

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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One reason for the plethora of genres employed in narrating Israel's history in the Old Testament is . . . the fact that the Old Testament is fundamentally a theological oeuvre and only secondarily and almost incidentally historical. Thus its purpose dictates the mode and garb in which it presents itself.

—Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of the Old Testament*,
2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.

How to Read and Study the Old Testament, Part 6

RECAP:

Standing in the middle of our road are five gaps that must be bridged so that we may reach a proper interpretation of an Old Testament text. These gaps are:

1. The Language Gap
2. The Geography Gap
3. The Cultural Gap
4. The Historical Gap
5. The Literary Gap

GAP # 5: The LITERARY Gap

We don't begin to appreciate the interpretive decisions we make each and every day. When we open up the newspaper, we are exposed to a diversity of writing forms: news reporting, commentary, classifieds, comic strips, etc., all of which require us to change the way we read and interpret them to come at an accurate understanding of the message. When we read a letter from a friend, or from the church, or from the IRS, we adjust our approach accordingly. When we read our favorite novel, we read it differently than we do an essay on history, or a poem, or a fable. What is more, the same phrase may be understood in entirely different ways depending upon the literary form in which it is encountered. Thus the phrase "steel sinks" may mean one thing in a scientific journal but an entirely different thing in a sports commentary. Yet it may mean something completely different if found in the classified ads.

If forms of writing are part and parcel of our everyday reading and interpretive experience today, then it is reasonable to assume that it played a similar role in the time of the Old Testament. But this question still remains:

“Do readers of the Bible—a document written more than two thousand years ago—recognize the differences in form, content, and function of the diversity of forms of expression in it? Do they realize that to understand the Bible correctly, they cannot treat every portion of Scripture the same, as if it all were created equal?”¹

Unfortunately, for centuries believers did not approach the Bible with any kind of sensitivity to the different writing forms that are present there. But if we want to gain an accurate understanding of the text, we cannot treat narrative like it is poetry, or prophecy like it is legal text. Each contains its own rules that we must understand in order to interpret the Old Testament accurately.

*****What biblical event(s) might these passages describe?*****

- “The waves of death swirled about me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.”
- “Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it.”
- “He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters.”

The first sounds reminiscent of Jonah’s time at sea. The second requires some deeper thought. Is real fire and smoke in view? Is this a terrible creature? Is it a description of Satan? As for the third, Peter’s water-walking experience comes to mind.

However, all three verses come from the same passage: 2 Samuel 22, where David sings praises to God for delivering him. The psalm is poetic, and so the language involves vivid imagery and dramatic expression. He was not threatened by drowning. However, his life was threatened, and drowning afforded a poetic means of depicting his predicament.

Identifying a Literary Genre

In order to bridge the literary gap, we need to know what to look for that will help us identify what particular genre a given passage falls into. Fortunately, there are three marks that will tell us which genre we are in:

1. Form/structure
2. Content
3. Function

Form/structure These can be the most immediate marks of a genre. When we look at poetry, we know immediately what it is because of its form. This form contrasts greatly with the

¹ D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 1–2.

form and structure of prose. But even within poetry, structures differ between different forms of poetry. A lament psalm will have a certain structure or formula, while a praise psalm will have its own structure.

*****How might we distinguish between poetry and prose based on form and structure?*****

In other words, how can we know something is poetry by looking at it, and without needing to read its content?

Content

Once we make our initial observations about a passage based on its form and structure, we can confirm our decision by taking a look at the passage's content. Thus, if the form and structure of the passage lead us to the conclusion that it is a "psalm," then when we read the content, our suspicions will either be confirmed or refuted. This is because there is a certain expectation of what a psalm will deal with in comparison to prose. Psalms deal with brief, personal experiences. This automatically excludes narratives, epic poems, and imaginative experiences.

Function

Another way of understanding function is *intention*. How did the writer intend his writing to function? Is the story that Nathan told to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-14 a parable or historical narrative? Only the larger context of 2 Samuel 11-12 can help us discern the function or intention of Nathan's parable. If the parable had appeared in a different context, we might read it with a completely different meaning. This is usually the way it is for most passages. The larger context will determine the author's intended function.

Literary Forms of the Old Testament

So what are the literary forms of the Old Testament? The following diagrams may help clarify:

OLD TESTAMENT			
PROSE	PROPHECY	POETRY	
Narrative	Oracles of Salvation	Psalms	Wisdom
History	Announcements of Judgment	<i>Praise</i>	<i>Proverb</i>
Law	Apocalyptic	<i>Lament</i>	<i>Other</i>

Narrative

Narrative is the heartbeat of the Old Testament. All of the prophetic texts flow out of the narratives that make up Israel's past. And when it comes to reading narrative, we should approach biblical narrative the way we approach any other narrative text—we have to look for the key components that make up the narrative genre. The following diagram outlines these components:

COMPONENTS OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

Scene	<p>These are sequences that break up the overall action of the narrative. Each scene represents events that took place in real time and space. In this way, a scene is different from the narrative's plot. <i>Scenes can be studied by themselves, but they aren't intended to be taken in isolation from the overall narrative.</i></p> <p>Example: The Joseph narrative spans Genesis 37-50. The narrative is broken up into a number of scenes, including Joseph's dreams, his enslavement, his rise in Pharaoh's household, his imprisonment, his rise in Pharaoh's administration, his interaction with his brothers, etc. All these scenes contribute to the meaning of the whole narrative.</p> <p>Remember: In biblical narrative, God is often one of the characters in the scene. Do not forget this important point or you may miss the point of the scene. "Even when God was not directly mentioned as being one of the participants in the scene, his presence often was implied from the point of view taken by the narrative, writer, or the prophet who spoke on his behalf."²</p>
Plot	<p>This is the overall flow of the narrative when all the scenes are considered together. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end, and this plot comprises the development of all the action depicted in the individual scenes.</p> <p>Example: In Genesis 22, the plot can be depicted by a pyramid of intensity. It begins with God's initial request for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, rising intensity until Abraham is halted at the last minute before his son is slain. The action then quiets once again as he and Isaac return to his servants who are waiting for them to come back from the journey.</p> <p>Remember: One aspect of plot to keep in mind is pace. The writer can make the plot move very quickly either by using short, quick sentences, leaving out details, or avoiding character descriptions. Meanwhile, the narrator can slow the pace down by repeating verbatim previous material (i.e., Gen 24), using direct speech, or injecting the thoughts of characters. <i>When the narrative slows down, this is usually to produce suspense or to emphasize important details the narrator wants you to know.</i></p>
Point of View	<p>This refers to the perspective or stance that the story is told from. Does the narrator focus on one particular character, following him from scene to scene, or does he jump with the characters? Does the narrator tell the story as it happened, giving only the information that can be known at the time, or does he interrupt the story with information that comes from a later time frame? And finally, does the narrator evaluate the events either directly or indirectly? Does he approve or disapprove of a character's actions, deeds, or words?</p> <p>Example: In Genesis 13, we see that the narrator chooses to remain with Abraham and focus on him, though both Abraham and Lot decide separately where they will graze their flocks.</p> <p>Remember: "If the writer is God's chosen instrument for revealing the narrative at hand, one must carefully note that the point of view adopted by the narrator is the</p>

² Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Narrative," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 71.

one that God would take, and therefore the one that we must give credence to as well.”³

Characterization This is the particular description that the narrator gives to individual characters. In all honesty, this does not occur much in biblical narrative, making it all the more significance when we learn something specific about a given character. Often times, however, we get a better sense of a character by how they contrast with other characters.

Example: Learning about Esau’s ruddiness, or Rachel’s beauty, or King Eglon’s obesity clues us in that such a person might be a prominent figure in the narrative. In addition, this information, because it is so rare, also may play into the events of the narrative as well. Add to this details like Saul being taller than any other, which gives not only a physical description of Saul but tells us something of the impetus for the people choosing him to be king. His physical description then contrasts with David’s description which focuses inwardly.

Setting This locates the plot and the characters in time and place. Israel in Babylon dramatically changes our reading of the text than Israel in Canaan. In addition, setting can significantly factor into the interpretation of a text. Abraham and Isaac’s trek to Mt. Moriah takes on more significance in light of the development of that site as the cultic center of Israel in David and Solomon’s time.

Dialogue Biblical narrative places a high priority on dialogue. It is important to note where the narrator introduces dialogue into the narrative. Ask yourself why dialogue is given rather than continuing the narration. Who speaks, and what does it tell you about the character?

Law

Not much will be addressed here concerning law as a genre in the Old Testament. However, keep some of these points in mind as you read law texts in the Old Testament. First, the laws we read about occur in the context of a covenant between God and Israel. There was, in other words, a defined relationship between Yahweh and Israel, and that relationship was expressed in terms of the laws outlined in the text. In other words, the Mosaic Law (i.e., Exod 20) is not a series of do’s and don’ts as much as they were a means of expressing Israel’s relationship to a holy God.

Second, the laws we read about in the Mosaic Law can be divided into different categories. We certainly see unconditional (i.e., apodictic) laws which assert judgments of what is right and wrong that apply unconditionally to everyone. The Ten Commandments serve as a prime example. The other broad category could be called conditional (i.e., casuistic) laws that provide case studies. These laws, marked often by “if...then” conditions, describe specific situations as categories that serve to illustrate righteousness and unrighteousness in principle by describing situations or cases. The trick to case law is to identify the underlying principle that the law teaches.

Prophecy

As the diagram above clearly states, there are several subcategories for prophecy, i.e., oracles or salvation, announcements of judgment, etc. Each of these categories will be marked in some way by the form/structure they take as well as their content. Oracles of salvation bring

³ Ibid., 74.

messages of encouragement and hope to readers. These texts revolve around the recurrent theme of salvation, and bring *promises* to God's people and describe *blessing* that God will provide. All this is focused on a future hope of what is to come, and contrasts with the reader's current situation. Thus, in Isaiah 40, the prophet offers Israel hope for a return from exile, salvation and blessing to come in their land, which is meant to encourage the nation in light of their current situation.

In contrast, prophesy often includes announcements of judgment designed to warn God's people that their current actions are not in keeping with the covenant relationship with Yahweh and thus warrant God's judgment. This was a difficult task for God's prophets, because often times the words of these divine spokesmen ended up falling on deaf ears. To gain the attention of their hearers, the prophets often utilized vivid imagery to depict God's judgment. This kind of language was intended to make their words stick in the minds and imaginations of their hearers.

Sometimes a prophet would make his case in the form of a lawsuit. He would appeal to witnesses, contrast Israel's sins with God's graciousness, and then call the people to turn back to God and obey Him (see Isa 1; Mic 6; Jer 2). Other times, the prophet would preach to the people using a "woe oracle," which uses the word "woe" or "alas," which was a cry in Hebrew that one would make over the grave of a dead person. The message of this type of oracle was clear to the people: right now, you're as good as dead! For examples of this, see Isa 5; 10:1-11; 28:1-4; 29:1-4, 15; 30:1-3; 31:1-4; Amos 5:18-6:7; Mic 2:1-4; Hab 2. In other cases, the prophet would simply call the people to repent of their sin and return to God.

In all these instances, the purpose was not simply to announce doom. Instead, the prophet's job was to effect change in God's people. They had to know that God would judge them. The prophet's toolbox involved dramatic imagery and appeals to God's covenant law.

Psalms

Psalms are intensively personal. They deal with real life and real experiences. They are prayers set to music. Sometimes they reflect the heart of corporate Israel, while at other times they reflect the heart of a specific individual, such as David. In all cases, they made their way into the songbook of Israel and were sung as a chief means of corporate Israelite worship.

Psalms can be divided into two types: laments and praise. We can usually identify these two by their form and content. In terms of form, lament psalms usually include an invocation and a plea to God, a request or petition, and a statement of confidence in God's response. In terms of content, they usually are written in response to a crisis, either personal or national. They can be directed toward God, towards the psalmist's enemies, or towards the psalmist himself. These factors will help us determine the function of the psalm. It can be intended as a call for justice, a call for help, or even a call for or expression of repentance.

Psalms of praise are similar. Their forms will vary, but their content will focus on praising God for deliverance or blessing rather than asking God for it. In addition, the psalmist may also seek to share his experience and emotion with others.

Proverbs

Proverbs are usually easy to identify because they take the form of brief, timeless expressions that focus on the practicalities of life. Their content may include topics such as morality, work ethic, finances, leadership, etc., and their intended function is to equip readers to live skillfully (read: wisely) in everyday life. These statements are expressed in a variety of ways:

FORMS OF PROVERBS

Instructions	Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding (Prov 4:1).
Admonitions	Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Prov 4:23).
Numerical sayings	There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand, the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden (Prov 30:18-19).
Better-than sayings	Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse (Prov 28:6).
Comparatives	For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife (Prov 30:33).
Abominations	The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases Him (Prov 15:8).
Beatitudes	Blessed is he who is kind to the needy (Prov 14:21).
Paradoxical sayings	Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes (Prov 26:4-5).
Folk sayings	As is the man, so is his strength (Judg 8:21).

Two factors make proverbs difficult to interpret. First, their simple, pithy statements make them quizzical and enigmatic. Second, since they are axioms, they are intended to represent true wisdom in the *majority* of circumstances. However, it is easy to try to make them apply in all circumstances.

Suggested Resources

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 3rd edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Sandy, D. Brent, and Ronald L. Giese Jr. *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995.