

Hermeneutics 6 – Interpreting Genres

Genre – “A kind or style, esp. of art or literature.”¹ We think of literary genres like history, romance, fiction, and biography. We think of music genres like rock, pop, classical, and jazz. We think of movie genres like drama, comedy, action/adventure, and documentary. We think of art genres like Renaissance, surrealism, impressionistic, and modern.

The Bible has genres too.

Historical narrative – fact reporting; storytelling. (The material that follows is largely extracted from Robert Plummer’s 40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible).

When we want to teach lessons to our children, we use stories. Children grow older and we read stories that move us to action, to tears, and outbursts of love and affection.² Stories are powerful. Everyday new ones begin, and others end.

The sovereignty of God plans stories, enacts stories, and has inscripturated (past tense) stories.

Daniel Doriani – “In an important sense, the Bible is one long narrative. It tells the story of the creation, the fall, and the redemption of the world. Shortly after the sin of Adam & Eve, the Bible begins to narrate God’s plan to restore humanity to Himself. Every part of the Bible fits somewhere within that narrative.

Almost 60% of the entire Bible is of the genre *historical narrative*. Historical narrative dominates Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

In the NT, you have the four gospels, and Acts (Luke + Acts being the two longest books of the NT).

Why is so much of the Bible historical narrative? Because our faith is rooted and grounded in historical events. There is no reason to believe that the human authors got facts wrong. The Holy Spirit’s influence would not allow for that.

¹ Oxford Concise Dictionary 9th Ed.

² Favorites: Little Britches, Stone Fox, The lives of Jim Elliot, David Livingstone, Amy Carmichael, Eric Liddell, The book of virtues, Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance. Fiction also is powerful: see Nathan and David.

So how do we interpret historical narrative?

Challenges:

“The biblical writer’s purposes are usually undercurrents of the text rather than floating unmistakably on the surface.” – Dr. Plummer

The biblical author *does* have a point, however, that he is trying to make by giving us these facts. Sometimes the author tells us the purpose of his narrative: Mark 1:1; 7:19, John 20:31; Acts 1:8.

Some of the general principles that we went over 3 weeks ago are especially helpful here:

A. To show man as sinful and needing the salvation of God –
Frequently the historical narrative is given to present man as altogether sinful and in need of the grace of God. Historical narratives consequently tell us what happens (what it is like) when the grace of God enables a person to do righteously.

B. To show God as a faithful and powerful deliverer, and a kind and compassionate Father

All the times God delivered his saints, from creation by speaking, to Noah in the flood, to the patriarchs and their mishaps, to Israel being spared in the famine because of Joseph, to the Exodus from Egypt, to the desert wanderings and provisions, to the conquests of Joshua, through the leadership of the Judges and Kings and their battles against false gods, through the prophets who warned Israel and Judah and whom God delivered over to pagan nations, to God’s mercy in bringing them back in Ezra & Nehemiah, to Esther and her boldness that saved a nation, to the healing ministry of Christ and his apostles, and the growth of the church through the proclamation of the gospel, these things are written so that we may see the glory, power, mercy, and love of God, as well as His justice, sovereignty, hatred of sin, and salvation. We always want to go to the Scriptures saying Lord, show me your glory. And the historical narrative is precious because it does just that. We have in the prophets many phrases and chapters telling us of the power of our God and how he is mighty to save. But we don’t just hear about God’s power in the abstract. We see his power and glory in what He has done, how He has used that power for the good of His people and for the cursing of His and their enemies.

C. Break the story into smaller segments. *When* does this narrative occur? *Where* does it take place? In Israel, or pagan lands? *Who* are the main characters? Are they believers or unbelievers? *What* is the conflict the characters are trying to resolve? *How* do they (or God) resolve it? We must remember God is always on the scene, even if it is a background appearance. *Why* are we told of this narrative? Daniel Doriani notes that after the conflict has been resolved we are usually told the point of the narrative. We read of the healing of Jesus, and they are often punctuated with something like, “and the word spread of His healing power, and His fame increased.” Any such commentary the narrator supplies is essential to understanding (why we have) the text.

D. Pay attention to theological lines of thought. For example, when we are in Judges, we read over and over again that “every man did what was right in his own eyes.” This repetition by the author lets us know that society is degenerating because depraved man is not seeking God to curb his depravity. So naturally, we can read Judges as a degrading time in bible history as God’s people do not follow Him, but their own sinful desires.

Dangers:

1. Don’t let historical narrative interpretation lead to moralism. It is biblical to follow good examples,
1 Cor. 10:6, 11 “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire sin as they did....Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”
11:1 “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.”

The apostle Paul summarizes in these passages historical narratives from Exodus and Numbers and then tells us that these things were written for our instruction. We *must* assume that the biblical author is not setting forth each character as a shining moral example. The sins of Abraham, Rachel, David, Samson, and Jonah are all told to us, with no expectation that we should go and do likewise.

As Pastor Liddle says, “Everybody is good for something, even if it’s a bad example.” But when we study the text, we don’t want to say things like Achan is bad. Don’t be like Achan. We know that except for the grace

of God, we would (and have) steal too. Israel in the desert grumbled. We must not grumble. We must remember that God provides for us as He leads us along through life and He is faithful and we have no reason to murmur or believe He is treating us wrongly. We're not in hell, He is treating us better than we deserve. We don't want the text to begin and end with what we should do, but with what God is doing or has done.

2. The temptation to allegorize is perhaps the strongest with the genre of historical narrative.

There is a temptation to want to look past the history of an event and read it as a mystical poem or even a fictitious tale meant to teach some morals. There may be analogies, yes. But we must resist the temptation to retell another biblical drama through the lens of the historical narrative portion we are considering so as to ruin all the intended meaning of the text (we are considering).