

Beyond Mere Words

Wk6: Genre Specifics

“The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them.” C. S. Lewis, forward to *Paradise Lost*

1. Narratives:

- a. Definition: “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.” Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Characters
 - ii. Plot
 - iii. Plot resolution
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. A narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine...but often illustrates a doctrine(s) taught propositionally elsewhere.
 - ii. Individual Old Testament narratives are not intended to teach moral lessons.
 - iii. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.
 - iv. Narratives don’t set legal precedent for God’s future actions, but they can show patterns...that may be repeatable.
 - v. Consider Contexts and Connections to surrounding narratives
 1. Metanarrative: cosmic level story of God culminating in Christ
 2. Larger Narratives: the story of God redeeming a people for his name (i.e. Old Covenant or New Covenant)
 3. Individual Narratives: the individual episodic story
 - vi. God is the hero of all biblical narratives.

2. Prophecy (Prophets):

- a. Definition: Prophecies are the recorded spoken words (oracles) given by God through prophets’ to their contemporaries. The prophets major role was that of message sent from God to call people back to the Covenant, and although they often decried social sins, they focus was covenantal. They were not merely social revolutionaries. Think of them as ‘covenant enforcers.’ The blessings and curses they announced are rooted in the Torah.
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. One of the primary basic units of thought is Oracles
 1. Judgment Speech: This is the basic form of prophetic message. There is usually a detailed accusation or description of the situation that led to the judgment. This formula includes, “thus says the Lord”—and the prediction of judgment. (e.g. Amos 4:1-3)
 2. The Lawsuit: God is portrayed imaginatively as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, judge, and bailiff in a court case against the defendant, Israel. The full lawsuit form contains a summons, a charge, evidence, and a verdict, though these elements may sometimes be implied rather than explicit. (e.g. Isaiah 3:13-26; 41:21-29)
 3. The Woe: “Woe” was the word ancient Israelites cried out when facing disaster or death, or when they mourned at a funeral. Woe oracles contain, either explicitly or implicitly, three elements: an announcement of distress (the word “woe,” for example), the reason for the distress, and a prediction of doom. (e.g. Habakkuk 2:6-8; Isaiah 5:8-24, Matthew 23:13-36)
 4. The Promise / Salvation Oracle: Basic elements: reference to the future, mention of radical change, and mention of blessing. (e.g. Amos 9:11-15; Jeremiah 33:2-13)
 - ii. Symbolic Actions / acted parables (e.g. Jeremiah 18:1-10; Ezekiel 5:1-4)
 - iii. They are not always present in their original chronological sequence.
 - iv. They are often spoken in poetry.
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Determine the specific prophetic message(s).
 - ii. Consider the context (immediate and larger) and co-texts (e.g. the texts the passage draws from).
 - iii. Don’t let the contemporary situation control the text.
 - iv. Don’t take episodes in the text and symbolize them to speak to modern events.

- v. Don't ignore the role of Israel in redemptive history, or claimed that the promises God made to Israel are applicable to other nations.
- vi. Remember all of the promises of God have their "yes" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20).

3. Apocalypse:

- a. Definition: A particular type of revelatory literature found primarily in ancient Judaism, characterized by claims to offer visions or other disclosures of divine mysteries concerning a variety of subjects.
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Whereas prophetic writing were once spoken oracles, Apocalypses' were literature from the start.
 - ii. Angles often guide or mediate meaning to the author.
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Note the function and meaning of symbols.
 - ii. Look at the use of symbol in contemporary or past literature.
 - iii. Look for examples on how to interpret the apocalyptic passage in the passage itself.

