serving God or other gods). This implies that all good stories must involve portrayal of evil, either in personal, natural, or supernatural form.

Secondly, all good stories generate suspense. The reader must want to know what happens next. This suspense is most frequently manufactured by leaving the outcome in doubt (we'll see a good example of this in next week's study of Esther), but may also be accomplished by letting the reader know what will happen from the beginning, but forcing him to wonder *how* it is going to come to pass (Jesus tells His disciples, and thus the reader, about His resurrection long before it happens; God reveals to Joseph at the beginning of the story that he will rule over his brothers).

Thirdly, almost all biblical narratives center around a main character, or protagonist. The didactic purpose of the narrative is usually wrapped up in the behavior of the protagonist and the consequences of the action of the story for his life and that of his people. The protagonist can serve as an example to illustrate the lesson being taught (in Jesus' parables, for instance), or may serve as the reader's surrogate, teaching truth about God and life that is directly applicable to the life of the reader. The protagonist also serves to give unity to a series of narratives, such as those concerning Abraham or David. Common plot types include those revolving around a test that the protagonist must face (Job, David and Goliath), or those involving a transformation of the protagonist's character, whether for good or ill (Jacob, Solomon).

Fourthly, biblical narrative emphasizes its didactic purpose through the use of contrasts. The bravery of David is accentuated by the cowardice of the Israelite army; the integrity of Joseph is set off to good effect by contrast with the deceit of his brothers; what Paul becomes is even more striking in the light of what he had been before God saved him; the examples of this phenomenon could go on and on.

Fifthly, stories in the Bible often display a sense of poetic justice - the good are rewarded, while the wicked get their just deserts. Daniel's enemies wind up as lion food, while Daniel is delivered; Joseph becomes the secretary of agriculture of Egypt, while his brothers must come crawling to him for food; Elijah goes to heaven in a chariot of fire, while Jezebel is unceremoniously defenestrated and eaten by dogs. This obviously contributes to the didactic purpose of the narratives.

Next week, we will look at the application of some of these principles in more detail by examining one of the most fascinating stories in the entire Bible - the book of Esther.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE IV

Historical Narrative - The Book of Esther

Last week, we discussed some of the fundamental principles involved in the historical narratives of Scripture. Today, we will observe those principles at work in one of the most rousing tales found in the Bible - the story of Esther and the deliverance of the Jews from potential genocide at the hands of the Persians. We will begin by looking at the setting, characters, and plot of the story, then analyze the ways in which these elements contribute to the overall didactic purpose of the author.

SETTING

The setting for the story of Esther is found in 1:1-9. The description found here is more extensive than that of most biblical narratives and contributes to the story in a number of ways.

First of all, the setting establishes the place where the story is to occur - the Persian capital of Susa, a city of great wealth and beauty and the center of the Near Eastern world during the days when the Persian Empire was at its height. Not only does the story occur in Susa, but it centers around events in the royal palace of King Xerxes. The description of the palace establishes its beauty and magnificence and helps to create a mood as well as providing factual information. This, obviously, is to be a story centering on the lives of the rich and famous.

Secondly, the setting establishes the time during which the events of the story took place. The third year of Xerxes was 484 B.C., and was virtually the pinnacle of Persian power. Soon after the events of the book's opening chapter, Xerxes launched his doomed effort to subjugate the Greeks, but, after initial successes, he was defeated at the great naval battle of Salamis in 480 (interestingly, this was the year Esther entered the king's harem - see 2:16). Eventually, he was assassinated in a plot similar to the one foiled earlier by Mordecai.

CHARACTER

As many authors do, the writer of the book of Esther occupies the early part of the story introducing the main characters. By the time we have reached 3:6, all of the major characters have been introduced, with enough action to give us the necessary insights into their personalities.

Xerxes, the king, is pictured as vain, petty, and ostentatious. He spends half a year showing off the glories of his capital, throws a week-long orgy, then spitefully demotes his queen when she refuses to display her charms for his drunken guests. Then, on the advice of his councilors, he holds a lengthy tryout camp to audition prospective replacements.

The next major figure introduced is Mordecai, a Jew of the Diaspora whose great-grandfather had been carried away to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar during the second captivity in 597 B.C. He immediately becomes a sympathetic figure because of his selfless care of his orphaned cousin and the cautious advice he gives her when she is taken into the king's harem. His character is further amplified when we are told of his role in foiling a palace plot against the life of the king. Note that

the fact that he sat in the king's gate meant that he filled a position of some authority in the city, not that he was a beggar.

Esther herself is introduced in somewhat ambiguous circumstances. She is described as beautiful, which seems to have been Xerxes' chief criterion for recruiting prospects to replace Vashti. She is very obedient to Mordecai, though one must wonder at her submission to the obviously ungodly requirements of the king's audition. Her desire for simplicity as she goes before the king is reminiscent of Daniel's approach to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 1, and stands in stark contrast to the ostentation surrounding the royal court.

The final major character to be introduced is Haman, the villain of the piece. He appears in chapter three as a favored courtier, puffed up by his preferred position and quickly infuriated by Mordecai's refusal to accord him the respect he felt he deserved as the king's favorite. His disproportionate response is the driving mechanism of the plot, as we will see in the next section.

PLOT

Any good plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning describes background incidents, the middle starts with the introduction of the central conflict and concludes with its resolution, and the end ties loose ends together.

In the story of Esther, the beginning of the plot tells us the necessary background incidents of the king's banquet (484 B.C.), the ascension of Esther to royal position as a result of the demotion of Vashti and her success in the audition process (480 B.C.), the heroism of Mordecai in revealing a plot against Xerxes' life, and the elevation of Haman to the position of court favorite (both sometime between 480 and 475 B.C.).

The central portion of the narrative begins in 475 B.C., with Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman and Haman's subsequent determination to exterminate the Jews of Persia. We are told in 3:7 that Haman cast lots at the beginning of the year and determined that the date most auspicious for the extermination of the Jews would fall at the end of the same year. Thus the central action of the plot falls within the confines of the year 475 B.C.

