

Understanding Bible Literature

It has taken me a long time to get my head around understanding the Bible and there is still so much to understand. Perhaps, like you, when I (Pete) first picked up a Bible all I saw was a thick book with small print that seemed difficult to understand. Yet over the years through my continued reading of the Bible, its storyline from the beginning to the end has become clearer to me and my appreciation of the different types of literature it contains has grown.

When I was at university, I had to read all different types of books; law books, history books, newspaper articles and academic journals. Each one had their own distinct writing style that I, alongside the other students, had to learn to appreciate as we prepared our own essays for various academic departments. In some ways it is the same with the Bible. It also contains different types of literature and when you begin to understand the differences, it does significantly help you to understand the message and the teachings contained within.

A brief overview of the Bible

The Bible is not one book. It is a library of sixty six books by 40 different authors. These authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit meaning the Bible is the inspired word of God. It also contains clear human touches from the writers. For example, the writings of Paul in the New Testament are different from the writings of King David in the Old Testament. Their different personalities are reflected in their writings.

Different types of Bible literature

The Bible as a piece of literature contains different types of writings. For example, it contains law, history, wisdom, poetry, gospels, letters, prophecy, and apocalyptic (future disaster) literature. The literary type or wording in a passage affects the interpretation. For example, if you listen to a conversation on a subject you know nothing about it will be difficult to understand. This is because you will hear phrases and words and symbols that are specific to that subject. This is the same in literature. Understanding the type of literature helps you to interpret what is being communicated. For example, is it literal or is it figurative? When Jesus said that he is the '*bread of life*,' he is not being literal. He is using an illustration his listeners would understand; just as they need bread to meet their physical needs, so they need him daily to meet their spiritual needs.

Basic Literature types

History or Narrative: these are stories. The books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, and Acts fit this category. Almost every Old Testament book contains history. Some books are grouped together and are sometimes called the 'history books' – for example Joshua, Kings and Chronicles. These books explain the history of the Jewish people over hundreds of years. In the New Testament, the book of Acts contains some of the history of the early church; the gospels contain the history of Jesus's life.

Law: This refers to the instructions and laws of God that were given to Moses. These are found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The law is given to highlight our sinfulness and therefore our need of a saviour. If there was no law there would be no understanding of right and wrong.

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Wisdom: This style of literature provides us with proverbs and sayings to help us to understand matters relating to the meaning of life and the way to live our lives. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and the Psalms fit into this category.

Poetry: This style of literature is found in Psalms, Song of Solomon and Lamentations. Poetic literature is mostly found in the Old Testament. The Hebrew language is different to English so it does not always translate the original meaning of the text very well.

Prophecy: Prophecy books in the Old Testament include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. In the New Testament, prophecy is scattered throughout - mainly in reference to what has already been said in the Old Testament. The book of Revelation is the most significant book of prophecy in the New Testament containing information about the end of this age and the beginning of the next after the second coming of Jesus.

There are two aspects to prophecy. The first is foretelling which speaks about things that will happen in the future. The second is the proclamation of truth which is to direct us in relationship with God or to bring us back to God.

Apocalyptic: This type of literature focuses on future end-time dramatic events. It often uses a combination of narrative, imagery and symbolism. These can be found in Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Revelation to name a few.

Gospel: This word means good news. The gospels were written in the first century AD. These are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Their primary focus is to tell the story of Jesus from birth to death, resurrection and his ascension back into heaven.

Parable: These are fictional stories that Jesus told to illustrate truth and examples of parables are found in the gospels. Parables are a form of communication used to outline one or two significant points to the listeners; not every detail of the parable is important.

Epistle: These are the letters written to specific audiences. For example, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, Peter, John and the first 3 chapters of Revelation. They are the personal letters from the apostles to the churches they had started or to individuals they were instructing.

Romance: These are narratives and they are written as love stories. The book of Ruth and the Song of Solomon fit this category.

What are the differences between the Old and New Testament?

1. The Old and New Testaments complement one another.
2. The Old Testament is foundational. The New Testament builds upon that foundation with further revelation from God.
3. The Old Testament saw the paradise in Eden lost through Adam and Eve's fall. The New Testament shows how paradise is regained through Jesus who, in the New Testament, is called the second Adam.

