

Biblical Interpretation (CL1)

Interpreting the New 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 guide 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.

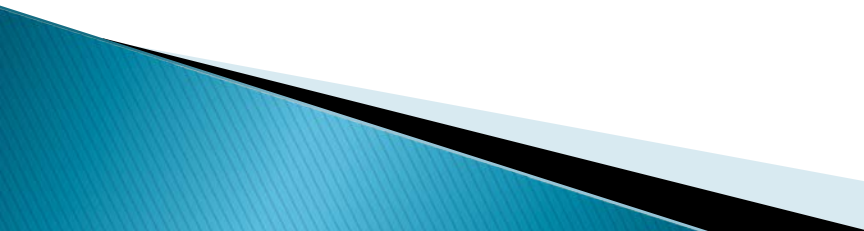
Interpreting Shared Genres

- ▶ 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 book’s 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 they 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.

Genres Occurring Primary in the New Testament

- ▶ **Parables** are short fictional stories meant to illustrate a moral or religious principle, especially by using some sort of *comparison*. Historically interpreted allegorically, they are now read more for the plain meaning likely perceived by their original listeners.
 - A primary theme in the parables of Jesus is the coming of the Kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required.
 - A good first step in parable interpretation is to determine the main point (or main points) of the parable, by asking...
 - Who are the main characters, and what do they represent?
 - What happens at the end?
 - What happens through direct discourse between characters?
 - Who or what gets the most space in the parable, and why?
 - What striking or unexpected details stand out? (But note that not ALL details have special meaning.)

Genres Occurring Primary in the New Testament

- ▶ **Epistles or Letters** (there are 21 epistles in the New Testament) are personal communications written either to individuals or to church congregations.
 - **Epistles of Paul** (13, ordered roughly by SIZE)
 - *Romans *1&2 Corinthians *Galatians
 - *Ephesians *Philippians *Colossians
 - *1&2 Thessalonians *1&2 Timothy *Titus *Philemon
 - **General Epistles** (8, ordered roughly by AUTHOR)
 - *Hebrews – author unknown
 - *James
 - *1&2 Peter
 - *1, 2 & 3 John
 - *Jude

Genres Occurring Primary in the New Testament

- ▶ **Epistles or Letters** (there are 21 epistles in the New Testament) are personal communications written either to individuals or to church congregations.
 - Epistles are not abstract theological treatises, but instead address the specific concerns and problem of specific people and groups within the Church. For this reason historical and cultural context are especially important.
 - Remember that we have only one side of the “conversation” in the epistles – we can only try to understand all that prompting the response we read.
 - It helps to break a letter (especially some of the longer letters) into more manageable sections for analysis/interpretation.
 - Try to get a firm grasp on the overall organization of the letter (especially since they were intended to be read in entirety).
 - Focus on which words are important, and what they mean.
 - What does the message mean for us today?