The storyteller builds suspense in a number of ways in the next few chapters. Haman manipulates Xerxes by appealing to the king's pride in much the same way the enemies of Daniel had done in Daniel 6. Mordecai realizes that Esther is the only person who can stop the intended massacre, but the author makes it clear that in order to do so, she must place herself in a position of mortal danger. Her courageous decision to take the risk is the major turning point in the plot, and it should come as no surprise that the basic lesson of the book is brought out in connection with that decision (4:14).

Chapters 5-7 narrate the action that results from Esther's decision. The author builds interest by taking advantage of the tortuous paths of Ancient Near Eastern hospitality, so that Esther uses her audience with the king to request that he and Haman attend a banquet, then uses the banquet to set up another one, thus allowing the suspense to be drawn out over several days. Furthermore, the ironic plot twist provided by the king's insomnia, the interview with Haman, and the honoring of

Mordecai gives comic relief during the height of the tension generated by the story, while at the same time serving to exacerbate the wrath of the villain.

The climax occurs at the second banquet, where Esther pleads for the lives of her people and fingers Haman as the source of the plot against them. The author again uses irony in the incident where Haman begs for his life and the king thinks he is attacking his queen, as well as the poetic justice displayed in the hanging of Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

The denouement of the story is given in chapters 8-10, in which the Jews are given permission to defend themselves against their enemies (since the law of the Medes and the Persians could not be changed, the edict against the Jews could not simply be nullified), they do so successfully, the feast of Purim is instituted, and Mordecai is raised to a place of great honor.

DIDACTIC PURPOSE OF THE STORY

As we have already noted, the didactic purpose of the book is stated explicitly in 4:14. We see that, though the name of God is never mentioned in the story, the major lesson of the story centers on His providence - how He brought a Jewish girl into the palace at Susa in order to preserve the Jews from their enemies and thwart a plot intended to bring about their destruction. Mordecai's confidence that God will keep His covenant with His people whether Esther steps forward or not also illustrates the sovereignty of God in using His chosen vessels to carry out His purposes. In a secondary sense, the story shows the origin of the feast of Purim and gives a snapshot of Jewish life in the Diaspora during the years after some had returned to Jerusalem (the story occurs in the years after Haggai and Zechariah and the rebuilding of the Temple, and before Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem).

BIBLICAL LITERATURE V

Fiction in the Old Testament

Needless to say, the Bible does not contain a great deal of fiction. The genre was not widespread in the ancient world; in fact, the lines between fiction and non-fiction tended to be blurred considerably in the writings of the era. When reading fantastic stories such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, we wonder whether the authors intended these stories to be believed as fact and whether the readers actually believed them as such, though we have no qualms about treating them as mythological rather than factual. This problem, of course, is what causes many modern scholars to label almost everything in the Bible as fiction - they identify the genres of Scripture with these fantastic tales of the ancient world and see them all as examples of myth-making.

The Bible clearly treats its narratives as historical fact, however, because it so often builds doctrines upon them. The stories of Scripture are not like Aesop's fables, with their nice little morals attached to the end; the morals would be of value whether the stories happened to be true or not. Instead, in the Bible, we find doctrines concerning the nature and plight of man, the character of God, and the way of salvation derived from these stories; if they are not true, the doctrines built upon them are rendered nonsensical.

Having said all this, however, we must note that the Bible does contain a few examples of fiction - stories that are plainly intended to be read as made-up accounts rather than historical incidents. The most notable of these, of course, are the parables of Jesus. The Old Testament does contain a few examples of fiction, however, which fit into the categories of fable, parable, or allegory. We will look briefly at these this week, then next week turn to the parables of Jesus.

JOTHAM'S FABLE - JUDGES 9:7-20

Fables, like those of Aesop and Uncle Remus, are clearly identifiable and distinguishable from other types of fiction because of their use of anthropomorphism in connection with animals or inanimate objects. Tortoises and hares arrange races, foxes plot dastardly deeds, and trees carry on conversations. They may share with parables the characteristic of having a single point (the morals of Aesop's stories) or have in common with allegories the association of each key element of the story with something it is intended to symbolize. Jotham's story is identifiable as a fable because it involves talking trees and shares with parables its unified focus.

Jotham was the only surviving son of Gideon. His seventy brothers had been murdered by his half-brother, Abimelech, who had then tried to make himself king. Jotham warns Abimelech's supporters that they will be destroyed if they follow him by telling the story of a group of trees that decide to choose a king, but find that the noble and useful trees are too busy doing worthwhile things to turn their attention to ruling, leaving only the worthless bramble to ascend the throne. The bramble ultimately destroys the other trees, as Jotham implies Abimelech will do to those who have so foolishly anointed him as their leader. Before the chapter ends, Jotham's fable has proved true. Note that the fable may also be read as a diatribe against monarchy in general - a lesson that the Israelites clearly failed to learn, as is evidenced by their pursuit of a king "like all the other nations" in the time of Samuel.

NATHAN'S PARABLE - II SAMUEL 12:1-12

A parable, unlike a fable, is a realistic story - one that *could* happen, even though it didn't. In fact, the impact of the parable depends on this very feature. The listener or reader must be able to identify with what is being described or else the parable loses its punch (we will discuss this further next week when we talk about the parables of Jesus). A parable always has one main point, and may share with an allegory the characteristic that key elements symbolize specific things in the experience of the hearers, though this is not always the case.

The setting in II Samuel 12 is familiar. David has just committed his great sin - adultery with Bathsheba, followed by the conspiracy to murder her husband Uriah. Nathan the prophet comes to David and tells a story. Had he challenged David directly, the king's response might have been different. Because a parable is a realistic story, David thought he was being told about an actual incident. As parables are intended to do, the story generated an emotional response; David was angry at the perpetrator of this horrible miscarriage of justice and immediately rose up in judgment of the foul sinner. Nathan then revealed the point of the parable: the man was David himself. Suddenly David was able to see himself as he really was and collapsed in repentance before God.

EZEKIEL'S ALLEGORIES - EZEKIEL 16; EZEKIEL 23

The most famous allegory in the English language is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the story, each element symbolizes some aspect of the Christian life - everything stands for something that is outside of the story itself. This is the key difference between parable and allegory; in the former, the symbolism is subservient to a central point and details of the story enhance the point without necessarily standing for anything, while in the latter, every major element is intended to symbolize something.

