

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 18, OT Genres

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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, a 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 of literature, the type of literature that we're dealing with, and how that influences the way I read and interpret the text.

We make, we actually make genre decisions and identifications every day, though we usually do it intuitively and naturally and implicitly. Every time you pick up a newspaper, you make, 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. And 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 at the back or something like that.

So you make unconscious genre shifts in identifying the different kinds of literature. When you, when you pick up and read or write a letter, when you, 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. Or if you pick up a book and it begins, to use a very classic and common example, usually referred to as illustrating genre, if I pick up a book and it begins, once upon a time, I know what kind of genre I am reading, and I know what to expect, that 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 a certain life, of a rise of a certain civilization. I'm going to be reading what is called a fairy tale, and whatever valuable 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 in space and time history. 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 like to give is, when we lived in Scotland, I had the most difficult time trying to understand the game of cricket, and 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, but two metaphors that have frequently been used for understanding genre is a genre, 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, a literary genre much 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 that the rules determine how a game is played, when it comes to literary genre, one must apply the appropriate rules or guidelines for reading, both writing, but also reading the biblical text. In light of that, the reference to both the author producing the text and the readers making sense of it and reading it is a second metaphor has been that of a contract.

That is, the author, 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. So the literary genre guides the reading process.

It is part of the meaning of the text and the sense of the text, 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 and 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, the ancient world might have literary genres that are very different than our own. In other words, the literary genres that 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 and those features are the group of works that share a similar form and shape, a similar content, and that serve a similar function. But it's important also to recognize that 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 some of the features of the, 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.

It's not a running, it's not a, some comics I guess are a single picture with a caption, but most comics are in a series of frames. They are rather exaggerated and sometimes the features are caricatures of human beings or other animals or things like that. And then the other feature is there's usually a bubble within the frames that contain the speech of the different persons within the comic.

And 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. But one reads a comic and realizes that they often function to provide a, they're not necessarily referring to actual literal persons 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 to demonstrate that we make genre identifications every day. Again, the difficulty is with identifying and utilizing ancient genres and ancient conventions of literary genre, one has to be more intentional. One has to make more explicit identifications, which, as I said, 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.

Genres, literary genres should also be understood both horizontally and vertically. That is, horizontally, biblical text can be read as belonging to other literary types and genres of its kind. That is, 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 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 an appeal to genre won't solve every last problem of interpretation.

Again, 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. Hirsch referred to this as extrinsic genre and intrinsic genre, that is, the literary classification to which a book belongs, that is, the other works that it resembles, and then intrinsic genre, the work's own 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 genre and literary types of the Old New Testament, focusing

especially on how that might make a difference in 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 and structure and characterization. I won't spend a lot of time on narrative. I want to make a few additional observations in regard to 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, but then I will focus on epistles and then the last book of the New Testament in the Bible, the book of Revelation, and again focusing on the genre and some of the just major broad conventions and maybe some brief guidelines for interpretation. The first one in the Old Testament that I want to talk about is poetry, and 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 on to law after that.

Poetry, most treatments of poetry, as I understand it, focus on two features, again that I only have time to briefly, painfully, in a painfully brief manner 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 poetry, Hebrew poetry, where the lines in poetry stand in relationship to each other, and even most English translations, if you read the Psalms or Proverbs or other poetic literature, will lay out poetry and structure it in a way that shows parallelism, that is two, usually two lines, most commonly, are juxtaposed to each other in parallel fashion, and 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, chapter 9 and verse 10, the fear of the Lord, 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 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 a 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, but as far as I know, that Hebrew parallelism doesn't work as far as the rhyming sounds or parallel with 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, and the best thing that I think, the best advice I could give is to talk with someone who's an expert on Hebrew poetry or read works of persons like Adela 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 in different labels, though others have questioned those or whether those are valid categories or not. But the main thing is to become familiar with the parallelism and the way it works, how one line functions to expand or impact or explain in some way the line that comes before it. The other important feature of poetry, Hebrew poetry, whether in the Psalms or

Proverbs, especially the Psalms, even prophetic literature often is a cast in poetic form.

The other feature 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 being compared to in some way to a lamp. Or another example, look at the very first Psalm, immediately begins with by communicating through metaphor and figures of speech.

So Psalm 1 begins, blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel 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, basically what metaphor is or figures of speech consists of is 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. So that 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 wither, what is communicated by this juxtaposition of two things that usually don't belong together and usually do not go

together? Or for example, Psalm chapter 57 and verse 4. Psalm chapter 57 and verse 4, the author says, I am in the midst of lions, I lie among ravenous beasts.

Now, if I stop there, is this author somewhere in the forest? Or is he at a zoo? Or where in the what's 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 beasts and wild beasts and animals? What is the effect? What meanings or meaning is communicated by putting together two things that usually do not belong? Oh, three things to say about that.

Number one, the problem is that often, often biblical authors might use metaphors that are unfamiliar to us and that we do not use in our modern day society. So that once again, trying to place the text within its historical context is necessary to perhaps understand the force of the metaphor. A second, metaphors are, and figurative speech is important for its emotive appeal as much as its intellectual appeal.