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4. The Old Testament declares that man was separated from God through sin (**Genesis 3**) and the New Testament declares that man can be restored in his relationship to God (**Romans 3-6**).
5. The Old Testament predicts a Messiah (**Isaiah 53**) and the New Testament reveals who the Messiah is (**John 4:25-26**).
6. The Old Testament predicted the Messiah's life. In the New Testament, the gospels record Jesus's life. The letters and epistles interpret Jesus's life and show us how we are to respond.
7. The Old Testament records the giving of God's law and the New Testament shows how Jesus the Messiah fulfilled the law (**Matthew 5:17, Hebrews 10:9**).
8. In the Old Testament, God's dealings are mainly with his chosen people the Jews. In the New Testament God's dealings are mainly with his church (**Matthew 16:18**).
9. The Old Testament provides the history of a people. The New Testament focuses on the person of Christ.
10. The Old Testament contains many prophecies that are fulfilled in the New Testament.
11. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament.
12. The Old Testament gives the law. The New Testament clarifies that the law was meant to show men their need for grace and for salvation (**Romans 3:19**).

As an overall statement, we can say that the Old Testament lays the foundation for the coming of the Messiah who would sacrifice himself for the sins of the world (**1 John 2:2**). The New Testament records the life of Christ the Messiah and then looks back on what he did and how we are to respond. Both testaments reveal the same holy, merciful, righteous, loving and gracious God who condemns sin but desires to save sinners through sacrifice. In both testaments, God reveals himself to us and tells us how we are to come to him and find salvation through faith alone (**Genesis 15:6, Ephesians 2:8**).

Some Figures of Speech in the Bible

When sometimes it is stated that the Bible is literally true we do not mean that every word must be given a literal interpretation. Literature is like speech in that it has different forms of expression and understanding these different forms is important to interpreting the Bible. The following is a brief outline of some of these different expressions.

An Idiom - An idiom is a commonly used expression whose meaning does not relate to the literal meaning of its words. For example, 'I have a frog in my throat' means I have a bit of a croaky throat. In **Psalm 105:6** we have the term, '*the seed of Abraham*.' The word 'seed' in this context is speaking of Abraham's descendants.

A Simile - A simile is a comparison of one thing to another usually using words such as 'like' or 'as'. For example, **1 Peter 5:8** reads, '*the devil prowls around like a roaring lion.*' This does not mean that the devil is an actual lion, but that he is as fierce as a lion.

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A Metaphor - A metaphor is a description using words that are not literal. The words; 'like' or, 'as' have been omitted so that it seems literal. In **Luke 13:32** Jesus said, '*Go tell that fox*'. Jesus is using the word fox to describe Herod's character.

An Allegory - An allegory could be described as a long metaphor written in the form of a story. In **Judges 9:8-15** a story is told about trees who talk to other plants. The author is using these plant types to describe what was happening in Israel. Jesus in **John 10:1-16** consistently describes himself as a shepherd. In **Galatians 4:21-31**, Paul explains his use of allegory when he uses illustrations to describe the two covenants - in verse 24 Paul says, '*this may be interpreted allegorically*' (English Standard Version). Allegories are illustrations.

Anthropomorphism - This term is used to explain something by giving it the characteristics of a man. For example, we often speak of God in human terms when he is far greater than a human. **Isaiah 59:1** says, '*surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.*' This passage tells us that God has no limits in his ability. We know how to reach out a save someone with our arms or to turn our ear to listen; here the writer is using our human understanding of this to express God's ability to save and to hear.

Hyperbole - A hyperbole is used to emphasize a point by using exaggeration. We see examples in regular speech; '*I am so hungry I could eat a horse*' or, '*there are millions of things to do*'. In **Genesis 13:16** God said to Abraham that the Israelites would be as numerous as the '*dust of the earth*'. In **Matthew 5:29** Jesus says, '*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*' Jesus was not being literal in what he was saying but he was using hyperbole to emphasize the point of the seriousness of sin.

Don't worry if when you read the Bible you find it difficult to understand. The more you read and study it, the clearer it will become to you. There are many books or online sites to help in this. Here are some that will help you.

<https://www.studylight.org/>

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