

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Story

Topic: Biblical Interpretation (Part 2)

Fall 2026

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. Our theme for this fall is Christian Story. Tonight is the second of two sessions on biblical interpretation.

Literary Genres in Scripture

We know from our everyday reading experiences that the “rules” for interpretation vary depending upon the literary genre we are reading. The same is true for the Bible. Knowing some basic information about the biblical genres will help us to avoid some of the most common errors when it comes to biblical interpretation. Here is a good principle to keep in mind: **though the Bible is always literally true, it is not always meant to be interpreted literally.**

Historical Narrative

More than half of the Bible is historical narrative. This includes most of the Pentateuch, all the historical books of the OT, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. Historical narratives are meant to recount past events. However, historical narratives are not meant to be neutral or exhaustive. There are reasons the biblical authors wrote those books, and there are reasons that people of faith recognized those books as divinely inspired. Historical narratives are **theological history** because they are meant to help readers to think rightly about God and His world for the sake of living rightly before God in His world.

When reading historical narratives, we should pay attention to what the authors state or imply about their context. We should look for key verses that are intended to communicate the major theme for a book or section of Scripture. We should be on the lookout for repetition because this was a common way to note emphasis in ancient writings. We should distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy characters in the narrative.

Prophecy

There is a sense in which the entire OT is prophetic because it prepares readers to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, some writings are intended to be prophetic because they offer a word directly from the Lord through a prophet whom he has chosen specifically for this task. Some prophetic writings were written by the prophets themselves, while others recount the words of prophets. Sometimes prophetic utterances are found within other genres of biblical literature.

When reading prophetic writings, we should pay attention first and foremost to the original audience. However, we should also pay attention to how later Scriptures interact with earlier prophecies. We should expect much of the language to be figurative. We should pay attention to which prophecies are conditional and which are unconditional. We should also pay attention to which prophecies are fulfilled and which are unfulfilled. We should remember that some prophecies have layers of fulfillment that are progressively revealed over both redemptive history and post-biblical history. We should recognize that all biblical prophecies find their ultimately fulfillment in Christ, the one new covenant people of God, and the new creation.

Apocalyptic writings are intended to unveil how God is providentially working behind the scenes, and will continue to work in the future, to bring about his sovereign purposes. Rob Plummer notes that apocalyptic writings are characterized by seven themes:

- The expectation that God is working in unanticipated and dramatic ways to bring our present fallen age into complete alignment with the perfect age to come
- The use of angelic mediators to communicate God's message to a chosen human spokesman (who might also be a prophet)
- The human spokesperson being allowed to see into the heavenly realms, thus gaining a glimpse of God's "behind-the-scenes" intentions
- Symbolic visions and dreams that creatively describe both current hidden spiritual realities and future divine interventions
- Visions of God's coming judgment on human sin, including the final judgment at the end of the present age

Poetry

Poetry is common in the Bible, especially the OT, and frequently crosses over into other genres, including proverbs, historical narrative, prophecy, and psalms. Normally, biblical authors write poetry for one of three reasons: (1) to make the words more memorable; (2) to express the author's emotions; (3) or to induce strong emotions from readers. As in other languages, Hebrew and Greek poetry uses figurative or hyperbolic language, symbolic images, and mnemonic devices such as acrostics, repetition of similar sounds, and parallelism.

When reading biblical poetry, we need to remember three key principles. First, the original poetry is sometimes lost in English translation. Study Bibles can help us to understand when a writer is employing poetry. Second, and more important, poetry is rarely intended to be interpreted literally, but rather points to general principles and/or means to evoke an emotional response from readers. Finally, we should interpret poetic language in light of other Scripture, while also allowing the emotions of biblical poetry to prevent us from being too abstract or "clinical" in how we formulate biblical doctrines and principles.

Parables

Biblical parables are short, normally fictitious stories that illustrates a spiritual principle by way of comparison with earthly examples. Approximately one-third of Jesus's teaching is in the form of parables, normally illustrating kingdom priorities and ethics. In Jesus's own day, some found the parables to be helpful while others found them confusing. This is a clear example of the importance of faith (or at least an openness to faith) when interpreting the words of Jesus.

When reading biblical parables, we should remember to first identify the main point or points rather than getting bogged down on the details of the story. The latter serves the former. We should also remember to look for what Rob Plummer calls "stock images": recurring imagery in Jesus's parables. Finally, we should allow the context of where the parable occurs in the Gospel to help us understand the point Jesus was making.

Epistles

The books of the NT are epistles written by apostles and others who were closely connected to apostles. Epistles are letters that were written to individuals, churches, or groups of churches. Epistles can have a main theme or themes, or they can be less thematic and more topical. Epistles are intended to be didactic, which is why this is one of the most popular genres for expository preachers.

When reading epistles, we should do our best to understand the historical context of both the author and the recipients. We should also break the epistle into units (often paragraphs) to help us understand how each section relates to the whole. We should look for key verses, as well as words or phrases that either recur or seem to carry significant importance within the epistle. We should try and understand the logic of sentences, then paragraphs, then larger sections like chapters, then the entire epistle. We should also apply many of these same principles to groups of epistles written by the same author.

Recommended Resources

Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me* (Crossway, 2016).

Matt Rogers and Donny Mathis, *Seven Arrows: Aiming Bible Readers in the Right Direction* (Rainer Publishing, 2017).

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Zondervan, 2020).

Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Kregel Academic, 2021).