The book of Ezekiel contains two allegories, both of which present pictures of the unfaithfulness of God's people to Him and to His covenant with them. In the first, Ezekiel pictures Judah as a discarded infant, rescued from the trash heap by the Lord, then raised, cared for, and made beautiful. When the girl grows to womanhood, the Lord makes her his bride and exalts her to a place of honor. She becomes restless, however, and uses the rich gifts of her husband to entice lovers, becoming a prostitute. Finally, her lovers turn against her and humiliate and destroy her. The Lord eventually reaches out and restores her, however (note the similarities between this and the real-life narrative with which the book of Hosea opens). The allegory of Oholah and Oholibah in Ezekiel 23 is similar, except that the sisters, pictured as prostitutes from the very beginning, represent both Israel and Judah, and the narrative lacks the promise of restoration following judgment.

The point of both stories is that Judah, loved and protected by God, had turned to worship idols and false gods, squandering God's blessing and despising His covenant. Ezekiel was announcing the judgment that was to come, but also promising God's mercy - eventual restoration once the judgment had been completed.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE VI

Fiction in the New Testament - the Parables of Jesus

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

We talked a little about parables last week. Let's begin by reviewing what a parable is and noting its relationship to the other fictional genres discussed in the last lesson. First of all, a parable is an earthly story. It is drawn from the common experience of Jesus' listeners. Every parable Jesus told described a situation familiar to his readers. It should be noted in passing that knowledge of first-century Jewish culture is thus essential for a proper understanding of the parables. What was commonplace to Jesus' listeners is often foreign to us.

A parable is a piece of fiction. Though any of the parables could have happened, it is erroneous to assume that any parable was based on an actual incident (the existence today of an inn called The Inn of the Good Samaritan on the Jerusalem-Jericho road, for instance, is a patent absurdity).

A parable is intended to convey spiritual truth in a symbolic way, but differs from other symbolic forms of literature. Unlike a fable (e.g., Judges 9:7-21; Aesop's fables), a parable is a story that actually could have taken place; unlike an allegory (e.g., Ezekiel 16, *Pilgrim's Progress*), a parable is intended to convey a single truth. It is a mistake to assign symbolic significance to every detail of a parable unless Jesus explicitly indicates that we should do so. This is perhaps the greatest error made in the interpretation of the parables of Jesus.

A parable is thus an extended metaphor, a word picture in the form of a story. It is the discovery of the single truth Jesus is seeking to communicate that is the goal of the interpretive process.

WHY DID JESUS SPEAK IN PARABLES?

This was the same question asked by the disciples in Matthew 13:10. We will now examine the answer given by Jesus in Matthew 13:11-17. Though many of the parables are familiar to us through repeated exposure, they clearly were not understood by most of those who heard them, including the disciples. The question then arises, that if Jesus was trying to communicate spiritual truth, why didn't He simply spell it out instead of clothing it in symbolic language?

As we can see from Matthew 13:11-17, the parables *deliberately* obscured spiritual truth. Jesus' ministry was one of division. The parables, like His ministry as a whole, gave light to those who came in faith and increased the confusion and condemnation of those who did not. It is only to those "to whom it is given" that the parables convey truth. Even then, of course, comprehension was neither immediate nor perfect. In Matthew 13, Jesus explained His parables only to the disciples, but He *did* need to explain them. In some cases, comprehension did not come until after Jesus' death, with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

HOW SHOULD THE PARABLES BE INTERPRETED?

The following principles should be kept in mind when interpreting parables. Some derive from what we've already discussed and some from common sense.

- When interpreting a parable, one central meaning should be sought. Drawing conclusions from the parable that go beyond this central meaning is dangerous, and is the major cause of fanciful and speculative interpretations.
- The story told in the parable must be understood in order for its meaning to be understood. This underscores the importance of knowing something about the culture in which Jesus' original listeners lived.
- The parables must be interpreted in context. The surrounding verses usually give clues to the meaning, whether through a preceding discussion of the situation that prompted the parable or through a following explanation.
- Do not be deceived by the formulaic introduction. "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Many erroneously assume that the first thing mentioned in the parable is then intended to represent the Kingdom. Actually, it is the central meaning of the parable that is intended to convey information about the Kingdom.
- The parables were designed to elicit an emotional response or reaction from the listeners, then use that response to drive home the point when the "punch line" was revealed. The parable of the Prodigal Son is a good example of telling a story so that the listeners are sympathetic with the repentant younger brother and pleased with the Father's generosity, only to find themselves compared with the elder brother at the end.

EXAMPLE - THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

THE GENERAL SETTING (Matthew 13:1-3)

Jesus was sitting in a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, just outside Capernaum, speaking to a large crowd on the shore that included His disciples. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills, and it is possible that Jesus' listeners could have seen farmers on the hillsides doing exactly what Jesus was describing. Seeds were carried in a shoulder bag and scattered by hand as the farmer traversed his field. The seed, as verses 19, 20, 22, and 23 make clear, is intended to symbolize the Word of God. But whom does the farmer represent? He is the one who speaks the Word, whether it be Christ Himself or His messengers.

THE PATH (Matthew 13:4, 19)

Fields belonging to different farmers were separated from one another by footpaths, in which the soil would be tightly packed by the constant passage of travelers on foot. Seed tossed onto the path could not penetrate the soil and would quickly be gobbled up by hungry birds. The kind of person symbolized by the path would not necessarily be a notorious sinner, but one impervious to

the Word. In fact, Jesus found that the notorious sinners of His day responded to the Word, while the religious leaders displayed the kind of impenetrable hardness characteristic of this soil. Pathway people can be very nice, even religious - but the Word of God goes in one ear and out the other (or perhaps, to use another cliché, slides off them like water off a duck's back). These people care nothing for spiritual things.

THE ROCKY SOIL (Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21)

Much of the region around the Sea of Galilee consists of a thin layer of topsoil spread atop a limestone shelf. Seeds that fall into such soil tend to sprout rapidly, since the shallow soil stays warmer and contains more moisture than deeper soil during the early part of the growing season. When summer arrives, however, the heat of the sun quickly dries out the shallow soil, and the roots of the plants are unable to penetrate the rock to reach water. As a result, the plant quickly dies.

The rapid early growth suggests a strong emotional response to the Gospel. The stifling sun is the heat of persecution or trial, which, like the storm of Matthew 7:24-27, distinguishes between legitimate and fraudulent conversions. This soil clearly illustrates the danger inherent in decisionism. Assurance of salvation cannot be based on an initial emotional experience, but only on the clear evidence of fruit in a person's life. Response to trial and persecution can be significant indicators of a person's spiritual condition.

THE THORNY SOIL (Matthew 13:7, 22)

Palestinian farmers typically plowed the seed under after sowing it. Some weed seeds would survive the plow, however, and would spring up and rob the young plants of sun, moisture, and nutrients from the soil. Though the plants might not die, they would be too badly stunted to produce fruit.

Some may be tempted to conclude that the thorny soil represents a "worldly Christian," one who is "carnal," who has received Christ but is not living for Him. Yet passages such as Matthew 7:15-20 and John 15:1-8 indicate that one who does not bear fruit is not a Christian. If it is true that "you cannot serve two masters," one whose spiritual commitment is stifled by the concerns of this world has no basis for claiming that he belongs to Christ.

It should be noted as well that thorns need not be cultivated in order to grow. All that is required is benign neglect. In fact, in the same way that hard work is needed to prevent the growth of weeds in a garden, diligence is required to keep worldliness from choking a person's spirituality.

THE FERTILE SOIL (Matthew 13:8, 23)

The last type of soil is the fertile soil, which produces a bountiful crop. What does the fruit represent? Some might suggest things such as good works or converts. The best answer comes from Galatians 5:22-23. It is the fruit of the Spirit that distinguishes believers from unbelievers. This fruit cannot be produced apart from the Spirit and always flows from His presence in a person's life.

WHY JESUS TOLD THE PARABLE

For the multitude, Jesus was driving them to examine their own condition. Many were following Him out of shallow or false motives. Many in the crowd could not be expected to understand the parable at all. For His disciples, Jesus was preparing them for the variety of responses they could expect from those to whom they were to minister. In what ways is this parable an encouragement to those who seek to spread the Gospel?

BIBLICAL LITERATURE VII

Gospels and Epistles

In the second lesson of the course, we noted that the idea of genre could be applied on many levels. In other words, genres can be as broad as classifications like poetry and prose and as narrow as categories like imprecatory psalms or stories that explain how places got their names. This week, we will look at the two most prevalent genres of the New Testament - gospel and epistle. In doing so, we must first note that each of these incorporates many sub-genres. For instance, the Gospels contain historical narrative, parables, and sermons, while the epistles include poetic sections woven into the epistolary prose. Our purpose this week, however, is to look at the broader structures and styles that are characteristic of these genres as a whole rather than dissecting them through the study of sub-genres.

THE GOSPELS

The Gospels found in the New Testament have no true parallel in secular literature. Though they come closest to the style and content of biography, they fail to fit the pattern of a typical biography for a number of reasons. First of all, the fact that they are clearly intended for a didactic purpose sets them apart from most biographies (e.g., the biography of George Washington penned by Parson Weems is both clearly didactic and clearly bad biography). They are more evangelistic tracts than objective examinations of the life of Jesus. Their purpose is underscored by the fact that almost a third of the total Gospel materials focus on the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ.

Secondly, they deviate from typical biographies in their lack of interest in Jesus' life prior to His public ministry. While most biographies take great pleasure in dredging up incidents from the childhood of their subject to explain what he or she eventually became, the Gospels are almost completely silent about the first thirty years of Jesus' life on earth.

What, then, are the Gospels? The first obvious conclusion we must draw is that they are set up in the form of *stories*. While they weave many styles of prose into the overall narrative, the simple truth is that the Gospels tell the story of the ministry of Jesus from beginning to end, always driving toward the climactic events of His death and Resurrection. It is worth noting that throughout the stories, the authors have left pointers directing our attention toward the coming climax. They constantly bring up things that the disciples didn't understand until after the Resurrection and include words and events in Jesus' life that pointed forward to His coming death.

The second positive point to be made is that, while the Gospels were read independently by their original readers, God had a purpose in giving us four of them. Like quadrasonic speakers that surround us with sound and give us a much richer experience of the orchestra, four Gospels, each with its own point of view, provide a much more complete and rounded picture of the ministry of Jesus than could be given by one. Traditionally, these four perspectives have been seen to focus on the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matthew), the Servant-Messiah (Mark), the Son of Man who cares for the poor, downtrodden, and outcast (Luke), and the Logos, the Son of God (John). Jesus was all of these things, and more. Each emphasis reflects something about the community for whom the Gospel was written (e.g., Matthew to Jewish Christians, Mark to the Roman world, Luke to

Hellenists), and affects the choices of the materials included (Matthew says much about fulfilled prophecy, Luke includes many parables, Mark restricts himself almost entirely to the works of Jesus).

One of the clearest indicators of the different emphases of the Gospels may be found in their genealogies. Matthew shows Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, emphasizing His descent from Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, and David, the head of the kingly line. Mark includes no genealogy, since it would have no purpose in his portrayal of the Divine Servant, whose parentage is of no real significance. Luke traces his genealogy through Mary all the way back to Adam, linking Jesus with the entire human race. John has no interest in human genealogy, but begins his Gospel by picturing Jesus as the eternal Son of God who was from the beginning.

