

Understanding the Literary Type or Genre of the Books of the Bible

One of the most important things to learning to properly study, interpret and teach the Scriptures is to understand that God not only chose to use men to actually pen the words, but that these men chose to use many different literary forms or literary *genre* to write God's word within. This is truly one of the more human sides of the Bible.

In order to communicate His word, God moved men to write in narrative history, genealogies, prophecy, laws of all sorts, parables, letters, poetry, proverbs, biographies, etc. In order to properly understand God's word, the student of the Bible must not only know a few general principles to guide them in their studies, but they must also have some basic guidelines for reading and studying the major forms of literary genre in the Bible. You simply cannot approach a narrative history and a parable in the same way. Likewise, a psalm and an epistle of Paul must be examined and studied with a different approach.¹

Narrative Writing

The single most common form of writing in the Bible is narrative writing or narrative history. These are the books which contain the story or the story line of the Bible. Biblical narrative stories compose 40 % of the Old Testament and a large part of the New. The narrative based books would include:

Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, Haggai, some of the Prophetic writings, the Gospels, Acts

“Narratives are stories—purposeful stories retelling the historical events of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present.”² These stories are inspired by the Holy Spirit and absolutely true, and to appreciate and learn from them, we must know some basic truths about narratives, that is, what they are and how they work.

There are three different sets of narrative stories in the Scriptures and we will look briefly at all three. These include Old Testament narratives, Gospel narratives, and the Book of Acts.

Why so much Narrative in the Bible: Narratives are written history and He desperately wants us to know His story! Stories are powerful learning tools. They evoke images in our minds and we often will remember stories while we struggle to learn individual verses. Within the pages of the narratives, we get to know what God is like, how He deals with people, how people respond to Him in both positive and negative ways, and the consequences of their responses. In the stories we learn what He likes and hates, what man's true nature is really like, and what God can do to remedy man's evil nature. Narratives are a great way to learn!

¹ Fee & Stuart, pp. 22-23.

² Fee & Stuart, p. 90.

Parts of a Narrative: Most Bible narratives will have the following elements that you should look for. . .

1) A Narrator: The biblical narrator of a story (Moses for example in the book of Genesis) is the one who chooses what to write and what to leave out. They are telling the story looking back and are the ones responsible for the point of view and main points.

2) A Scene: Biblical narrative stories are made up of many miniature scenes much like a modern movie. Very few scenes are long, but each scene gives us a glimpse into God, the character's lives, and the overall plot. While reading the narrative, it is important to remember that each scene can be a stand alone incident to learn from, but above all, it is a small part of a larger story God is trying to tell us. We must read each scene in light of the other scenes before and after to see God's major points He is trying to make.

3) A Plot: Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, but the Hebrew plot is usually very fast moving and reaches its climax very quickly. It is critical to discover the major plot of each scene in a narrative (these would be sub-plots) and how they fit into the overall plot of what God is saying through the narrative as a whole.

4) Major and Minor Characters: The central part of all Hebrew stories are the characters. God is the central character in every story and He must be discovered there. If we miss Him, we have missed the point. After the Lord Himself, usually there are two kinds of characters in the stories, those who are making wise and godly decisions and those who are the contrast to this. It is critical that we see these characters and learn from there lives God's ways! These characters are almost always the centerpiece of the story.

These different elements should be noted as you read and you should ask yourself questions about each of these.

Principles for learning from Old Testament Narratives

- 1) Old Testament narratives usually don't teach a doctrine directly.
- 2) Old Testament narratives usually illustrate a doctrine or principle taught directly in another part of the Bible.
- 3) What people do in a narrative is not necessarily a good example for us. In fact it is often just the opposite.
- 4) We are often not told in the narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to make that judgment ourselves based upon the rest of the teaching of God's word.
- 5) God allows both the good and the bad of the characters in the stories to be seen so that we might learn from their obedience and mistakes.
- 6) Stories may either teach us explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by implying something without clearly stating it).
- 7) God's dealings with man is the central theme of all biblical narratives.³
- 8) Roman's 15.4 and 2 Tim. 3.16-17 tell us that these Old Testament narratives were written for our instruction and training in righteousness. It is critical that we see three things in them: their direct or explicit teachings, their indirect or implicit teachings, and their illustrations of clear New Testament principles.

