

Biblical Interpretation (CL1)

Interpreting the Old Testament

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Biblical Interpretation (CL1)

Jan. 29 – Introduction to Biblical Interpretation

Feb. 5 – Starting with the Text

Feb. 12 – Questions of Meaning

Feb. 19 – Principles of Interpretation

Feb. 26 – **No Class**

Mar. 5 – Interpreting the New Testament

Mar. 12 – Interpreting the Old Testament

Mar. 19 – Applying the Principles; Final Exam

Introduction to Biblical Interpretation

➤ **Biblical Interpretation:** the process of finding the *purpose, meaning and right application* of a passage of Scripture through a study of the cultural, geographic and historical context of the original writers and audiences; literary genre and forms; textual sources and variants; language structure, word meanings and grammar; and theological harmony within Scripture.

“To interpret a document is to express its meaning through speaking or writing. To engage in interpretation assumes there is, in fact, a proper and improper meaning of the text and that care must be taken not to misrepresent the meaning. When dealing with the Scriptures, to properly interpret a text is to faithfully convey the inspired human author’s meaning of the text, while not neglecting divine intent.”

Robert L. Plummer

Interpreting Biblical Genres

- The Bible contains many **genres** (literary types characterized by particular style, form or content) that must be recognized to interpret the text properly.
- Misunderstanding the genre of a book (or passage) can lead to a skewed interpretation.
- Intentionally mislabeling a genre has sometimes been an underhanded way to deny the text's truthfulness.
- Genre interpretation has sometimes been misused to excuse one from the demands of Scripture.

“Christian scholarship is the human race’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the New Testament, to ensure that one can continue to be a Christian without letting the New Testament come too close.” Soren Kierkegaard

Interpreting Shared Genres

- ▶ There are some genres found in both the Old and New Testaments:
 - **Historical Narrative** – the recounting of factual events, making up about 60% of the Bible, both OT and NT.
 - It is often not obvious what the purposes are for the authors of biblical historical narrative, so it is more difficult to get at author intent. (An interpretive technique: “*I, (author), have told you this story because...*”)
 - **Context** is especially important for interpreting historical narrative.
 - **Editorial comments** within the text often can be guides to author purpose.
 - **Repetition** of words or concepts is often a way for biblical authors to tell us what they want emphasized.
 - **Trustworthy characters** often appear in historical narrative, to tell us more clearly what is right and what the main message is.


Interpreting Shared Genres

- ▶ Some genres found in both the Old & New Testaments:
 - **Prophecy** – has various meanings, but most basically is the delivery of a message from God (a “Spirit-inspired utterance”) through an appointed “prophet,” both in the OT and NT.
 - Make sure you investigate the books background, date and author. When was it written, and what were the circumstances? To whom was it addressed, and what do we know of them? What do we know about the author?
 - **Context** is also important for interpreting prophetic writing.
 - **Figurative language**, including poetry and exaggerated expressions, is to be expected in prophecy – and in modern translations are often set off in poetic lines.
 - **Conditional and unconditional prophecy** – that is, the statement of the unalterable purposes of God versus conditional consequences or warnings, must be distinguished from each other.

Interpreting Shared Genres

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 - **Prophecy** – has various meanings, but most basically is the delivery of a message from God (a “Spirit-inspired utterance”) through an appointed “prophet,” both in the OT and NT.
 - Considering the implications for us today may help you see the intentions of the original prophetic author.
 - Consider whether the prophetic predictions were fulfilled or are as yet unfulfilled.
 - Take special note of the apologetic nature of prophetic writing.
 - Understand the difference between Old Testament-era and New Testament-era prophecy.


Interpreting Prophetic Writing

- ▶ The authors of Scripture understood themselves and their task as occurring in the context of community, and so must be interpreted in this light.
 - ▶ Biblical authors assumed a continuity in God's dealing with his people, so that earlier events are seen as clearly foreshadowing of later ones.
 - ▶ The New Testament authors understood themselves as living in the age of eschatological fulfillment.
 - ▶ The New Testament authors believed all Scriptures were about Jesus Christ, as he was the fulfillment of all that had come before.
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Interpreting Shared Genres

- ▶ Some genres found in both the Old & New Testaments:
 - **Apocalyptic Literature** – writing (such as Daniel and The Book of Revelation) which “reveals” or “unveils” God’s plans, especially by use of symbolic and/or mysterious imagery. Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature may include:
 - A clear expectation of God breaking into the present age to initiate a qualitatively different existence in the age to come.
 - The use of an angelic mediator or mediators to communicate God’s messages.
 - A journey by a chosen human into the heavenly realms.
 - Symbolic visions or dreams that describe both current and future spiritual realities and divine interventions.
 - Visions of final, divine judgment.
 - Warnings to the faithful or coming distresses and trials.
 - Encouragement to the faithful to persevere until God intervenes.

Special Concerns in Interpreting Old Testament

- ▶ Old Testament interpretation can be more complex than New Testament interpretation, simply because we are further away from the events and the culture.
 - ▶ We must first focus on what the old Testament passage meant to those living in Old Testament times – the original recipients.
 - ▶ Identify the basic theological principle or principles reflected in the passage.
 - ▶ Consider how this theological principle{s} fit into the rest of the Bible.
 - ▶ Determine how we might read this Old Testament passage through the grid of the New Testament.
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Interpreting Old Testament Narrative

- ▶ Narrative (stories) comprise nearly one-half of the O.T.
- ▶ Narrative has sequential time action, plot, setting and characters – it is the **story** form of literature.
- ▶ The **meaning** of a narrative derives primarily from the **action of the characters**. Rather than telling us how to live or not live, the narrative shows us by the actions of the characters and the consequences.
- ▶ Old Testament story narrative is *much more* than history. It tells us the truth, but the deeper truth is theological. It is theological history, in narrative form.
- ▶ God uses narrative to teach us (rather than essays or some other form) because it is more interesting; we are drawn into the story; it depicts real life that we can relate to; it can better portray ambiguities and complexities of life; it's easier to remember; it can relate shorter incidents and events to the bigger story.

Interpreting Old Testament Narrative: The Dangers

- ▶ OT Narrative is not always clear (especially to Western minds), and so takes some interpretive work.
- ▶ It's possible to lose the *real meaning* by getting wrapped up in the story. (*Why are we being told this story?*)
- ▶ It is possible to miss the *theological importance* of the story. (*What are we to learn from this story?*)
- ▶ It is possible to read *too much* theological importance into an OT story.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

- ▶ **Law** occurs throughout much of the Old Testament, but is especially present in the Pentateuch.
 - There are 613 *mizvot*, or “commandments” in the Old Testament.
 - The challenge for us is to determine which ones still apply to us as Christians.
- The **Traditional Approach** has been to differentiate between *moral*, *civil* and *ceremonial* law in the Old Testament, with only the moral law still binding.
- It is also possible to interpret commandments according to **Narrative Context**.
- Or we may interpret commandments according to the **Covenant Context** – reading the Mosaic Law through the grid of the New Testament.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

- ▶ **Proverbs** are a subset of **Wisdom Literature** – a broad genre in which the reflections and sayings of the wise are recorded.
 - Biblical proverbs differ from other kinds of proverbs in that they are divinely inspired, and so reflect what God approves of or condemns.
 - But even biblical proverbs (except those that refer to God's nature) are circumstantial, and so allow for and even generally assume the possibility of exceptions. Therefore most biblical proverbs (along with the rest of wisdom literature) must be read as helpful guidance, but not as absolute promises.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

- ▶ **Poetry** occurs within many other Bible genres, and predominate the Psalms and Song of Songs.
 - Hebrew poetry has very little that resembles Western poetry – especially no rhyme or recognizable meter. Rather than being poetry of sound, Hebrew poetry (while it does use repeated syllables, lines, sounds and stress patterns – almost none of which translate into other languages), is best understood as poetry of the mind – built on imagery and ideas.
 - Poetry is intended to makes the words more memorable, or to express and/or evoke strong emotions, Therefore we should expect figurative and exaggerated language which often cannot be taken literally.
 - The question must be asked of Hebrew poetry – “What did the inspired author intend to communicate?”
 - It is important to be able to recognize Hebrew poetic forms – parallelism (synonymous, antithetical and synthetic), “X,X+1” structure, repetition of words or sounds, acrostic, chiasm.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

- ▶ **Psalms**, which is the worship songbook of the Hebrew people, is part of the large “poetry” genre but deserves its own attention.
 - There are many subgenres of Psalms, but seven *major* ones:
 - **Psalms of Lament** – the most widespread subgenre, these are songs of mourning and distress, directed to or about God.
 - **Praise Psalms** – these praise God as Creator, Savior of Israel or Sovereign over history.
 - **Thanksgiving Psalms** – thanking God for answering petitions.
 - **Celebration Psalms** – to celebrate God’s covenant relationship with his people.
 - **Wisdom Psalms** – a hybrid of song and wisdom literature, dealing with the source of true wisdom, dealing with injustice, etc.
 - **Penitential Psalms** – confess sin and declare repentance.
 - **Imprecatory Psalms** – calling on God to enact justice against the –psalmist’s enemies.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

▶ **Guide to Interpreting the Psalms**

- Note the organization of the Book of Psalms. The longest book in the Bible, containing 150 psalms, it is helpful the Psalms were divided into five books (perhaps in imitation of the Pentateuch):
 - Book 1: Psalm 1-41
 - Book 2: Psalm 42-72
 - Book 3: Psalm 73-89
 - Book 4: Psalm 90-106
 - Book 5: Psalm 107-150
- Focus on reading the Psalms themselves, rather than the mountain of introductory materials and commentary.
- Identify the subgenre of the psalm – the best way to understand author intention.
- Then look at other psalms of the same subgenre type.
- Note superscriptions and other contextual information.
- Pay attention to how the psalm is structured & segmented.

Genres Occurring Primary in the Old Testament

▶ **Guide to Interpreting the Psalms**

- Recognize the poetic language and symbolism used in the psalm.
- Explore any messianic significance reflected in the psalm.
- Pray the psalms.
- Memorize the psalms.
- Sing the psalms.

