What is genre?

Another important methodology in biblical interpretation is a consideration of the biblical text from the standpoint of the type of literature it is. That is known as genre criticism. Genre is the French word meaning “kind” or “type.” So when you talk about “genre,” in relationship to literary and biblical studies we’re talking about the kind or type of literature that we’re dealing with, and how that influences the way I read and interpret the text. We actually make genre decisions and identifications every day, though we usually do it in intuitively, naturally and implicitly.

Every time you pick up a newspaper, you automatically make a genre identification as far as what kind of literature you’re reading and the expectations therefore that you bring to the text. Even if you’re reading a newspaper, you make genre shifts as you turn the pages, because hopefully you don’t read the comic section in the same way you read the sports section, or you don’t read the sports section in the same way you read the front page of the newspaper, or the ads, the editorial page, or something like that. So, you make unconscious genre shifts in identifying the different kinds of literature.

When you pick up and read or write a letter, if I’m grading a research paper, I’m making a genre identification implicitly and intuitively, and that creates an expectation of what I’m going to find and how I’m going to read that text. If you pick up a book and it begins to use a very classic and common example, usually referred to as illustrating genre and it begins, “Once upon a time,” I know what kind of genre I am reading, and I know what to expect. I’m not going to expect to find the scores to baseball games or football games. I’m not going to expect an historical account of the rise of a certain civilization. I am going to be reading what is called a “fairy tale,” and whatever viable insight it might have in life, I’m going to read it in terms of the fact that this is not an actual historical
account of individuals and events that took place historically in space and time.

Genre criticism is important for understanding, in many regards, because, often, a failure to come to grips with the correct type of literary genre can often result in miscommunication or misreading. One example I’d like to give is, when we lived in Scotland, I had the most difficult time trying to understand the game of cricket. The reason that was the case is because I kept trying to understand it according to the conventions and according to the rules of American baseball. Over and over again I had difficulty figuring out what was going on because I couldn’t get beyond my understanding of the game of American baseball. The same is true of understanding literature.

Two metaphors that have often been used, however imperfect they are, the two metaphors that have frequently been used for understanding genre is that literary genre has often been compared to a game. The author and readers are expected to play by the rules. Genre is like a game where there are certain rules that both the author follows in producing the text and that the reader will follow in reading and interpreting the text. Again, much like my difficulty with the British game of cricket to apply the incorrect rules to understanding the text will often result in misunderstanding at best. So the rules of the genre, in the same way determine how a game is played, when it comes to literary genre, one must apply the appropriate rules or guidelines for both writing, but also reading the biblical text.

In light of the reference to both the author producing the text and the readers making sense of it and reading it, is a second metaphor that of a contract. That is, both the author and readers enter into an agreement. The author will follow certain conventions in producing a type of text, and the reader then will follow them in attempting to make sense of and interpret the text. Literary genre guides the reading process; it is part of the meaning of the text. And the sense of the text, in some respects, is determined by how the text communicates. Literary genre has to do with how the text communicates. In one sense, the same questions one asks of literary forms - remember, we talked about form criticism as far as its structure, genre intention - those types of questions are now asked of
the entire text as a literary whole, as a literary genre. The primary difficulty, as we’ll see, is that ancient civilizations might have literary genres that are very different than our own. In other words, the literary genres we intuitively use, we have to be more intentional about how we understand genres that do not exist in our own day or are very different than the literary genres that we operate with.

A literary genre could be described as a group of works that share recurring features of form, content, and function. That is, a literary genre is a work that we can identify as sharing similar features with other works. Those features are the group of works that share a similar form and shape, similar content, and that serve a similar function. But it’s important also to recognize that literary genre is not just a classification tool, but it is what is known as a heuristic tool, that is, it is useful in interpretation. It’s no good to simply classify a literary work apart from understanding what difference that makes in reading it and interpreting it.

One example I like to use in some of my classes is a comic, or a cartoon that one finds in the newspaper, and I ask them for example, “What are the formal features? What is the form of this that tips you off that this is a comic?” For example, the fact that there’s a series of frames, some comics, I guess, is a single picture with a caption. But most comics are a series of frames. They are rather exaggerated and sometimes the features are caricatures of human beings or other animals or things like that. Then the other features: there’s usually a bubble within the frames that contain the speech of the different persons within the comic. Usually, again, most students have to stop and think a little bit, but they can, indeed, identify a comic. They usually do that intuitively, and they also realize that when one reads a comic it’s not necessarily portraying an event that actually happened, though a political cartoon can do that, but it portrays actual events or situations or realities in the political world in rather exaggerated, almost symbolic and metaphorical ways. One reads a comic and realizes that they’re not necessarily referring to actual literal people and events, but they may function to provide a commentary on reality and on society and on life, but they do so in a way that evokes humor and sometimes even satirically poking fun at certain conventions in society. So, by reflecting a little bit on a
cartoon, usually, students can identify the reasons they classify it as a cartoon, and how that affects the way they read it and interpret it. This is to demonstrate that we make genre identifications every day.

Again, the difficulty is with identifying and utilizing ancient genres, and ancient conventions of literary genres one has to be more intentional, one has to make more explicit identifications. This becomes more difficult when you are dealing with genres from an ancient culture that may or may not have analogies to the literary types that we utilize today. Literary genres should also be understood both horizontally and vertically, that is, vertically the biblical text can be read as belonging to other literary types and genres of its kind. Again a literary genre is a group of writings that have similar recurring features of form, content, and function. So vertically, a given biblical text fits into a larger category of writings to which it belongs that it will correspond to.

But one should also read a literary type horizontally, that is following its own logic and its own structure. What that means is literary genre does not always solve all the interpretive difficulties. In my opinion the primary function of genre is to help us to get off on the right foot in interpretation. It’s an entry point into the text to make sure we’re off to the right start but sometimes the text will have its own logic and structure, and sometimes its own unique features that require interpretation and require the understanding that genre identification won’t solve every last problem of interpretation.

One example is classifying the literary genre of the book of Revelation does not solve the problem of the millennium. It might rule out some approaches to that text, but it doesn’t solve ultimately how one will read that text, there are other factors that come into consideration. The literary critic, E.D. Hirsh referred to this as extrinsic genre and intrinsic genre, that is, the literary classification to which a book belongs and the other works that it resembles. The intrinsic genre works on logic and structure, and how that influences the way we read it.

What I want to do is very briefly examine some of the literary genres and literary types of the Old New Testament, focusing especially on how that might make a difference on interpreting it. In the Old Testament we’ll focus on poetry, law, and
prophecy very briefly. We’ve already talked about narrative as far as some of the conventions of narrative plot, structure and characterization, I won’t spend a lot of time on narrative, I want to make a few additional observations in regard to the Gospels in the New Testament, but we’ll look at poetry, law, and prophecy in the Old Testament. In the New Testament I’ll make a few observations about the Gospel genre, the genre of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then I will focus on Epistles and then the last book of the New Testament and the Bible, the book of Revelation. Then we will again focus on the genre in some of the major broad conventions and maybe some brief guidelines for interpretation.

Old Testament Poetry

The first one in the Old Testament that I want to talk about is poetry. Actually the person filming this is far more qualified than I am to stand up here, maybe I should switch places with him, but what I want to do is simply summarize not so much my own individual insights but more summarize some of the key features of poetry that other works focus on and then we’ll move onto law after that. Poetry, most truths of poetry, as I’ve understand it focuses on two features that I only have time to briefly touch upon and that is two important conventions, the use of parallelism and the use of figures of speech.

Parallelism is simply a feature of Hebrew poetry, where the lines in poetry stand in relationship to each other. Even most English translations if you read the Psalms or Proverbs or other poetic literature, will lay out poetry and structure in a way that shows parallelism. That is usually two lines, most commonly are juxtaposed to each other in parallel fashion. The second line in some way usually defines or expands upon or develops the first line in some way.

We see this for example just to give one example of this without lingering at it too long in Proverbs chapter 9 and verse 10 for example, and there’s all kinds of examples of this. Proverbs 9 verse 10 is one of the more well-known statements in Proverbs,

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

And notice the two lines stand in parallel fashion, the second line is set in some way
developing or expanding upon or unpacking the first line to which it is juxtaposed. So one of the things that one has to deal with in reading poetry, especially those of us that are familiar with poetry that primarily operates with the rhythm of sound, and rhyming sounds at the end of lines or something like that is perhaps there’s been other work that’s done I’m not aware of as far as I know that Hebrew parallelism doesn’t work as far as the rhyming sounds or parallel sounds.

Although sometimes as we’ve said one feature at times of poetry is there may be other structuring features such as sometimes certain verses begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet taking you through the entire Hebrew alphabet, something that obviously is going to be lost in English translation. But the first thing that you need to be aware of then is the feature of parallelism. The best thing, the best advice I could give is to talk with someone who is an expert on Hebrew poetry or read works of persons like Adele Berlin, or Robert Alter, and some hermeneutical texts at times do a very good job of introducing you to Hebrew parallelism in poetry. But again the way it’s often structured is according to two lines that are juxtaposed, the first line in a variety of ways and sometimes scholars have created categories such as antithetic parallelism or synonymous parallelism and different labels. Others have questioned whether those are valid categories or not. The main thing is to become familiar with the parallelism and the way it works; how one line functions to expand or unpack or explain in some way the line that comes before it.

The other important feature of Hebrew poetry, whether in the Psalms or Proverbs but especially the Psalms, or even prophetic literature often is cast in poetic form, is figures of speech and primarily what is often labeled similes or metaphors. Something is said to be like something else or simply something is something else. For example, when God is referred to as a “rock” or a “fortress” or a “tower” or in Psalm 119, verses 105, a classic example “your Word is a lamp to my feet.” The Word is being compared in some way to a lamp.

For a another example look at the very first Psalm. It immediately begins by communicating through metaphor and figures of speech so Psalm 1 begins, “blessed is
the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.” And I’ll stop reading there, but notice how already the Psalmist utilizes the convention of figurative speech especially metaphor or what is sometimes called simile. What this suggests is basically that a metaphor is consists of the juxtaposition of two things that usually do not belong together, such as explaining a man or a person in terms of a tree. That sort of creates a dissonance by juxtaposing two things that don’t go together. Then one asks what light does that juxtaposition shed on the meaning that is trying to be communicated. So again, when the author compares God to a rock or when the righteous are compared to a tree that produces fruit and its leaves do not whither. What is communicated by the juxtaposition of two things that usually don’t belong together or go together?

Or, for example, Psalm 57:4, the author says, “I am in the midst of lions. I lie among ravenous beasts.” Now if I stopped there, is this author somewhere in the forest, or is he in the zoo, or what is going on? But you go on further and it says, “Men whose teeth are spears and arrows whose tongues are sharp swords.” So instead of referring to physical animals that he finds himself in the midst of, he appears to be describing his enemies.

And so one can ask, what is the effect of juxtaposing the author’s human enemies with wild beasts and animals? What is the effect? What meaning or meanings are communicated by putting two things together that usually do not belong? Four things to say about that. Number one, the problem is that often the biblical authors might use metaphors that are unfamiliar to us and that we do not use in our modern day societies so that once again, trying to replace the text within its historical context is necessary to understand the force of the metaphor.

A second, metaphors are in figurative speech which is important for its emotive appeal as much as its intellectual appeal. Too often we see metaphors, especially
sometimes I think Evangelical interpreters are particularly guilty of this, seeing metaphors as simply containers for some theological propositional truth, without recognizing the metaphor is there for its emotive appeal as much as it is for its intellectual facts of it. For example, when the Psalmist compares his readers to wild animals that are encircling him and are ready to devour him; that certainly has an effect on the reader. That goes far beyond a more bear description of “my enemies are ready to attack” or something like that. So metaphors are important for the emotive appeal.

Second, metaphors invite the readers’ participation. One of the effects of metaphor and figurative speech I think is it invites the active participation of the reader to imaginatively engage this metaphor to ask: what is the primary point of comparison? What is the effect of putting together these two things that usually don’t belong? Metaphor opens up a range of possible connections that the reader is invited to explore.

But a last thing to say about metaphor is unfortunately; often English translations are unable to capture the full force of the metaphor. Particularly if you have a metaphor, one of the difficulties is, again, if I have a metaphor in the biblical text that is unintelligible or is not current in the receptor language in the modern translation. That creates a difficulty, do I choose a different metaphor? Do I explain it which then would lose important features? What if the metaphor, especially if metaphors are meant to invite the reader to explore possible connections to simply explain the metaphor might limit the number of things that it could do. So I’ll leave it at that.

But as I said with poetry, two things, one has to deal with, is the parallelism that is usually recognized as an important feature or poetic literature, Hebrew parallelism and then its utilization of figures of speech; metaphors and similes and things like that.

Legal Language in the Old Testament

The second literary type in the Old Testament that I want to talk about briefly is law or the legal language of the legal literature of Israel. The first thing to understand about law or the legal literature is that it needs to be understood within the context of instruction and the regulation of the life of God’s people within the covenant relationship that he has entered into with his people. In other words, the law material, the legal
material, in the Old Testament is the personal demands of a covenant with God who has graciously entered into a relationship with his people. In other words, the first thing for most modern interpreters, especially some of us who may be coming to legal literature or the law material in the Old Testament for the first time, is to realize this is not simply what some of us might think of as a list of rules or stipulations or legalistic demands placed arbitrarily on readers. But it is important to understand that the literature grows out of God’s covenant relationship that he enters into with his people.

Casuistic Laws: “If.../then...”

Scholars have identified at least two types of law, there are many things that could be said and again, one of the best things you could do would be to read works that discuss the different types of law and how they function, especially in the life of God’s people, Israel. One type of law is often referred to as “casuistic law.” It basically follows an “if/then” structure that is that the “if” part stipulates the circumstance, or the issue, or the case. The “then” is the penalty or the consequences or the legal treatment of that case. So if this happens then here is what you are to do.

One example that is found in Exodus 21, again there’s a number of examples we could point to but I’ll just start as close to the beginning. Chapter 20 is the giving of the Ten Commandments and we will use that to illustrate another type of law. Chapter 21, verse 2, “if you buy a Hebrew servant, then he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year he shall go free without paying anything.” So, the “if” part is: “if you buy a Hebrew servant.” It is the case or the issue and then the rest of it is how this case is to be dealt with and how it is to be treated legally. Or again verses 18 and 19, “If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die, but is confined to his bed.” That’s the ‘if’ part of the case. Then verse 19 gives the legal penalty or how the case is to be treated. Verse 19: “Then the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff. However he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.” And again we see there is a number, especially in Exodus 21 you can read that one through the chapter, there are a number of what scholars call casuistic laws, with the ‘if/then’
structure.

Apodictic Laws: Thou shalt not…

The second type of law that Old Testament scholars frequently draw attention to is what is called “apodictic law,” which are more categorical commands, simply “you will do this.” A good example of that is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. So, “You shall have no other gods before you.” “You shall not make for yourselves an idol.” “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord.” “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” “You shall not murder.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal.” So the Ten Commandments are examples of apodictic law, simply categorical commands.

Interpreting Legal Material

So in light of that, probably what of more interest is how we interpret the legal material in the Old Testament, especially how does it apply to God’s people, to Christians today. Again what I want to do is just summarize very briefly some, I think some important aspects, there’s much more to be said, and I can only briefly illustrate these principles. But first of all, I think the first important feature for understanding law, is like any other piece of literature, to understand the context of the giving of the law. Particularly Exodus chapter 20, and verses 1 and 2, we’ve already said we need to understand the law in the context of God graciously entering into covenant relationship with his people. So the law then stipulates what God requires of his people within that covenant relationship. So we need to start by understanding the context of the giving of the law. Exodus chapter 20 and verse 1 and 2 “and God spoke all these words.” In verse 2 of Exodus 20, right before giving the so called Decalogue or the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” I think this provides the context for the giving of the law, in that the law was given in the response, to the gracious provision of God in redeeming his people out of Egypt. That is the law was given to maintain this relationship with God who had redeemed them and blessed them by rescuing them from Egypt. Now the laws given as Israel will respond to that and live in light of that.
Second, it’s important to understand, I think, the law in light of its original historical context in the same way we would treat any other literature, that is, to understand the historical cultural background of the different laws. For example, to give you just one brief example, why in Leviticus 19, verses 27 and 28 does the Mosaic Law forbid tattoos? Why is it forbidden to clip the beard and things like that? So if I get up tomorrow and shave or trim my beard have I violated the Mosaic Law? If you have a tattoo, or several tattoos, have you violated the Mosaic Law? It’s important just like any other biblical text, to place the laws within their historical, cultural setting.

One common explanation of this text is that what Leviticus 19 is forbidding is the association of Israel, God’s people, with certain pagan religious priestly practices. So it’s necessary then to put the laws in their original, historical, cultural, context is to ask what they were doing and why they were given?

Very quickly a third principle is, especially in terms of application, is having understood the original historical cultural context is to ask what then appears to be the true intention of this law? Why does it appear to be given? What appears to be the primary driving principle that gives rise to this law? For example, as we said, with tattoos in Leviticus chapter 19, the intention might be to avoid pagan religious practices. Today tattoos usually don’t seem to be associated with pagan religious priestly practices so one could have tattoos without violating the Mosaic Law. So we have to look for other ways in our own society and culture where we might be in danger of violating the intention of this command that God’s people avoid association with participation with pagan religious rituals and practices.

Or take, for example, another command found in the legal material of Israel’s of the life of Israel, and that is in a couple of places, Israel is commanded not to harvest their crops all the way to the edge of the field but to leave some of it standing. Again, I think the true intention of this was basically we might say part of Israel's welfare system. It was a way of allowing some of the crops to stand so that the poor could come glean in the fields which is what you find going on for example in the book of Ruth. So one, the Israelites were commanded those who had a crop to leave some of it standing as a way of
supporting and providing for the poor. Again we have to ask, in our day, given this intention of this law, what might that look like? In our day we usually don’t allow persons to walk through our fields; that’s not a normal or acceptable way of feeding the poor. They usually don’t go to farmer’s fields; they might, but they usually don’t. They usually don’t go to fields to look for or to find substances. Today they may go to other places such as food pantries or something like that. So we have to ask ourselves in what way do we and should we care for the poor of our day? What way should God’s people demonstrate their concern for the poor, within the church as well as outside of the church of God’s people? Again, usually it’s not going to be by allowing people go glean our fields, especially if you are not a farmer or rancher, or if you don’t raise crops that are edible or suitable human consumption. So again I look at this command and ask: what appears to be the true intention? What appears to be the intention of this command? What is it trying to communicate? What might that look like in my contemporary society? How might I fulfill that true intention in my day and age differently from that ancient culture?

A final one, again that I can only touch on very briefly, I think that it is very important and this, this impinges upon my understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testament that ultimately the Old Testament finds its climax and fulfillment in the New Testament and in the new covenant revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. So ultimately I think interpretation of any text must end up by asking how it finds itself in relationship to the entire context of the Old and New Testament canon. This places the two testaments in redemptive theological relationship so that what that means then is that number four, ultimately one also needs to understand how the law applies to us today in light of fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Now that is sometimes very difficult and I don’t have time to go into some of the questions related to that but one of the key texts I think is Matthew chapter 5 and verse 17 for understanding how the law applies to God’s people where Jesus says, “I have not come to abolish the law.” This is right at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “I have not come to abolish the law but I have come to fulfill it.” What Jesus means by fulfilling the law I think is not primarily that he has come to obey it, though indeed he does that, but that
instead the word fulfillment needs to be understood in light of how Matthew has used the
term fulfillment in previous chapters. Where frequently he uses fulfillment to
demonstrate how Jesus life and his teaching fulfills or brings to completion something in
the Old Testament. Jesus, his life, his person, his teaching, is the goal to which the Old
Testament was pointing, in that the goal has finally arrived. Jesus then can be seen to
complete it or fulfill it. So therefore when I take it that when Jesus says in Matthew 5, 17
“I have not come to abolish the law, I have come to fulfill it,” primarily what Jesus is
saying is my person and teaching is the true intention and goal of the Old Testament law,
in that Jesus, in that the law was pointing to something greater. Now that Jesus has
arrived, his teaching and his ministry, his life and person can now be seen to bring the
law to fulfillment. So then as Christians, when we look at the Old Testament law, not
only do we ask the question what appears to be the true intention of the law, but as we
read the New Testament we ask: how does Christ seem to fulfill the law? So the Old
Testament law in its entirety applies to Christians but only as seen through the lense of
how it has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

To give you again a couple of very quick examples, number one is for example the
sacrificial system of the Old Testament--the sacrificing of offerings and animals. The sin
offerings referred to in Leviticus etc. those can be seen as being fulfilled. The sacrificial
system we can be seen to obey it and observe it by trusting in Jesus Christ who now is the
once for all, ultimate sacrifice that has been made in fulfillment. So the sacrificial system
in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus Christ once for all sacrifice. We continue to
obey and keep and fulfill the Old Testament law by now trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus
Christ for our salvation and our sin.

Another example very quickly, is a little more controversial because it comes right
out of the Ten Commandments, the so called Decalogue, and that is the Sabbath
command, where Israel was called upon to keep the Sabbath, to observe the seventh day,
and the various stipulations that grew up around that as to how Israel would do that, and
even some of the penalties for failure to do that. However, it’s then interesting to ask the
question, “How then do God’s people today observe the Sabbath? Do we do so by
observing Saturday, the seventh day? Or by observing some other day? Is Sunday now the Christian Sabbath? Has the Sabbath day been transferred to Sunday, so that we should now treat Sunday in the same way Israel treated the Sabbath day?” Or, I think when you read Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, once again I think the author is clear that we fulfill the Sabbath once again by resting in Jesus Christ and trusting in Jesus Christ for our salvation not by keeping a specific, separate day. I think we usually gather on Sunday to worship for different reasons, in my opinion, than keeping the Sabbath.

Now that does not mean that some might not still choose to observe days or periods of rest, and certainly that is still good advice, but when I read Hebrews 3 and 4, I find primarily that the true intention, or the command to observe the Sabbath, is primarily fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and the new covenant salvation that he brings. We keep the Sabbath now primarily by trusting in Christ.

Now we can still ask the question back to number three, “What is the true intention of this law?” And that might lead us to observe periods of rest and implement periods of rest into our own lives, but I think the New Testament is clear that primarily Christians keep the Sabbath by looking at it in terms of how it has been brought to fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now there is a lot more that could be said about the law and it’s a lot more involved than just a few points I’ve made, but hopefully I’ve at least wetted your appetite to consider the legal literature of the Old Testament and providing some guidelines for reading it and applying it and interpreting it today.

Prophetic Literature

The final aspect or, I’m sorry, the final literary genre in the Old Testament that I want to touch upon briefly is the prophetic literature, which again makes up quite a large body of material in the Old Testament. A couple of observations initially to make regarding the type of literature the prophecy is: it’s important to understand that, at least in our modern day world, most people, not only Christians and not just Christians, even outside of Christian circles, and outside of our churches, people in the world often associate prophecy with fortune telling or palm reading or something like that. So
prophecy is primarily simply telling the future, forecasting or predicting events in the future. This is usually in response to, simply in response to our fascination with the future or inquiry of wanting to know “What’s going to happen to me sometime down the road?”

Often you found this particularly in Greco-Roman religions, that is someone would often go to a place called an “oracle” with different questions and they would consult the gods on those questions. Often through a priest or an interpreter, would convey an oracle back or convey a prophecy that answered questions such as, “If I go to war, am I going to win?” or “Should I do this or that? Should I marry this person?” One would bring that to the gods, and the god would respond back with an answer. We often think of prophecy in the Old Testament, as kind of a fortune telling, looking into a crystal ball to see what’s going to happen months or years or even centuries down the road.

It’s important though to understand that in the Old Testament, at least, prophecy, as one Old Testament scholar defined it, a prophet is what could be called a “covenant enforcer.” One who, when Israel began to stray from their covenant obligations, and for example began to lapse into idolatry and idolatrous practices, God would often raise up a prophet to remind Israel of its covenant obligations, and to warn them of the dangers or even to communicate the punishment that now would take place because of their failure to keep their covenant obligations. So prophets don’t just rise out of thin air to satisfy the curiosity of the person who wants to know what’s going to happen in the future. Instead, the Old Testament prophets were covenant enforcers or those that God raised up to address Israel to remind them of their covenant obligations and to warn them of the dangers of lapsing into idolatry or even to pronounce judgment upon them when they had done that, as well as addressing and pronouncing judgment on other pagan nations as well.

Forth-telling / Fore-telling Distinction

This has led to a very popular and common distinction that you’ll find in a number of interpretive or hermeneutical textbooks, a distinction between forth-telling and foretelling. That is, forth-telling being communicating a message, forth-telling a message to the readership as opposed to foretelling, that is predicting something that is going to
happen in the future. Old Testament prophecy is usually considered as containing both, but focusing more on the former. That is again the prophets are mainly there to communicate a message to the readers. Even when they do foretell the future it’s in a way that is relevant to addressing the situation the readers find themselves in. Within prophecy in general, just to make you aware of the fact, the best thing you can do is read other works that deal with prophetic literature and what it is and how it functions and how to read it. One thing you’ll find within prophetic texts is that you often will find various other forms utilized in the prophetic text. We’ve talked about one of those already the “call narrative” under form criticism. It is a literary form that seems to have arisen out of the need to legitimate the prophet’s message and his calling, to legitimate everything else he is going to say, and often that was in the form of a confrontation of God with the prophet, and a commissioning followed by an objection by the prophet, followed by the response of God and then usually a promise and a sign as well. All of those are frequent elements of the prophetic call narrative.

There are other types of forms you find that seem to be a common form, a stylized form, you find in prophetic literature, such as what is often called “woe oracles.” It is a text that begins “Woe to” whoever and then sometimes giving the reason for the woe. Usually the woe oracles are seen as developing from funeral dirges or funeral laments but in the Old Testament texts they are used to lament the judgment that is now coming upon Israel or the nations because of their sins. So you often find “Woe to” or “Woe, Woe to” someone, and then giving the reason. That is often known as a woe oracle.

Another common form is what is sometimes labeled “messenger speech” where you find something like “The word of the Lord came to so and so, thus says the Lord.” You will find that form commonly appearing throughout the prophetic literature, probably again functioning to legitimate the message of the prophet and to demonstrate that it has divine sanction.

And finally, a form that actually develops into apocalyptic type literature like Daniel, is what is known as a vision report which records a prophet’s visionary experience, whether through a dream or some other type of ecstatic visionary experience.
Usually you find references to the preparation for a vision, such as fasting, even the setting of the vision, a common setting of the vision is sometimes standing by a river, followed then by the account of the visionary experience, then followed by an account of what it was that the person saw.

Hermeneutical Principles for Dealing with Prophecy

So my point is even within prophetic literature you find various types of forms making up the prophetic text. What I want to talk about briefly is to summarize again, the principles of approaching prophetic types based on what I think the type of literature it is. First of all, a very important, basic hermeneutic principle is to recognize that prophetic literature is not primarily predictive. Instead, it is primarily a message from the present, it’s primarily a message from the prophet directed at his contemporaries. Again when we said that the difficulty is, the prophets usually arise when Israel is in crises, when they’ve gone off in adultery or reneged on their covenant obligations the prophet is often raised up to communicate a message that primarily is a call to repentance and obedience. So we’ll return to that, but the prophet’s message is not primarily just to predict the future for the sake of predicting the future but ultimately is one of calling the people back to obedience and to repentance.

Second, like any other text, although I am always intrigued especially with how often this principle is ignored, although they’re happy to apply it to other types of literature in the Bible, but like any other text, prophetic text must ultimately be understood, first of all, in light of the original historical context in which it was produced. Again, what that means then is it is probably illegitimate to read prophetic text as predicting 21st century events or earlier, or even later. Even when the prophet does predict the future, it still must be understood in light of what readers would have understood it to mean in the first century or earlier historical context.

Third, is to recognize that often prophetic literature utilizes metaphorical language and symbolism that the readers would have understood. So for example, when we think about how Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled or will be fulfilled, often the answer is not literally. While prophetic texts, especially those that do anticipate future fulfillment or
refer to future fulfillment, often they are accounts in metaphorical and symbolic language, that means while the prophets are indeed anticipating the fulfillment of God’s purposes in actual persons and events, yet he communicates that symbolically and in metaphorical type language. So what that means is, we should not necessarily expect that the prophetic text will be fulfilled in what we might think of in some strict, straightforward, literal way.

I was raised in a church context, and I’ll return to this same principle when we talk about Revelation in Daniel, that said one should interpret prophecy literally, unless there is good reason not to. I think that should be turned on its head and to say that prophetic language, the metaphorical, symbolic language should be interpreted symbolically, unless there is good reason not to. Again, what that means is, I am not suggesting that the prophets were not predicting actual persons and events historically, but that often when they describe them, they do so with symbolism and in metaphorical language. So we need to ask, we need to understand and ask, “What is the meaning of that language? What was the author intending to communicate? What is that metaphorical language suggesting about how the author sees the event and understands it?” So we should interpret not literally but interpreting symbolically.

A fourth principle is to understand that prophetic literature then refers to both the present and the future. The prophets, in fact you’ll often see that sometimes the prophetic literature seems to be describing events that are taking place in the readers own day, or will take place just on the horizon, very soon, but then without warning, it is as if the author is all of a sudden using language that describes the ultimate end of history, the eschatological end of history. Often what you find happening is sometimes the prophets will describe events as they occur, but they describe it against the backdrop of God’s broader purposes for the entire world. So sometimes interpreting prophetic texts can be a little tricky in understanding when the author has moved beyond his own horizons and his own situations to embrace a vision for God’s purposes for the entire cosmos.

A fifth one, and I’ll just mention it and we will pick it up in the next section, a fifth important principle in interpreting prophetic texts, is to ask the question of, “How
does this prophecy get fulfilled?” Especially to ask a couple of questions, number one is
to ask, does this get fulfilled in the Old Testament period? Does it get fulfilled in the
period of Israel’s history? Or does it get fulfilled in the New Testament with the coming
of Christ? Or further than that, does the prophecy get fulfilled ultimately in the future at
the very end of the world and God’s dealing with the entire cosmos? So sometimes it is
important to ask, how does the prophecy get fulfilled? Does it get fulfilled in the day and
age of the author and his readers? Is it fulfilled in their lifetime? Does it get fulfilled
sometime in Israel’s history? Or does it get fulfilled in the New Testament, mainly
through Christ and his people? Is it a prophecy for the end of history, for the end of the
cosmos?

There are other issues related to asking the question of how this prophecy gets
fulfilled, and in the next session we will look at that and give a couple of other examples
of fulfillment and mention a couple more principles for interpreting prophetic texts. Then
we will move right onto the New Testament, and consider New Testament genres and
literary types and how that influences interpretation, beginning specifically with the
Gospels, and we won’t spend a lot of time on those because we have already dealt with
the gospels in a narrative criticisms, but I simply want to begin looking at New Testament
genres by just making a few further observations on how we read the Gospels and what
type of literature they are.