³ Fee & Stuart, p. 106.

Take time to learn from the stories of the Bible. They are one of God's greatest teaching tools for our lives and ministries. Here are some of the key things you can learn from the narratives of the Bible:

- a) Abraham – the life of faith – how God takes a man with little or no faith and walks him along a journey to make him a great man of faith. There are many illustrations in the life of Abraham of principles of faith that are clearly taught in the New Testament.
- b) Moses and the Exodus – the story clearly illustrates NT principles of taking a city or region for God. It also gives us clues into the deeper issues of men's hearts as they are saved and begin a walk with God.
- c) David & the Kingdom – Here is perhaps the clearest illustration of Jesus' own teaching on the kingdom of God in this age. We also learn great lessons on good and bad leadership.
- d) The Kings Stories – lessons on leadership and how national sin and national obedience affects every area of people's lives.

Learning from Acts

When people study the book of Acts, it usually has at the root of their study a desire to see how the Holy Spirit interacted with men and how the early church lived and operated. This is a great desire, but many have misinterpreted the book and which has led to major error in teaching and in the church. The key question when you study and interpret Acts is:

Was their lives and their practices in the church to be the norm for our lives and our practices today? Should we form basic doctrinal practices from the history of the early church?

This has been done for centuries, often to the detriment of the church.

Luke's Original Intention: The key to learning from Acts lies in discovering Luke's original intention in what he included in the story of the early church. It is critical that we discover what he was trying to say to us under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, but it is equally important to discover what he was NOT trying to say to us.

- 1) Luke included very little about the lives or biographies of the early apostles or Christians. The book is almost silent on these points.
- 2) Luke has little or no interest in church organization, structure, or day to day operations. We see a few glimpses, but these vary greatly from a Jewish setting to a Gentile setting.
- 3) Luke does not at all seem to be giving us a daily pattern to follow or a norm to adhere to. In fact, there is great diversity to practice and experiences in the book that leave very little room for church practice or spiritual experiences.⁴

Luke's apparent intension was twofold:

- 1) The movement of the Gospel and the church constantly forward into new territory, new lives, and new regions. This is the primary message of the book. God is a God of mission

⁴ Fee & Stuart, p. 113.

and desires to constantly move forward into new hearts, lives, regions, etc. and nothing can stop Him.

- 2) The powerful working of the Holy Spirit through normal men to accomplish this mission. The Holy Spirit is truly the “Star” of the book as He guides, speaks, converts, transforms, empowers and does signs and wonders as men turn to Jesus Christ.

Principles for Learning from the Story of Acts

- 1) We cannot form a normal way of Christian living or ministry from a single story in Acts. This is the record of how the Holy Spirit worked in these days and in these cultures, but does not necessarily mean it is the only way He will move today.
- 2) These stories should serve more as guides for our life and ministry than definite norms. We should NOT form firm rules for how church should operate or how daily Christian life should be led based upon these stories. It does not tell us how to have church, how to minister in every situation.
- 3) If things are repeated within the book, it could be assumed that we can learn basic patterns of life and ministry.
- 4) We gain a good understanding of how man relates to Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts. One of the overriding purposes of the book is to convince men that the Holy Spirit wants to flow through them with power to the world. Even in this, we cannot limit the Spirit to just what we see in Acts for in these stories, He was moving in new and living ways that they had never seen or heard of before.
- 5) We must be aware of who is the main character of the story – was it an apostle, a teacher, a prophet, or a member in the church. Each of these gifts have different abilities and responsibilities. To say that we should be like all is not biblically correct.
- 6) We cannot conclude that our church should be structured or built like the Acts churches because it is never stated that they should be. These churches were set into particular cultural settings of the day and so should ours. For example, the Jerusalem and Antioch churches were very different because of their cultural setting. Just as they build city taking churches by the leading of the Spirit that fit within their cultural framework, so should we.
- 7) We should seek to emulate their: doctrine, teaching & preaching, power, love, and results in a culturally relevant church of today.

The Gospels

To correctly study and interpret the Gospels, we must understand that they are one story with many dimensions. Each of the writers was writing to a different audience with a different perspective of the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus. Within the Gospels we can find two basic elements: ***the stories about Jesus (narrative)*** and ***the sayings of Jesus (direct teachings and parables.)***

Why Four Gospels?

Early Christianity did not harmonise the four Gospels into one book. This demonstrates the appreciation and reverence for each individual work. But why four Gospels? One answer to this question is that we need four Gospels in order to represent the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ adequately. Since the time of the church fathers it has been common to

differentiate one Gospel from another by suggesting symbolic motifs for them, such as the creatures found in Ezekiel 1:10:

- ✓ Matthew is the Gospel of the lion - it presents Jesus as the Messiah-King.
- ✓ Mark the Gospel of the ox - it presents Jesus as the perfect Servant.
- ✓ Luke is the Gospel of the man - it presents Jesus as a perfect man.
- ✓ John is the Gospel of the eagle - it presents Jesus as Son of God.

This way of defining the Christology of the Gospels is too simplistic however. Mark, for example, can be read as the most uncomplicated Gospel, but its intention is deeply theological: 'The beginning of the gospel about *Jesus Christ, the Son of God*' (Mk. 1:1).

Mark is generally considered to be the first written and then it was 'rewritten' by Matthew and Luke to meet their audiences understanding and need of the story and teachings of Jesus. Later, John wrote an entirely different gospel to a wholly different audience under an entirely different set of circumstances. Four gospels, one central story, but written to four different audiences, with different cultural backgrounds and a different set of circumstances.

Because this is true, it is critical for us to discover a few things to understand the four gospels:

- 1) What was Jesus historical setting like?
- 2) Who were the target audiences of each gospel?
- 3) Why was it written differently?
- 4) What was the historical situation it was written in to?

Jesus Historical setting was Aramaic speaking Israel. It was agricultural, small villages, and very rural. He often taught in parables, hyperbole, similes and metaphors, questions and He used poetry and proverbs often in His teaching style. This was *very common* to great rabbinical teachers of His day. It would serve you well to discover a good book about the cultural setting of Jesus day and immerse yourself with an understanding of His day.

The Historical Setting of the Gospels differ from one to the other. They each had different target groups, cultural assumptions, and purposes in writing their rendition of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. These are very important for us to understand for us to properly learn from the Gospels. You can discover the Author's audience, the purpose of writing and the nature of each Gospel from a good commentary, Bible Dictionary, or the introduction of a good study Bible to the Gospel account.

The Gospel Of Matthew

The first Gospel forms a natural bridge with the OT, being written by a Jew primarily for Jewish Christians or to lead Jews to faith in the Messiah. It gives a sense of continuity between Judaism and Christianity. The Jewish interest is seen by its opening genealogy, references to OT prophecies and by the fact that it is built around five major discourses, the first being the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5 - 7). The Gospel may be dated c. AD 50-70.

The Gospel Of Mark

All books of the NT had to have some connection with an apostle to be accepted into the canon. The apostle Peter is generally believed to be Mark's source of information for the life and ministry of Jesus. The book gives a great deal of space to the Lord's wonderful works and it is thought to have been written primarily for Roman Christians. As a Man of action Jesus would certainly appeal to the Roman mind. The majority of scholars take Mark to be the earliest Gospel, and argue that it is used by Matthew and Luke (see Lk. 1:1-4).⁵ Modern dating bears this in mind and fixes a date c. AD 68, that is, before the death of Peter.

The Gospel Of Luke

Luke, a close companion of the apostle Paul, wrote Luke-Acts. Luke 1:1-4 indicates the purpose behind the joint work. 'Most excellent Theophilus' is generally taken to indicate a man of position (cf. Acts 24:3; 26:25). The Gospel is characterised by its parables, its universalism, its concern for the social outcast, women and children, its features of joy and prayer, the ministry of angels and the Holy Spirit. Dating places the Gospel before the Acts.

The Gospel Of John

John, the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', outlived the other apostles and may have been the youngest apostle called by Jesus. The purpose of the Gospel is given in Jn. 20:30, 31. The Gospel contains seven 'signs', which are seen as 'enacted parables'. It contains no parables in the sense of full-blown stories with a spiritual meaning. The Fourth Gospel is sometimes referred to as the 'spiritual Gospel', especially as it opens with Christ as the pre-existent Word or Logos. It is usually dated as the last Gospel, c. 90 AD. A fragment of a copy of the Gospel, the Rylands papyrus, is dated c. 120 AD.



Discussion

Read John 20:30, 31. Discuss how the purpose of the Gospel of John differs from the other gospels.

Reading to See the Big Picture: One critical approach to studying each Gospel is to study the background behind its writer and purpose for being written and then reading the book through several times looking for the **Big Picture**. That very distinct thing that the writer was trying to emphasize to his audience that makes the Gospel so distinct.

Understanding the Narratives: The narratives of the Gospel tend to function in more than one way. They often have many more dimensions to them than do the other biblical narratives.

a) The miracle stories function to show us the power of God and His kingdom breaking into people's lives then (and hopefully today). They often illustrate the operation of faith in the lives of people.

⁵ The Roman Catholic church still holds to the primacy of Matthew.

b) Other stories such as the rich young ruler and the request to sit at the right hand of Jesus in His Kingdom serve to illustrate major teaching points of Jesus and many, if not most, of these are set in the middle of His teaching. The stories illustrate the teaching and the teaching explains the stories.

c) The third function of these stories is that they reveal to us Jesus Christ Himself. No other place in the Scriptures can we gaze upon the Lord and come to know Him as in the Gospel narratives. To be a true follower of Jesus, we should immerse ourselves in these stories to get to know the Master.

d) These can serve as examples for us to follow in many cases. Any one story as a single event is probably not going to be a pattern for us to follow, but His life looked at as a whole should be our basic pattern or living. Only in these stories will we discover how He lived and how we therefore ought to live.

The Teachings of Jesus

HIS NARRATIVES: The first level of Jesus' teaching is ***His outright direct, imperatives***. He gives many clear, direct teachings that must be followed. . .love, give, pray, lay down your life, abandon all and follow Him. As we study the Gospels, we must take special note of these.

Sometimes, people will fall into two extremes trying to make these statements religious laws to be followed. As they do this, they again fall into the legalism of the day that Jesus was so fiercely attacking.

A second error, is to avoid these and say that He couldn't mean that because it sounded so much like a law and we know that under the New Covenant, we are no longer under the law, but under grace. This is an equal error. We must not avoid Jesus' words. These did not serve as legal ways to approach God, but were teachings of how life would be lived as we related to God by grace and received the full life of the Holy Spirit.

HIS PARABLES: The second level of Jesus' teaching are ***His parables***. To understand His parables we need a set of tools and understandings to work from as we study.

1) Jesus used many kinds of parables and we should identify the kind of parable He was using as we begin to read. . .