THE EPISTLES

Unlike the Gospels, the epistles of the New Testament occupy a familiar genre, and one that was common to the world of the first century. Hundreds of letters have been found the structure of which has much in common with the epistles of Paul. As letters, the New Testament epistles begin with salutations that identify both author and addressee, an opening greeting, and a prayer or word of thanksgiving, and end with greetings and personal notes. Most are not personal letters (Philemon being the obvious exception) and are intended for circulation, both within individual churches and among churches (Ephesians was clearly intended to be read by a group of churches, and thus it lacks the personal references common to epistles intended for a single Christian community, such as Romans or the Corinthian letters; I John was an open circular letter, and thus contains none of the distinctive opening or closing characteristics). Some New Testament books are characterized by epistolary frameworks built around distinct genre writings (Hebrews is a sermon within the context of a letter; Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature attached to a circular letter addressed to the churches of western Asia Minor). Many have also noted the tendency of Paul, in particular, to divide the body of the letter into doctrinal and practical sections (e.g., Romans 1-11 and 12-16), though this distinction should not be pressed too far; Paul, like the other writers of Scripture, knows nothing of doctrine apart from application.

We should also note, however, that the writers of the New Testament epistles have adapted a common style of writing to their own particular purposes. For instance, the typical salutation with which any letter begins (Dear So-and-So . . .) becomes in Paul's hands a theological assertion. By typically opening his letters by wishing his readers *grace and peace*, he not only combines the common Greek (*Kaire*) and Hebrew (*Shalom*) salutations, but invests them with new meaning - Christ is the source of true grace and peace.

Finally, the epistles, like other broad genres, incorporate other types of writing. Paul's frequent doxological passages are poetic, and passages like Philippians 2:6-11 may reflect the hymnody of the early church. We even find brief narratives (e.g., Galatians 2:1-14) woven into the letters on occasion. All these contribute to the overall purpose of the letters - to edify the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE VIII

Poetic Parallelism

Biblical poetry is not like English poetry. This truism has much to commend it, but doesn't really tell the whole story, since there are in fact some very basic similarities between biblical poetry and that written in English, or most other languages. This week we will look at both the similarities and the differences, then turn our attention to the defining characteristic of biblical poetry - the matter of parallelism.

WHAT IS POETRY?

The first question we need to consider is what differentiates poetry from prose. It must be more than such simple matters as rhyme and meter, since there are many poems that contain neither of these. Instead of focusing on such matters of form, we should look instead at the language used in poetry.

First of all, poetry is marked by conciseness of expression. A poet is able to communicate in few words what a novelist might take pages to say. If one were to render in prose form one of the short poems of Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost, for instance, one might write on at considerable length in an attempt to capture what the poet has encapsulated in a few evocative lines. Even comic poetry is marked by conciseness. Note, for instance, what is reputedly the shortest poem in the English language:

Fleas

Adam
Had 'em

Secondly, poetry differs from prose in its use of symbolic language. While prose writers frequently make use of symbolism, the concentration of metaphors, similes, and other such devices is much higher in poetry than in prose.

We should note, of course, that these basic characteristics of poetry apply to biblical poetry as well as such varying forms as the blank verse of Shakespeare, the limericks of Ogden Nash, or the haiku of Japan. Though the Bible never uses the word *poetry*, nor is there any evidence of such a word in ancient Hebrew, what we know as the poetic books of Scripture are full of such types of writing.

HOW DOES BIBLICAL POETRY DIFFER FROM ENGLISH POETRY?

English poetry, at least in its classical form, was structured around the repetition of sounds. Both meter and rhyme consist of the repetition of certain kinds of sounds, whether in their stress patterns or their pronunciations. A poem such as Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven* clearly illustrates the power of repeated sounds to create an almost musical effect with words alone.

Biblical poetry is also built around the idea of repetition, but it is not the repetition of sounds that provides its structure. Instead, biblical poetry is built around the repetition of ideas. Poems in

the Bible are most frequently made up of couplets - two lines of similar length and (often, though not always) similar grammatical structure. In these couplets, ideas are repeated using a technique known as parallelism.

WHAT IS PARALLELISM?

Parallelism involves constructing poetry so that the second line of a couplet stands in a fixed and recognizable relationship to the first. Three major kinds of parallelism may be discerned in the poetry of the Bible - synonymous parallelism, antithetic parallelism, and synthetic parallelism.

Synonymous parallelism occurs when the second line of the couplet repeats the idea expressed in the first line in different words without really adding anything of significance to it. Note, for instance, Psalm 19:1 -

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.*

Antithetic parallelism involves the creation of a contrast - the second line of the couplet completes the first line by showing the other side of the truth enunciated at the beginning. A good example of this is Psalm 1:6 -

*For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.*

Synthetic parallelism occurs when the second line of the couplet supplements or completes the idea expressed in the first. This can be done in many ways - by applying the idea from the first line in a more specific way, by generalizing the point made in the first line, or by communicating some different but related truth. One example of this is Psalm 2:9 -

*You will rule them with an iron scepter;
You will dash them to pieces like pottery.*

Other more complex forms of parallelism exist, some in lengthier patterns than couplets, but these are the most common. Take a few minutes to have the members of your class locate two examples of each kind, then read and discuss them together, making sure they understand how they fit the different types of parallelism and how these serve to communicate the truth the poet seeks to get across to his readers.

One final thing should be noted before concluding this lesson. Poetry has a tremendous power to elicit emotional involvement. The fact that it shows up so frequently in the pages of Scripture indicates that God intended our involvement with His Word to be more than intellectual. He intended us to read the Bible with our hearts as well as with our minds.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE IX

Lyric Poetry

Though the Bible contains a great variety of types of poetry, lyric poetry is the form that predominates. The Psalms, of course, are primarily songs, used in the corporate worship of ancient Israel (and by the Church for two thousand years), but they are not the only lyrics found in Scripture. Lyric poetry is also found in a few places in the historical books, and in much greater abundance in the writings of the prophets. In the next two lessons, we will look at different types of lyric poetry found in Scripture, with accompanying examples.

SONGS OF THANKSGIVING

As the name implies, these psalms are designed to help God's people express their gratitude for what God has done on their behalf. Some are corporate (Psalm 107; Exodus 15) while others are individual (Psalm 18). Typically, these begin with an expression of thanksgiving, followed by a description of the circumstances from which the Lord granted deliverance, then a narrative of God's work on behalf of the people, followed by a closing exhortation to give God the praise He deserves. Psalm 107 is a particularly interesting example of this type of song because it contains six cycles of calamity and deliverance (verses 4-9, 10-16, 17-22, 23-32, 33-38, 39-42) between the opening and closing words of praise.

SONGS OF WORSHIP

These are hymns specifically designed for the corporate worship of God's people. The best-known psalms of this type are the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), which were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the various feasts of Jahweh. Psalm 122 is a fine example of this genre, as it speaks of the beauties of Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. The emphasis is always on the Lord and His Temple, since the Temple was where the people would go to meet with God. These are almost universally expressions of joy, as the people looked forward, not only to meeting with God in His house, but also to gathering with others who served the Lord and worshiped in His Temple.

SONGS OF NATURE

The nature poetry found in the Bible does not, like most nature poetry produced in secular literature, praise nature for its own sake. The poems of the Bible go beyond the vision of beauty found in the work of poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley, looking not just at the glories of nature, but also at the glory of the God who created it. Nature psalms usually focus on a particular aspect of the creation as a revealer of the glory of God (Psalms 8 and 19 look at the heavens, for instance), but some take a broader look at a variety of natural phenomena (Psalm 104, along with the marvelous series of questions found in Job 38-41). Take a few minutes to look at Psalm 8 and examine how nature becomes the source of praise to God, and note that the basis for praise here (God's condescending mercy) differs from that in Psalm 19 (God's revelation of Himself through His law).

SONGS OF HISTORY

Some of the poetry found in Scripture focuses on recounting the mercies of God toward His people throughout history. One of the greatest of these is Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, where Moses, shortly before his death, gives the people a song to help them remember what God has done on their behalf and instructs them to memorize it. The Psalter also contains hymns of this type, including Psalms 78, 105, and 106. Take a few minutes to look at parts of the Song of Moses, noting the extent to which the language of the song became the basis for later Israelite poetry. Phrases from Deuteronomy 32 are quoted and alluded to throughout the later writings of the Old Testament, both in the Psalms and in the writings of the prophets. Also take note of the highly symbolic nature of the language found in the song and the ways in which the symbolism evokes pictures of God and His work that go beyond mere narrative.

ENTHRONEMENT PSALMS

The final type of psalm that we will examine today is the enthronement psalm, written for the coronation of a king. It should not surprise us that these psalms are often strongly Messianic in content and speak not only of the king who is about to take the throne of Israel, but more directly of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords whose kingdom will last forever. Enthronement psalms include Psalms 24, 45, and 110, among others. Look briefly at each of these (if time permits), noting that the human king is almost an afterthought, while the focus is on the God on whose behalf the monarch takes the throne. Psalm 110 is particularly notable in this respect, since it is the psalm most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

We will continue to look at types of lyric poetry next week, focusing on some of the more specialized types of psalms, as well as on some of the darker ones, used by God's people, both then and now, to voice doubt, bitterness, and anger, as well as to deal with those very human emotions in a godly way.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE X

More Lyric Poetry

Last week we looked at a few types of lyrics found in the Bible. This week, we will examine a few more, along with pertinent examples. Remember that these are personal, subjective expressions of the experiences of God's people, both highly emotional and highly figurative. Not all express the joy of the ones we looked at last week, but even the songs that express doubt, bitterness, and disappointment can be instructive to us when we at times must deal with the same emotions.

ENCOMIUMS

An encomium is a song of praise directed toward a particular character trait or set of character traits. Proverbs contains several of these, including the words of praise concerning wisdom in the early chapters and the laudatory acrostic on the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. Psalms 1 and 15 are familiar examples of encomiums in the psalter (both dealing with the character of the righteous man), while I Corinthians 13 is the best-known example of encomium in the New Testament. Spend a few minutes going through Psalm 15 and noting the instructive value of the encomium as a poetic genre.

SONGS OF LOVE

As one might expect, the Hymnal of Israel does not contain love poetry. This does not mean that the Bible doesn't concern itself with the greatest of all human emotions, however. The glories of love, particularly the love between husband and wife, are sounded in the Song of Solomon, which contains some of the most intimate imagery found in Scripture (note that this book is also a poetic dialogue, as is the book of Job). Psalms 127 and 128 address the issue of the family, but do so in the context of God's blessing rather than that of familial affection. Other passages, such as Proverbs 7, speak poetically of the false love associated with the adulteress and warn against such counterfeits of God's true purpose for human fulfillment.

SONGS OF LAMENTATION

Somewhat surprisingly, the lamentation, in which the poet complains of his plight and cries out to God for deliverance, is the type of song most frequently found in the psalter (on second thought, knowing our own tendencies, is this really so surprising?). A typical lament is structured in five parts: a cry to God, a statement of the complaint, a petition for deliverance, a statement of confidence in God, and a vow to praise God when the expected deliverance occurs. The entire design of the poem conveys faith rather than doubt, though a few laments omit some portions of the standard structure. Laments may be written from the point of view of one going through turmoil or from the standpoint of one who has already experienced deliverance, so that the complaint is voiced from the perspective of hindsight. In any case, the words of the psalm communicate confidence in the God who is faithful and has promised to deliver His people.

Typical laments include Psalms 10, 35, 51, 54, and 77, along with the acrostic dirges of the book of Lamentations. Psalm 54, for instance, contains all five elements of the lament, with the cry

to God (verse 2), the complaint (verse 3), the petition (verses 1, 5), the assertion of confidence in God (verse 4), and the vow to praise God (verses 6-7). As was the case with the poets of Israel, our expressions of pain to God should be couched in the language of faith rather than that of accusation.

IMPRECATORY PSALMS

The Psalms express the entire range of emotions typical of the people of God, from extreme joy to extreme sorrow. They also at times express anger and bitterness. In line with the New Testament exhortation to “be angry and sin not,” they express anger in the context of the glory and wrath of God. Rather than striking out against sinners on his own, the psalmist instead cries out to God to judge the evildoer, often in the language of the covenant curses found in the books of the law. These imprecations may sound harsh indeed, but really say no more than what God Himself said He would do to those who reject Him. Note also that the imprecations are usually couched within lamentations, and represent part of the psalmist’s cry for the Lord’s deliverance. Examples of imprecatory passages in biblical poetry include Psalm 12:3-4; 35:4-8; 58:6-8; 137:7-9. Take a look at the last two of these more closely, noting both the confidence in God expressed by the psalmist and the symbolic language used in the imprecations.

