

The Genres of the Biblical Texts

I. Introduction to Genre

Over the last six weeks, we have looked at how the concept of covenant helps us understand the Bible as a whole. What you may not have realized is that we were really exploring how one literary genre has influenced the theology of the Bible. Now, a Suzerain-Vassal covenant form is one example of many literary genres that the authors of the biblical texts have used in their writing styles. What is a genre?

Definition: **genre is a type or style of literature**

It is important to remember that God inspired holy men, prophets, and apostles to write the sacred Text in various literary forms to say exactly what he wanted to say using the authors' own circumstances and personalities (2 Timothy 3:15-16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Thus we find covenantal forms, prophetic oracles, psalms/songs, wisdom literature, poetry, historic narrative, letters, and apocalyptic literature each equally guided by the Spirit of God, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the original documents, accurately portraying the heart of God (in human terms).

The most customary way to define literature is by the external genres (types or kinds of writing) in which its content is expressed. The **two main genres in the Bible are prose and poetry**. Numerous categories cluster under each of these.

Prose genres in the Bible include covenant forms, law codes, historical narratives, gospels, parables, and letters.

Specific **poetic genres** are: lyric, lament psalm, praise psalm, love poem, nature poem, wedding poem, proverbs, and wisdom monologue.

The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should alert us to what we can expect to find in a text. Additionally, considerations of genre should govern the terms in which we interact with a text. With narrative, e.g., we are on the right track if we pay attention to plot, setting, and character. If the text before us is a satire, we need to think in terms of object of attack, the satiric vehicle in which the attack is couched, and satiric norm (stated or implied standard by which the criticism is being conducted). In view of how many literary genres are present in the Bible, it is obvious that the overall literary form of the Bible is the anthology, as even the word Bible (Gk. *biblia*, "books") hints. As an anthology, the Bible possesses the same kinds of unity that other anthologies exhibit: multiple authorship (approximately three dozen authors), diverse genres, a rationale for collecting these particular materials (a unifying religious viewpoint and story of salvation history), comprehensiveness, and an identifiable strategy of organization (a combination of historical chronology and groupings by genre).¹

¹ Entire paragraph from Leland Ryken, "Reading the Bible Literarily" from *The ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008)

II. Genre Structure of the Bible

Pentateuch	Historical Books	Poetical Books	Prophetical Books
Genesis	Joshua	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Ezekiel
Numbers	Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Daniel
Deuteronomy	Kings	Song of Solomon	The Twelve
	Chronicles	Lamentations	
	Ezra		
	Nehemiah		
	Esther		

The Law
<i>Chronological</i> (from the creation of the world to Moses' death): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
The Prophets
<i>Narrative books</i> (from the entry into the Promised Land to the Babylonian exile): Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
<i>Oracular books</i> (in descending order of size): Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, The Book of the Twelve
The Writings
<i>Lyrical/wisdom books</i> (in descending order of size): Psalms (with Ruth prefixed), Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations
<i>Narrative books</i> (from the period of exile to the return): Daniel, Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles

Gospels	Paul's Letters	General Letters
Matthew	Romans	Hebrews
Mark	Corinthians	James
Luke/Acts	Galatians	Peter
John	Ephesians	Letters of John
	Philippians	Revelation
	Colossians	
	Thessalonians	
	Timothy	
	Titus	
	Philemon	

III. Features in Prose

In **historical narrative** there are a few structures:

Occasion -> Problem -> Resolution (Acts 19:23-41)

Setting -> Occasion -> Problem -> Resolution (Luke 9:28-36)

Setting -> Occasion -> Outcome (Matthew 5-7)

In **letters** there is always a basic structure:

Opening -> Body -> Closing

Openings generally include the sender, the recipient(s), greetings, and prayer.

Closings could include a variety of things like travel plans, a prayer, a commendation of fellow workers, prayer requests, quick final instructions, and a benediction.

IV. Features in Poetry

There is always **parallelism** in poetry of many kinds:

Synonymous – generally 2 lines in which the second repeats the structure and meaning of the first

Job 8:3 Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?

Antithetical – 2 lines in which the second contrasts the first

Psalms 1:6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Synthetic – 2 lines in which the second complements or enhances the first

Psalms 3:4 I cried aloud to the LORD,
and he answered me from his holy hill.

There is always **chiasmus** (chiasms) in poetry (and his prose for that matter). Chiasms are an inverted form of parallelism.

A God has taken his place
B in the divine council;
B¹ in the midst of the gods
A¹ he holds judgment (**Psa 82:1**)