4. Poetry:

- a. Definition: "This type of literature makes up 1/3 of the Old Testament. It is especially common in the 'Prophets' (all but Haggai and Malachi contain poetry) and 'Writings' sections of the Hebrew canon. It is very different from English poetry. English poetry is developed from Greek and Latin poetry, which is primarily sound-based. Hebrew poetry has much in common with Canaanite poetry. It is basically thought-based in balanced, parallel lines." Bob Utley, Bible.org
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Parts of a Poem
 - 1. Line (basic unit of Hebrew Poetry)
 - a. Colon (the term for a partial line)
 - b. Bicolon (e.g. Psalm 117:1)
 - c. Tricolon (e.g. Psalm 112:9-10)
 - d. Tetracolon (Psalm 96:11-12)
 - 2. Strophe
 - a. A strophe is in poetry what a paragraph is in prose.
 - b. A strophe is a group of lines that focus on a common theme.
 - c. Example: Psalm 13: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6
 - ii. Parallelism
 - 1. "Parallelism is the art of saying something similar in both cola but with a difference added in the second colon." Mark Futato
 - 2. It is sometimes helpful to think of parallelism by looking at the 'movement' from the first colon to the final colon in a line.
 - 3. Examples
 - a. Psalm 29:1 (change/movement from *who?* to *what?*)
 - b. Psalm 29:2 (change/movement in characteristic)
 - c. Psalm 29:5 (change/movement from general to specific)
 - d. Psalm 29:10 (change/movement from where? to how long?)
 - iii. Categories of Psalms
 - 1. Hymns/ Praise
 - a. Hymns typically celebrate God as Creator and God as Redeemer.
 - b. Examples: Psalm 29, 34, 118
 - 2. Laments/ Songs of Disorientation
 - a. While the dominate note in the lament is a sad one, the final note is typically upbeat.
 - b. Examples: Psalm 6, 13, 22, 88 (*88 ends with no hope)
 - 3. Songs of Thanksgiving
 - a. Expression of joy and gratitude to God for deliverance.
 - b. Examples: Psalm 18, 40
 - 4. Songs of Confidence
 - a. Expressions of unwavering confidence or trust in God's ability and willingness to deliver from adverse circumstances.
 - b. Examples: 16, 27, 91

- 5. Divine Kingship Songs
 - a. Focus on the kingship of God
 - b. Example: 93, 96, 97, 99
- 6. Royal Psalms
 - a. Songs relating to the King's coronation and enthronement
 - b. Examples: 2, 72, 101, 110
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Consider the Bicolon (or Tricolon), the Strophe, and type of Psalm when reading.
 - ii. Take note of images and the associations that are used to create them.
 - iii. Look for movement in the parallelism of the line. However, don't force the text to say more than it does.
 - iv. When reading a psalm, it is helpful to read that psalm both as being spoken by Christ and speaking about Christ.

5. Wisdom:

- a. Definition: "It is a unique form of literature that it addresses the individual, not the nation. There are no historical or cultic allusions. It primarily focuses on daily, successful, joyful, moral living." Bob Utley, Bible.org (e.g. Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastics)
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Proverbs are often parabolic (i.e. figurative, pointing beyond themselves).
 - ii. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God .
 - ii. Proverbs are worded to be memorable not theoretically accurate (no proverb is a complete truth statement).
 - iii. Proverbs must be read as a collection.
 - iv. Read the Wisdom Books as having a conversation with one another.

6. Gospels:

- a. Definition: Gospel translates as "good news," and prior to the New Testament, this word usually referred to good news of political or military victories. They are unlike modern biographies, meaning they do not cover all of Jesus' life, nor are they arranged chronologically.
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Narrative
 - ii. Parables & Direct Discourse (i.e. teaching)
 - 1. Exaggeration / Hyperbole (Matthew 5:29-30)
 - 2. Rhetorical Questions (Matthew 5:46)
 - 3. Metaphor and Simile (e.g. like, as) (Matthew 5:13; 10:16)
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Look for interpretive instructions from the author himself (Luke 14:7, Matthew 5:1-2, Mark 7:19).
 - ii. Consider narrative structure (e.g. characters, plot, resolution) and the connections between stories.
 - iii. Parables make one or two points, usually no more than three... Don't allegorize parables down to the last detail.
 - iv. Proper interpretation of the Gospels is dependent on a clear understanding of Jesus' central message: The Kingdom of God.

7. Epistles:

- a. Definition: an ancient form of letter writing addressing a person, person(s), or group.
- b. Literary Elements:
 - i. Introduction (e.g. Name of writer, Name of the recipient, Greeting, Prayer or Thanksgiving)
 - ii. Body
 - iii. Conclusion (e.g. Final Greeting, Farewell, Doxology, Benediction, Prayer Request, Travel Plans)
- c. Principles for Interpretation:
 - i. Note any information about the recipients, authors attitude, mentioning of specific occasions of the letter, and the letter's natural logical divisions.
 - ii. Read author's letters in light of their other letters.
 - iii. Read letters in conversation with other NT letters and all of Scripture.
 - iv. A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers.
 - v. Principles must be applied to genuinely comparable situations.
 - vi. Distinguish and discern between practices that are inherently moral and those that "become so only by their use or abuse in given contexts, when such use or abuse involves disobedience or lack of love." Gordon Fee, How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth