

What Am I Reading Here?

The Bible is a truly amazing book! There is, in fact, nothing comparable to it. Consider that it is comprised of 66 individual books, split between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was written over a period of approximately 1500 years, with 40 different human authors. There is, however, one message or theme that runs from the beginning to the end, which confirms that there is only one true author: God! As we examine this amazing compilation of books, we find that it is full of several different types of writing. We can divide the various books up into several genres of literature. Quite often, our understanding of the text will rely upon us knowing what type of literature we are examining. For example, we will not think of poetic language being the same as factual history. Just like we interpret different types of literature in different ways in our society today, so we must with the scriptures as well.

History...

There is much written in the scriptures that would be classified as *history*. In fact, the Old Testament scriptures are the most complete history of the Jewish people available to us. Because of the nature of the scriptures, and the claims they make for themselves, many desire or even require that the history found therein be confirmed by other secular sources. However, where extra-biblical evidence has been recovered, it has confirmed the account found in scripture.

The Old Testament begins with what is known as the Pentateuch, or “the book of five.” All of these contain a history of mankind through what we know as the Patriarchal period of man’s history. This covers the time of creation (Genesis 1-2) up through the time of Moses and the giving of the Law of Moses. Included in these early passages are several genealogies which help us to connect the generations of men from creation through important historical events. For example, the first of these appears in Genesis chapter 5, and ties together the time of creation (Adam) with the flood (Noah). These same types of genealogies are found in other places of scripture, but fulfill the same basic purpose. Through these family lines, the inspired writers will connect multiple periods of history together. Matthew, for example, provides a genealogy for Jesus in Matthew chapter 1. There, he connected Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian captivity, and the Babylonian captivity to Jesus. These were all significant times, and people, to the Jewish people.

There are several other books of the Old Testament that are predominantly historical. While whole books may be classified as a particular type of writing, we should be aware of the fact that the different genres are often interspersed among the books. For example, part of the Pentateuch would be classified as *law*, and yet parts of those books also record history for us. The book of Job is primarily written in poetic form, and yet it too contains history. Understanding the nature of these different genres, and how the ideas are expressed, will help us to understand the meaning of these passages!

Most of the Old Testament writings from Joshua to Esther fall into the category of *history*. We learn about how the children of Israel ended up in the land of Canaan, and about their rebellion against the Lord. We learn about the coming of their human kings, and how the nation was divided into two kingdoms. We learn about nature of their kings through time, and how their wickedness led to the fall of both of these nations. We read about the northern kingdom of Israel being taken into the

Assyrian captivity, only to be followed by their sister nation, Judah, into the Babylonian captivity. We read about the return from captivity, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. We can follow the history of the people of Israel for several hundred years, through their successes and failures. Through it all, we get a glimpse of how God interacted with His people. We are able to see what His expectations for them was, and we can learn what type of expectations He has for mankind today as well.

In the New Testament, there are 5 books that can be at least loosely classified as *history*. We say “loosely classified as history” because the first four are the gospels (Matthew-John) which are full of history, but are also full of instruction. They do, however, reveal the history of the life of Christ. The fifth book of history is the book of Acts. Acts is more of what we think of as traditional history. Luke records for us the history of the Apostles in the early church, most notably the work of Peter and Paul. Through the book of Acts, we learn of the establishment of the church, as well as its spread throughout the world. We are able to watch the work of Paul as he traveled around the world starting new local churches through the preaching of the gospel message. We are able to see what the church looked like under the tutelage of the apostles. This view into the working of the early church is invaluable to us. Knowing what the early church looked like, under the direct instruction of God’s inspired men, shows us what the church is supposed to look like today as well. Without the history of the book of Acts, it would be impossible for us to know what God wanted His church to look like for all time!

When we study history, we understand its nature. This type of literature serves the purpose of revealing facts about the various periods of time that we are studying. We look at the inspired history of the Bible in the same way that we look at histories written by men today. They are recording events as they happened, so that readers throughout time will be able to know what happened. Because the scriptures were inspired by God, we can have confidence in their historical accuracy.

Poetry...

A significant portion of the scriptures is written in poetic form. All of the books from Job to Song of Solomon are classified as poetry. There are, however, some significant differences among these books. For example, the book of Job contains history, and is formatted as prose for the introductory chapters. When the dialogue begins in chapter 3, the form changes from prose to poetry. This stands in contrast with books such as Psalms and Proverbs, that are more purely poetic.

