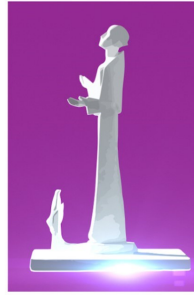


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



Theme 2: How to Approach the Bible

2e: Is it important to pay attention to genre, amongst other things, when we read the Bible?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Spend some time in Genesis. Read the first creation story as a song and be conscious of the refrain. How does an understanding that this is a poem/song influence your reading experience?
2. Some people enjoy narratives, others biography, others how-to manuals, others poetry. What are your favourite genres to read, watch or listen to?
3. Find out the different genres of writing that appear in the Bible, and see if there's one of your favourites there. See if you can read it for pleasure as an example of that kind of writing.
4. This video highlights genre. But what other kinds of things should we pay attention to when we read the Bible?

TRANSCRIPT

The Rev'd Canon Sarah Plowman

Director of Discernment

Whenever we read any part of the Bible its important to know what kind of literature it is that we are reading, what the genre is. I think that is probably the most important tool in your Bible reading tool kit. If you were to open any book, any work of literature, if you know what the purpose of it is, who the audience was, what the author's intention was, if you know a bit of background information about it it can make a lot more sense. If you were to open the Aldi catalogue for example and thought that it was a novel you'd be disappointed because its clearly not intended for that purpose...same with the Bible some books are books of poetry and they are beautiful when read like that. Some books of the Bible are really very funny stories! If you read the book of Jonah and you think that it has some comedy value and if you know something about the times in which it was written and what people believed at that time, then there are ways of actually finding truth within the story beyond just what's written on the page.

So, even just knowing that there are different genres in the Bible is a bit of a wow factor for some people who have never opened the Bible. There are letters, there's poetry, there's books of wisdom and great advice, there are books that are fables, or legends. There are books that are mythology! Once you realise that its very different across the whole scope of the Bible it makes it much more interesting because you're not reading the same thing over and over again, you're actually reading lots of different literature

Jonathan Sargeant

Lecturer in Practical Theology

Yeah you know genre for me is an interesting one - you start to talk about genre and it feels like we're sitting in an English lesson or something but it's actually super important when thinking about the bible.

There are some good examples too, one example comes from the beginning of the Bible. You know at the beginning of the Bible we've got Genesis, and at the beginning of Genesis we've got two beautiful creation stories - 2 separate stories, one after the other - it's good to pay attention to that too. But the deal here is that we have this second story which has Adam and Eve and snakes and serpents and stuff, but then

there's the first story. The first story doesn't talk about sin. The first story is the one that has recurring lines to the point where if you look at the first creation story in the original language, you start to notice a few things genre wise. If you look at that first story, you'll see that it has repeated lines, almost like a chorus. If you think about it, you'll remember what that is you know...that repeated line after God has created a thing on a particular day scripture talks about God looking at it and saying it's good - God made it and it's good. So, we have that line which is kind of like a chorus, or a repeated line. We also have the actual lines where God is doing the creation which also have that shared repeated structure, on the first day God did this, on the second day God did this.

Ok, so where are we going? We're talking about genre. And as we look at this first creation story we're starting to notice that there are particular things about this story that fit particular genre, so when experts in biblical study look at that they realise, 'What we've got here is kind of like a song, or a poem, maybe a song or a poem that was used in early worship!' and so on. So, the genre here is poetry, or music or song. And that to me is relevant because it suggests what this story is, a beautiful song which teaches us about who God is and how God creates, and what God creates, and that creation is good.

But it also tells us what this story is not according to genre. Because it's a song, because it's a poem, it's using metaphor which means I think, that we shouldn't expect this creation story to be useable as a science textbook. Its not talking about equations and physics for how universes come to be, it's talking about an ancient people singing about their love for a God who creates and creates well. So if you're wondering if genre is important I think that's one really great example. If you know that first creation story is a song or a poem, and in fact in some Bibles its actually written in italics and written line by line differently, or set out on the page differently to other texts to show that it's a song or a poem. If you know it's a song or a poem you read it differently than if you thought it was just a straight-out story describing actual events that happened.

So, I think that's important.