- *The True Parable* = A story pure and simple which illustrates a point. (The Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son. . .)
- *A Similitude* = An illustration taken from everyday life to illustrate what the Kingdom of Heaven is like (The Yeast, The Mustard Seed, The Seed Planted in the Garden)
- *A Metaphor* = A metaphor compares two dissimilar things without using obvious words such as "like" or "as." When Jesus says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "You brood of vipers!", He was using a metaphor to indicate his hatred of their self-righteousness (Mt. 3:7).
- *A Simile* = A simile compares two dissimilar things, using words "like", "as" or "than". Psalm 1 compares the righteous man to a tree planted by streams of water. Both bear fruit and prosper.
- *Hyperbole* = A hyperbole expresses something in extreme terms to make a point. When Jesus says that a judgmental person has a log in his eye and doesn't know it, he is

saying something that is physically impossible. His point, however, is that a person who is unaware of his own sins is totally unable to evaluate another person's sin.

- 2) In Jesus day parables were not major teaching tools to impart doctrine as much as they were short sayings to teach one lesson or make a point, pierce the heart and call for response. The purpose of a parable is to get to a person's heart and get them to respond. Parables are meant to immediately confront us with a truth and evoke a change.⁶
- 3) Whatever the kind of parabolic saying He used, in Jesus' day it operated much like a joke. He would use a piece of information that was common knowledge and tell it in such a way that His audience caught His meaning. Then He would have some ending to the parabolic statement which called for a response. This fact presents a bit of a problem for us in that because we are not a part of His culture and His day, we often don't catch His meaning because He is using common cultural illustrations.
- 4) Some Statements about parables:
 - The Meaning of the Parable is often stated in its introduction: (The Parable of the Persistent Widow Luke 18.1-8, The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector Luke 18.9-14)
 - The Meaning of the Parable is often in the closing: (The Parable of the Wedding Banquet Matt. 22.1-14,)
 - The Meaning of the Parable may be stated at both the beginning and the end (Parable of the Rich Fool Luke 12.16-21)
 - Sometimes we must listen to the parable in the context of all else that is happening in the chapter. This gives us the clue.
 - Parables should not be used to establish doctrine but more to illustrate clearly taught doctrine in other parts of Scripture.
- 5) Basic guidelines for interpreting parables:⁷
 - Begin with the immediate context -the verses before and after it.
 - Identify the central point – the main idea.
 - Compare with other passages for building understanding.
 - Identify the response Jesus wants you and others to make.
 - Obey Him!

The Epistles

As we begin to think of properly studying and interpreting the Epistles, we need to begin with a few clarifying statements about the Epistles themselves.

- a) Epistles are letters written by an Apostolic leader to a definite target audience.
- b) Some Epistles were meant for only one hearer (1 & 2 Timothy, Philemon) and some were meant to be for the general church public (Romans, Ephesians, Hebrews). ***This fact must be taken into consideration when studying the epistle. Who was it to?***
- c) The Epistles were NOT written to teach Paul, Peter, or John's theology; they were instead written to address a particular question, problem, doctrinal error, or need of

⁶ Fee & Stuart, p. 152.

⁷ R. McQuilken, pp. 194-197.

the person or the region written to. ***This is critical to know! Each Epistle was written to solve or speak into a very real situation in the First Century church.*** If we try to understand the teaching of the Epistle out of its context of ***Why it was written,*** we will miss the point.