Unfortunately, we often lose the beauty of the poetic language when translations occur from the original language. Think, for example, how words which may rhyme in one language will not rhyme when translated to another language. Changes in the number of syllables from one language to another may also change the meter or rhythm of the poetic verse. Because of these necessary changes in translation, we often lose the form of the original poetry, and therefore lose the beauty of the verse. It is, however, important to realize that we do not lose the meaning of the passages. We can understand what was written. In many of the modern translations, the translators tried to capture the form of the poetry, which gives us some insight into how these passages would have been seen by the original audiences.

When examining poetry, it is important to realize that it must be examined differently than other forms of literature, such as history. While the historical books are a recording of facts, and the language included should typically taken as literal, the same is not true for poetry. We understand this premise when examining literature in our society. We read and interpret a history book in a completely different way to how we read and interpret a book of poetry. This is because we understand how language is used! When we read a book of poetry, we do not expect that the author is setting

down a series of facts. Instead, we understand that he is writing creatively, and to understand what is in his mind, we are tasked with interpreting his creative style. In a future lesson, we will spend more time examining various literary devices that are used in poetry.

Instruction...

For our purposes, we will identify instructional writings as those through which God has specifically identified the actions He wants from His people. Throughout the Old Testament, the writings that were generally identified as “the Law” would fall into this type of writing. Throughout the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God was very specific with His instructions for the Israelites. In fact, while many people think that the Ten Commandments incorporated all of God’s instructions for His people, we find that they were only the tip of the iceberg of what God expected! He left no stone unturned when it came to the behavior of His people.

Instructive writing was not limited, however, to these books of Law in the Pentateuch. Throughout the Old Testament, God spoke to His people giving them specific instructions to control their actions. In fact, He would, on many occasions, tell them specifically when to act, and when not to act. A good example of this can be found in the book of Exodus, when the people were wandering in the wilderness after their disobedience (they refused to enter the promised land when God told them to go). God led them by appearing in the form of a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud lifted from the camp, God was telling them that it was time to travel. When it remained, He was telling them that they were to remain camped (Numbers 9:15-23). There are many instances interspersed through the Old Testament scriptures where God gave specific instructions to either an individual or groups of people (including the nation as a whole). In each case, it is evident that God expected to be obeyed! That was not always the case, but it was always the expectation.

In the New Testament, instruction was typically delivered in the form of *epistles*. Epistles were letters written from an inspired author to either an individual or a group of people (such as a local church). Several men wrote the epistles we find in our Bibles. Paul, Peter, James and John all wrote letters of instruction that have been canonized (i.e., added to the scriptures). Most of what we read in these letters are either reminders to continue doing what had already been delivered to them, or corrections in areas where they had strayed from the instructions that had been delivered. In any case, the written word was almost always a reminder of instruction that the recipients had received at some point in their past. This is why Paul could write a passage like the following to the Galatian brethren:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6–9).

While the New Testament is not comprised of books of law, such as the Old Testament was, it is nonetheless full of instruction. The inspired writers conveyed what was in the mind of God (Ephesians 3), including His expectations for the actions of His people. While there is no list of commandments, there are many passages describing the nature of the child of God, and subsequently the behavior of that child. Some want to use the absence of a “Ten Commandments like passage” to dismiss any existence of a law under the New Covenant. There are far too many passages that provide instructions (both “thou shall” and “thou shalt not” in nature) to think that God does not expect obedience. In fact, there are several passages in the New Testament scriptures that clearly indicate that a failure to conform behavior to God’s instructions will keep one out of the kingdom of

Heaven. We will present one here for illustration, but will return to this idea in a later study on the epistles:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

While this may not constitute a “list of commandments” as compared with the Old Testament commands, it is clear that the instructions are present. One cannot participate in these sins and inherit the kingdom of God. Therefore, it is evident that God was delivering instructions to avoid those sinful practices! In delivering these instructions, He intended for His people to be obedient. There are, after all, severe consequences for disobedience! One who does not “inherit the kingdom of God” cannot be saved, nor spend eternity with God in Heaven.

The writings contained in the epistles ensure that we can understand what God expects of us. He has revealed His mind, including the consequences for disobedience. These instructions must be followed if we are to have a relationship with Him, and with His people!

Prophecy...

Another type of biblical literature is prophecy. A prophet, in the simplest form, is simply one who speaks for another. This word, for example was used to identify the relationship between Moses and Aaron:

So the LORD said to Moses: “See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet (Exodus 7:1).

When used in relationship with God, the prophet is an inspired person, revealing the word of the Lord. The Old Testament is full of prophets speaking for God. These men often were proclaiming instruction that God wanted men to conform to. Consider, for example, the prophet Jonah. His message was one of repentance, calling for the people of Nineveh to give up their wickedness and return to serving the Lord. Much of what we read in books like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are quite similar in nature. God’s messenger would call for the repentance of the people, pleading with them to return to faithful service. In this sense, any person who spoke on behalf of God, providing any kind of instruction could be identified as a prophet, and could be said to be bringing prophecy. However, there is a different way in which we often think of this word as well.

Most often, we think of the prophets as being those who would tell what would happen in the future. Certainly, that was an important part of the work that they would do. Not only would these men deliver instruction, but they would tell what would happen in the future based upon the people’s response to that instruction. Once again, consider the prophecies of men like Isaiah. Isaiah, some 150 years before the event, named Cyrus as the man who would be responsible for the return of the people of God from the Babylonian captivity. He named the ruler who would return the people from a captivity that they had not yet entered (See Isaiah 44:28)! The only way to be able to prophecy the future with such specificity is through divine inspiration. Only God can know the future so well as to tell exactly what would happen.

There were those who claimed to be prophets of God, but who were false prophets. The people needed to know how to distinguish between the true (those who should be obeyed) and the false (those who should be ignored). It would be imperative for the people to be able to tell the difference between the two! God gave instructions that would help them to know when a prophet was

true, and when a prophet was false:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:20–22).

Also, consider these instructions:

“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’—which you have not known—‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

So, if a prophet spoke something different than what God has already revealed, or something that was directly contrary to His previous instructions, that man could be identified as false, even if he performed some great sign that seemed to confirm his word. Secondly, if a prophet claimed that a message came from God, but then his word did not come true, he could be identified as false. God would never be wrong! If He sent His word through the mouth of a man, it would come to pass!

Apocalyptic...

Apocalyptic literature is a subset of the previous class of literature (prophecy). It is, however, important to set it aside and discuss it on its own because of its difficulty and impact on our understanding of scripture.

Apocalyptic literature is a special type of prophecy that addresses the ultimate battle between good and evil, God and Satan. It is written in a more cryptic, or symbolic manner, making its interpretation far more difficult. It seems that this is the one type of literature that draws the attention of many new Bible students! It is understandable (as is all the Bible) but must be evaluated and studied in its context.

There are sections of the books of Ezekiel and Daniel that are classified as Apocryphal. Perhaps the most well known section of Apocryphal literature in scripture is the book of Revelation. John very clearly identified his work in that book as being signs, rather than straight forward, literal language:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw (Revelation 1:1–2).

This type of literature relies extensively on *figurative language*. Of course, there are other places in scripture that also use figurative language, and we will examine that in more detail in the next lesson. Here, we should realize that when reading apocalyptic literature, the language is often figurative, and to take it literally would most certainly lead to a false conclusion. For example, there are many who are looking for the events of the book of Revelation to come to pass, and yet John did say (in his introductory and therefore literal comments) that these things would “shortly take

place.” Taking the whole book out of the context in which it was written to devise a doctrine that appeals to us is not fair to God’s word, or to the men that gave their lives to reveal it for us!

Final Considerations...

As we prepare to study the scriptures, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, it is important to remember that studying scripture is not much different than studying other literature. There are some basic premises from which we operate, to ensure that we come away with proper understanding. If we are studying poetry, we understand that we look at it differently than if we are studying history. If we try to insist on looking at poetry exactly as history, it will be nearly impossible to comprehend its meaning!

Second, we must remember that it is our responsibility to interpret the scriptures as the writers intended for them to be interpreted. If we take their words out of context, and make applications or come up with doctrines that they never intended, then we have not come to understand the text. If we read more into a text than the author intended, then we have misinterpreted his words. Keep in mind that the ultimate author of all the text is God. If we have not come to understand His word in the manner He intends, then we still have work to do.

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Questions...

1. How many individual books make up the Bible? How many different human authors are responsible for writing?
2. What 5 types of literature were discussed in this lesson?
3. What Biblical books would be considered Poetry?
4. What is a prophet? For whom were the prophets of scripture speaking?
5. How do the instructive books of the New Testament differ from those in the Old Testament? Why do you think this is true?
6. What is Apocalyptic literature? What Biblical books would fall into this category?
7. What makes Apocalyptic literature difficult to interpret?
8. How is interpreting the Bible the same as interpreting other literature? How is it different?