A NOTE ON STRUCTURE - ACROSTIC POETRY

Among the more interesting forms of poetry found in the Bible are the acrostics. These are poems where each successive verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Besides their inherent structural interest, they were undoubtedly intended to serve as memory aids. We have already noted that the five poems that compose Lamentations, along with the encomium to the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31, are acrostics. Add to this the best-known acrostic of all, Psalm 119, which praises the Word of God in twenty-two octets, in which each verse in a given octet begins with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. Other acrostics include Psalm 34 and Psalms 9-10, which are written as a single psalm in the Septuagint. Acrostics include all types of psalms, from laments to songs of praise, and display more clearly than most the universal purposes of biblical poetry - God intended it to be used by His people throughout all ages, remembered and repeated as an appropriate means of expressing the entire range of our emotions as we reach out in faith to our God and Savior.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE XI

Proverbs

Wise aphorisms have been a popular form of literature from the sayings of Confucius to Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. The Bible also contains a large number of proverbs, not only in the collection compiled by Solomon, but also in such places as the Gospels and Epistles. Proverbs have the advantage of being concise and memorable, and as such stick in the mind so well that they often tend to become clichés. Today we will look at the proverb as a literary genre and discuss its role in God's revelation of Himself.

THE FORM OF PROVERBS

There are several characteristics of proverbs, both biblical and otherwise, that make them so memorable. One is that they are short. "When you are confronted with a problem, you should deal with it immediately, because the problem is likely to get much worse and be much harder to deal with if you procrastinate" is a wise piece of advice. It is not, however, memorable. On the other hand, "A stitch in time saves nine" communicates the same idea in a way that people are likely to remember. Similarly, while it is true that a person will eventually experience the consequences of his actions, "What a man sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7) communicates the same idea in a form that is far more memorable.

Secondly, proverbs make use of striking language and forms of expression, including a wide range of figures of speech. "Look before you leap" uses alliteration and metaphor to communicate the idea that it is advisable to make plans before taking action. Similarly, "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler" (Proverbs 20:1) makes use of graphic metaphors and poetic rhythms to paint a picture of the pathetic consequences of alcohol abuse. Proverbs also may be memorable because of their use of humor, whether one thinks of a proverb like "He who throws mud loses ground," or "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping" (Proverbs 19:13). Another type of striking language often found in proverbs is the paradox. This was one of Jesus' favorite modes of expression, found in such sayings as "Let the dead bury their dead" (Luke 9:60) and "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last" (Mark 9:35).

Thirdly, biblical proverbs are almost always expressed in poetry. Not only is poetry more memorable than prose, but the parallelism of Hebrew poetry in particular allows the framer of the proverb to make comparisons and contrasts that enrich the truth being communicated. For instance, in Proverbs 19:21, Solomon says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." The antithetical parallelism used in this proverb effectively contrasts the tentativeness of human endeavor with the sovereignty of God.

THE CONTENT OF PROVERBS

The proverbs are classified as wisdom literature. As such, they provide advice for everyday living. Several points should be made about the nature of that advice, or else the proverbs in Scripture may easily be misconstrued. To begin with, we must realize that proverbs are descriptions of slices of life stripped down to the bare essentials. Whether they involve broad generalizations or specific examples, they are structured to communicate universal truth. For instance, "An inheritance

quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end” (Proverbs 20:21) may sound like it is describing a particular situation - a person who inherits a large sum of money when he is young. In reality, though, the proverb enunciates a universal truth - that something that comes too easily is unlikely to be appreciated or beneficial in the long run.

Secondly, we must recognize that proverbs are used to express great insights into human behavior, and thus are very profound. “Whoever loves money never has money enough” (Ecclesiastes 5:10) communicates two important truths - that material things never bring satisfaction, and that one who lusts after them always wants more. Such truths, if incorporated into one’s decision-making, would have a profound impact on priorities, choices, and the direction of one’s life.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, proverbs are designed to be descriptions of real life and advice about how life is to be lived rather than absolute prescriptions for every situation without exception. For instance, when Proverbs 29:14 says, “If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure,” Solomon is enunciating a general principle - that just rulers tend to be popular with their people, and thus secure from the threat of insurrection - rather than a universal truth; after all, some just kings have been overthrown and some tyrants have prospered. The proverb is thus stating what is *likely* to happen, rather than what will *always* happen. Similarly, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Proverbs 10:4) has many exceptions, but it is true that the diligent man is more likely to be prosperous than the one who is lazy. Proverbs such as these are often misinterpreted as promises rather than descriptions. Such misconstructions are at the heart of the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which asserts that worldly wealth is the inevitable reward for the life of faith and godliness.

THE PURPOSE OF PROVERBS

It is no accident that the book of Proverbs is addressed by Solomon to his son. In the same way that parents want their children to grow up to become wise decision-makers who have their priorities straight and are able to apply godly common sense to the everyday problems of life, so God wants His children to be wise rather than foolish. The proverbs in Scripture are intended to accomplish this purpose. Because they are pithy aphorisms designed for memorization, they will readily come to mind when decisions are called for - “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Because they deal with broad generalities and universal truths, they help to cultivate a worldview that places God at the center - “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Proverbs 1:7). Because they speak to matters of character, they encourage purity of heart as well as godly behavior - “A man of perverse heart does not prosper; he whose tongue is deceitful falls into trouble” (Proverbs 17:20). May we incorporate their wisdom into our own lives as well as teaching it to our children.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE XII

Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature, especially as represented in the book of Revelation, holds both an ongoing fascination and an abiding strangeness for the Christian. While we don't anticipate doing more than skimming the surface of this difficult literary genre, we at least should be able to clarify some of the issues involved in its interpretation and application as we complete the final lesson in our series.

WHAT IS APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE?

Apocalyptic is another one of those literary genres found in Scripture that is unknown in contemporary literature. Though fantasy comes closest to the characteristics of apocalyptic, there are certain elements that set apocalyptic apart from the writings of modern authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien.