Guidelines for Studying and Interpreting Epistles

- 1) Discover the ***who*** that the Epistle is being written to. Who is the author's target audience?
- 2) Attempt to discover the ***why*** the Epistle is being written. What was the situation in Timothy's life? What was the situation being spoken into in Corinth or Ephesus? What was happening in Colossae that Paul was addressing?
- 3) Read through the whole letter at one sitting. This is how people read letters. It is critical to get the Big picture from the very start. Set aside an hour or so and just read slowly through the letter with a very alert heart to what God is saying overall in this letter. Read aloud if at all possible. It is powerful to hear the Word as well as read it.
- 4) Make a few brief notes about:
 - What is revealed about the audience the author was writing to?
 - What are the author's attitudes like?
 - What are the main points of the letter?
 - What are the natural divisions of the letter?⁸
- 5) Once you have done this, you are ready to study a passage or even a verse. As you study the passage out of the Epistle, such as Philippians 2.1-11, you must ascertain the following things:
 - How does it fit into the overall letter?
 - What is the context of this short passage?
 - What was the situation that caused Paul to write these thoughts?
 - What is his main point?
 - How should we then live?
- 6) ***Basic Rule #1: A text should not mean what to us what it never meant to the author or to his original readers.*** We do not need to come up with NEW DOCTRINE for today. We need the clearly revealed word of God applied to our lives and times.
- 7) ***Basic Rule #2: Whenever we share similar life situations with first century hearers, God's word to them is the same as God's word to us.*** It is still true today that *all have sinned, that all need a Savior and Lord, that all need eternal life in their soul, that all need guidance in their marriage, parenting, handling of money, etc.*⁹

It is critical that we learn to study, apply, and teach accurately the truths of the Epistles. Much of our theology and practice for life today comes from these early spiritual fathers and teachers.

Interpreting the Prophets & Prophetic Writings

The role and ministry of the biblical prophet was that of a 'forthteller' and a 'foreteller'. The OT prophets had more to say about the immediate future than the distant future. The prophets of God spoke to their contemporaries.

⁸ Fee & Stuart, pp. 56-60.

⁹ Fee & Stuart, pp. 74-75.

The Prophet As A Forthteller

The prophet's mission was to bring God's word to the people (Ex. 7:1), hence they often had God's word for the nation, its king and leaders. The ethical prophets reminded Israel of Yahweh's covenant, with its blessings and cursings. They preached justice, mercy and humbleness (Mic. 6:8), and stressed that obedience was more important than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22-23). Their oracles sometimes took the form of 'a lawsuit' (Isa. 3:13-26), 'a woe' (Hab. 2:6-8), or 'a promise' (Amos 9:11-15). Their message often took a poetic form.

The Prophet As A Foreteller

'The prophet's task might involve him in foretelling such events as the deportation and captivity of God's people, their deliverance and return, their world-wide dispersion, the birth, life and death of the Messiah, his second advent and eternal kingdom' (W. Kuhrt). God shared his wisdom and knowledge through the ministry of the prophets. Many OT prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (e.g. Isa. 7:14 and Mt. 1:22, 23).

Prophecy In The New Testament

The Bible itself is a 'sure word of prophecy' (2 Pet. 1:19). We need to appreciate that the dimension of prophecy is contained in all the Bible, that is, in both Testaments, for example, 1 Corinthians 15 unpacks details relating to the return of Jesus Christ, which has yet to take place. The book of Revelation pictures events that will take place before the end of the age.

The Fulfillment Of Prophecy

The prophetic word often has a multiple reference, that is, it is meaningful and applicable in more than one instance. It would often have a near, immediate fulfillment and then one later in history. So we see concerning many prophecies that they have multiple fulfillments. Consider these examples:

The Prophecy Of The Sceptre (Gen. 49:10)

'The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.'

The immediate and partial fulfillment is found in the preservation of the Davidic dynasty until the time of the Exile. The more distant and complete fulfillment will be found in Jesus Christ, David's greater Son, for ***'he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, his kingdom will never end'*** (Lk. 1:33).

The Prophecy Given To David (2 Sam. 7:13-14)

The prophet Nathan said to king David, ***'He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.'*** The immediate reference is to Solomon, but the ultimate reference is to the Lord Jesus, as the author of Hebrew indicates (Heb. 1:5). Note that 2 Sam. 7:14b does not apply to Jesus.

The Prophecies Of Mt. 24, Mk. 13 And Lk. 21

Not all the prophecies in these chapters are connected with the end times and the Lord's second advent. Some obviously apply to the events in AD 70, when the Roman armies under Titus besieged and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple.

The Scope Of Prophecy

Note the following observations:

- ✓ Prophecy may be given in the OT and fulfilled in the OT (e.g. 2 Kgs. 1-4 & 17)
- ✓ Prophecy may be given in the OT and fulfilled in the NT (e.g. Isa. 7:14; Mt. 1:22-25)
- ✓ Prophecy may be given in the OT and yet be unfulfilled (e.g. the millennium; Isa. 11);
- ✓ Prophecy may be given in the NT and fulfilled in the NT (e.g. Acts 11:28)
- ✓ Prophecy may be given in the NT and yet be unfulfilled (e.g. the Parousia; 1 Thess. 4)

Some Rules For The Interpreting Of Prophetic Scriptures

Be careful to recognize the language of prophetic scriptures, and to compare scripture with scripture when seeking to ascertain their message. Here are some guidelines:

- a. Research into the circumstances surrounding the prophecy.
- b. Take care to interpret the prophet's use of figurative language.
- c. Compare a prophecy with similar ones to gain insights, for example, the prophecies shared by three prophets concerning the Branch (see Isa.4:2;11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12).
- d. Take care to note if and how the prophecies have been fulfilled.
- e. Study how the Lord and the early church dealt with prophetic scriptures. The apostles saw many fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and his church (e.g. Joel. 2:28, 29 & Acts 2:16, 17; Amos 9:11, 12 & Acts 15:16, 17; Ex. 19:5, 6 & 1 Pet. 2:9; Hos. 2:23 & 1 Pet. 2:10; Rom. 9:25).

Different Ways In Which Prophetic Scripture Is Interpreted

The Allegorising (Or Spiritualising) Method

The way the Lord and the apostles quoted and used the OT may appear to support the view that not all prophecy is to be interpreted literally. Some extreme exponents of this opinion maintain that there are no prophecies respecting literal Israel that remain to be fulfilled.

The Literal Method

The word given to Ezekiel as he saw the valley of dry bones being turned into a great army was: ***'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel'*** (Ezek. 37:12). The fulfillment of this scripture has been a modern phenomenon.

This leads to the advice that, 'whenever possible, the prophetic Scripture, like every other part of Scripture, should be interpreted literally' (W. Kuhrt).¹⁰ This advice should only be used as a general guideline and not a concrete rule or you will get into trouble many times in interpreting prophetic writings.

¹⁰ W. Kuhrt, *Interpreting the Bible*, p. 93.

The Central Theme Of Prophecy

The whole inspiring motive behind prophecy is to testify to Jesus Christ and to set him at the centre of things (consider Lk. 24:27; 1 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 19: 10). Christ is the essence of the prophetic scheme of God. His sufferings and glory are two vital themes of prophecy (Acts 3:18; cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-11; Rev. 19:10). Prophecy reveals God's mystery (cf. Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:4-6; Col. 1:26-27). Apart from Jesus Christ, the essential stream of prophecy concerns the Jews, the Gentiles and the church of God. It is important to appreciate that prophecy always has a practical application. The book of Revelation helped a persecuted church through a time of opposition at the end of the first century - without a doubt it will do the same in the last days on the eve of the Lord's return.

Psalms and Proverbs

The books of Psalms and Proverbs are some of the most beloved of all Scripture. They are perhaps the read more on a devotional level than any other of the Bible, but to understand them we must see them in light of the kind of literature that they are.

Psalms

Psalms are basically the hymns and prayers of Israel as written by David and others who ministered before the Lord in the Tabernacle of David during that period of Kingdom History. They are not so much words **from** God **to** men, but more words **to** God **from** men or they are words **about** God **to** men. Because this is the case, we must pay close attention to a few things to be able to understand them properly and allow God to speak to us from the Psalms.¹¹

We should not look to the psalms to form the major portions of our theology or perhaps even our Christian practice, but they are invaluable for us to express our hearts to God and to experience His touch upon our lives in a real and living way.

Some truths about the Psalms¹²:

- a) The most important thing to remember is that they are musical poetry, and as written statements of prayer, poetry, and worship, they are above all aimed at connecting with the head by going through the heart. The Psalms first aim is the human heart!
- b) As musical poems, they are intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings rather than doctrinal thinking, and to stimulate the human heart to reach out to God in trust, love, and obedience.
- c) The vocabulary of poetry is very metaphorical. In Psalms, *mountains leap like rams singing about God, enemies spit out swords from their lips, and God is seen as a Shepherd, a Rock, a Fortress, a Shield, etc..* We must understand the nature of these things and not try to read deep things in, but see the metaphor and reach out to know God as such.
- d) Psalms were of several different categories and each category had a specific purpose in the life of worship of the Hebrew people. Some had purpose on the individual level and others were aimed at high worship song for the large group meetings of God's people.

¹¹ Fee & Stuart, p. 205.

¹² Fee & Stuart, pp. 206-211.

e) Psalms were eventually collected into five books: Pss 1-41; Pss 42-72; Pss 73-89; Pss 90-106; & Pss 107-150.

Types of Psalms¹³:

- a) *Laments* = The Psalms of Lament are the largest group of Psalms in the collection. These consist of more than sixty Psalms and they are prayers and songs that express personal or national struggles, hardships, trials, sufferings and attacks. Some individual laments would be found in Ps. 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 88, 120. Some corporate laments are Ps. 12, 44, 80, 94, 137. These Psalms are so very helpful in times of hardship of expressing our souls to God and of pouring out our hearts in prayer.
- b) *Thanksgiving Psalms* = The name is pretty self-explanatory. Some examples are Pss 66, 67, 75, 107, 124, 136 of corporate thanksgiving and individual thanksgiving Psalms are found in Pss. 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138.
- c) *Hymns of Praise* = A set of Psalms aimed at the praise of God for who He is, for His greatness, for His goodness to the whole earth and for His goodness to His people. Some examples of Hymns of praise are Pss. 8, 19, 104, 33, 103, 145 – 147.
- d) *Songs of Trust* = These ten Psalms center of the fact that God can be trusted and that even in times of darkness and trial, God's people should always trust Him. Pss. 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131.
- e) There are several other types of Psalms that will not be mentioned here.

The Basic Benefits of Psalms¹⁴

As we approach the book of Psalms in our lives and ministry, we discover three great benefits:

- They serve as a guide to personal and public worship.
- They show us how to relate honestly and openly with God.
- They demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation on all that God has done for us and will do for us in the future.

Proverbs

Men today need wisdom for life and Proverbs gives practical answers to many areas of life. They are filled with advice about attitudes and decisions in everyday life. As a whole, they are not highly theological, but generally practical in nature, trying to guide their readers to healthy attitudes and decision making for a successful life.

As a whole, they contrast the life of making good, godly decisions and foolish, self-centered decisions. They can NOT be used to form major blocks of theology for that was NEVER their purpose. We must go to the rest of Scripture for theology. Proverbs was meant by Solomon to be basic guidelines for living life well.

¹³ Fee & Stuart, pp. 212-214.

¹⁴ Fee & Stuart, p. 223.

Here are some guidelines for studying and teaching Proverbs:

- 1) They are NOT definite guarantees of success or cursing from God, but are more general guidelines that will lead to successful living.
- 2) They need to be balanced by other Scripture because they are often very short and give only a bullet point of information.
- 3) Proverbs are often very parabolic by nature and not literal. You must apply the general rules of defining figurative speech.
- 4) Proverbs are intensely practical not overly theological.
- 5) Proverbs often reflect Ancient culture and may need some translation to be useful for us today.
- 6) Proverbs give good advice for many areas of life, but are not to be taken as the only insight into their topics.
- 7) Wrongly used, Proverbs may be used to justify a materialistic lifestyle, but rightly applied they will provide practical advice for living a life that God can bless.
- 8) Proverbs are meant to be applied, not just talked about.