First of all, apocalyptic literature is more concerned with what is happening *outside history* and *beyond history* than with what is happening within the historical process. When a book such as Revelation pictures events occurring on earth, they are seen as reflections or consequences of what is happening in heaven (without commenting on their literary or theological quality, perhaps the novels of Frank Peretti - e.g., *This Present Darkness* - came closest to duplicating this characteristic of apocalyptic in the twentieth century). In addition, such literature looks toward an ultimate consummation that is to occur, not within the historical process, but with the termination of history as we know it.

Secondly, apocalyptic literature utilizes as its basic plot the reversal of present conditions. Because this reversal includes the exaltation of the downtrodden and the defeat of the oppressors, apocalyptic as a genre tends to arise within the context of persecution or oppression. The two greatest examples of the genre in Scripture, Daniel and Revelation, both fit this description.

Thirdly, apocalyptic literature is visionary. It most frequently consists of the record of dreams or visions experienced by the writer. As such, it is explicitly *written* rather than spoken communication (unlike most of the messages of the prophets, which were intended to be preached to the people). Like a dream, apocalyptic tends to consist of unconnected bits and snatches, whizzing rapidly from one place to another, from heaven to earth, and from time to eternity. But because it is written, it may also have a very deliberate and self-conscious structure, often utilizing numbers.

Fourthly, apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic in character. While symbolism is found throughout the Bible in poetry, prophecy, and parables, most of it tends to be realistic in the sense that what is pictured corresponds to something in the real world. Jesus talks about shepherds and sheep, farmers and seed, while John talks about ten-headed monsters and flying women. The symbolic character of apocalyptic fits with the first three characteristics summarized above. Because apocalyptic deals with otherworldly events and scenarios, it uses symbolism to describe that which is beyond human experience. The vision of God in Ezekiel 1 effectively conveys God's otherness. Unlike the beautifully precise statues of the gods and goddesses made by the ancient Greeks, which

served more than anything else to limit their understanding of deity to the scope of idealized manhood, Ezekiel's vision is ultimately open-ended and inexplicable - our God is a mystery who cannot finally be contained, either in human words or human pictures. John's vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 illustrates the same point; the truth is found not so much in what John describes as in what he obviously was unable to put into words. And because apocalyptic describes the reversal of present conditions, some commentators have suggested that symbolic language was essential for political purposes, in order to mask the true content of the work from the oppressors whose overthrow was being predicted therein.

It is also worth noting that the symbolism of apocalyptic literature is in most cases not original. The apocalypses of the Jews of the Captivity and beyond as well as the apocalypses of the Ancient Church commonly mined their images from the writings of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the later visions of Isaiah. The same is true of the book of Revelation, which draws much of its imagery from the same Old Testament books, though often making use of the images in fresh ways and in novel combinations.

Finally, apocalyptic in its extrabiblical form was commonly pseudonymous. Writers would couch their visionary predictions of future deliverance and judgment in an ancient context, putting the words into the mouths of ancient seers, who were then ordered to "seal up" the visions until an appropriate later time (namely, that of the author). Biblical apocalyptic pointedly does *not* share this characteristic. The fact that the biblical writers use their own names and speak in the context of their own times was one of the major factors in ascertaining the canonicity of books like Daniel and Revelation while rejecting as non-inspired literature the apocalypses of the Apocrypha, along with those of the second century. Critical scholars, of course, ignore this distinction, and use the common pseudonymity of non-canonical apocalypses to argue that Daniel and John must be pseudonymous. In so doing, of course, they patronize those in ancient Israel and the Early Church who, unlike modern scholars, clearly could tell the difference between legitimate works and pseudonymous ones.

BIBLICAL AND EXTRABIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic as a literary genre was popular among Jews and early Christians between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The greatest biblical apocalypses, of course, are the prophetic portions of Daniel and the book of Revelation. While Daniel was written before the era when apocalyptic was popular, Revelation falls right near the middle of that period. Apocalyptic found receptive ears among the oppressed Jews of the Intertestamental Period. Examples include the book of Enoch, along with parts of the Apocryphal book of II Esdras. Second-century apocalypses include the pseudepigraphal Apocalypse of Peter. Extrabiblical apocalypses were most often produced by fringe groups like the Essenes and the Gnostics; in many ways they are comparable to the ravings of modern doomsday cults, which have their own visions of the destruction of the world and the ultimate triumph of their own groups.

GUIDELINES FOR READING APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Because of its peculiar character, apocalyptic literature must be read with great care in order to avoid the abuses so common in the history of interpretation of this genre. First of all, the reader must recognize that the apocalypse was intended to communicate with the author's audience.

Consequently, great caution must be exercised in order to ensure that any firm interpretation be something that the original readers would have and could have understood. In fact, the original readers had a distinct advantage over us because they understood both the cultural and literary contexts in which the author was writing; some historical allusions and literary references may be lost to us that they would have recognized easily. This is not to negate the fact that fulfilled prophecy clears up what may have been obscure to the original readers (and to the prophets themselves), but should serve as a warning against overly speculative approaches to interpretation that see in the symbols of the apocalyptic writings references to events contained in today's newspapers.

Secondly, apocalyptic literature should be read as a whole, not subjected to proof-texting, and examined for general truths rather than specific details of future events. Remember, this type of literature intends to focus the reader's attention beyond history, not on it. Too often modern readers are looking for the wrong things - details of current or future historical events, rather than the "big picture" of God's sovereign control over human affairs and the consummation of His sovereign lordship in the final triumph of good and the final destruction of evil. Like parables, apocalypses are most often abused when people insist on assigning significance to every detail.

Finally, the book of Revelation in particular should be interpreted with a concordance in hand. John used an enormous amount of Old Testament imagery in describing his visions, and those visions cannot be interpreted correctly without reference to John's sources. While recognizing that John did not always use the images in the same ways they were used by the Old Testament prophets, we should always gain the benefit of comparing John's use of the images with those of the original source materials. As we do these things, we will be able to appreciate the glories of John's picture of the final triumph of Christ over Satan without getting all bogged down in details such as the identity of the Two Witnesses or the distinctions among the various beasts portrayed in his visions. Even so come, Lord Jesus!