Too often we see metaphors, especially sometimes I think evangelicals, interpreters are particularly guilty of this, seeing metaphors as simply containers for some theological propositional truth without recognizing that the metaphor is there for its emotive appeal as much as it is its intellectual, the intellectual facet of it. For example, when the psalmist compares his readers to wild animals that are encircling him and ready to devour him, that certainly has an effect on the reader that goes far beyond a more bare description of my enemies are ready to attack or something like that. So metaphors are important for their emotive appeal.

A second, metaphors invite the reader's participation. One of the effects of metaphor and figurative speech, I think, is it invites the participation, 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, a final 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? Do I, 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 at least one has to deal with is the parallelism that is usually recognized as an important feature of poetic literature, Hebrew parallelism, and then its utilization of figures of speech, metaphors and similes and things like that. The second literary type in the Old Testament that I want to talk about briefly is, is law or the legal language of the legal literature of Israel. The first thing, the important thing I think 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 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, some of you who may not have, who may be coming to legal literature, the law material in the Old Testament for the first time is to realize this is not simply a, what some of us might think of as a list of rules or stipulations or, or, or legalistic demands placed arbitrarily on readers. But it's important to understand that the literature grows out of God's, the covenant relationship that he enters into with his people.

Scholars have identified at least two types of law. There are many other 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, and it basically follows an if-then structure. That is the if part stipulates the circumstances or the issue or the case. And then the then is the, the, the, the penalty or, or the consequences or, or the, the, the, the legal treatment of that, that case.

So if this happens, then here is what you are to do. One example of that is found in Exodus chapter 21. Again, there's a number of examples we could point to, but I'll just, I'll start from close to the beginning.

Chapter 20 is the giving of the 10 commandments, and we'll use that to illustrate another type of law. But chapter 21, here's one example, verse two, 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, if you buy a Hebrew servant is the case or the issue, and then the rest of it is, is how this case is to be dealt with and how it is to be treated legally.

Or again, verses, 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 the one in the 19 is the, the, therefore the, the legal, the legal penalty or, 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, there's a number, especially Exodus 21, you can read down through the chapter, and there are a number of that type of what scholars call casuistic law that with that if them structure. The second type of law that scholars frequent 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 10 commandments in Exodus chapter 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. You remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. So the 10 commandments are an example of apodictic law, simply categorical commands.

So in light of that, probably what 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? And again, what I want to do is summarize very briefly at least some of the 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 of the 10 commandments.

He says, 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 response to, given to Israel in 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 law is 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.

That is, for example, to give you just one brief example, why in Leviticus 19, verse 27 and 28, does the Mosaic law forbid tattoos? Why does it forbid the clipping of 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, as with 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 to ask what they were doing and why they were given.

A third, again 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 the primary driving principle that gives rise to this law? For example, as we said, tattoos in Leviticus chapter 19, the intention might be to avoid pagan religious practices. So that 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 and participation in pagan religious rituals and practices. Or take for example another command found in the legal material of Israel's, the life of Israel, and that is in a couple of places Israel is commanded not to harvest their crop all the way to the edge of the field, but to leave some of it standing. Again, I think the true intention of this is this was basically the kind of we might say part of Israel's welfare system.

It was a way of allowing some of the crop to stand so 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. So 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, though that might happen, but they usually don't go to fields to look for or to find sustenance. There may be 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 today? In what way should God's people demonstrate the concern for the poor within the church as well as without outside of the church of God's people? Again, usually it's not going to be by allowing people to glean in our fields, especially if you're not a farmer or a rancher or if you don't raise crop that is edible for and suitable for 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's it trying to communicate? And then to ask what might that look like in my contemporary society? How might I fulfill that true intention in my day and age and culture? A final one, again, that I could only touch on very briefly, I think that is very important, and 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, which as it stands, places the two testaments, the Old and New Testament, in redemptive theological relationship.

So that what that means then is 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's 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 instead that word fulfillment needs to be understood in light of how Matthew has used 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' 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, when Jesus says in Matthew 5, 17, I have not come to abolish the law, I have come to fulfillment, 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, his person can now be seen to bring the law to its fulfillment. So then, as Christians, as 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, how does Christ seem to fulfill the law? Just to, and what, so that the Old Testament law in its entirety applies to Christians, but only as seen through the lens of how it has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

To just 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, or 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, and 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, a so-called Decalogue, and that is the Sabbath command, where Israel was called upon to keep the Sabbath, to observe the seventh day, the Sabbath, 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 interesting to then ask the question, how then do God's people today observe the Sabbath? Do we do so by observing Saturday or 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 chapter 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, so that 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 to 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. There's a lot more that could be said about the law, and it's a lot more involved than just a few points that I've made, but

hopefully I've at least whetted 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.

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, and a couple of observations initially to make regarding the type of literature that prophecy is. It's important to understand that at least in our modern day world, most people, not only Christians and not just Christians, but 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 or forecasting or predicting events in the future, 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 interpreter, and that priest or interpreter then 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. So we often think of prophecy in the Old Testament and the Bible as kind of a fortune telling, looking into a crystal ball to see what's going to happen years, 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 described it, a prophet was what he called a covenant enforcer.

One who, when Israel began to stray from their obligations, and for example, begin 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 the covenant obligations. So prophets don't just rise out of thin air to satisfy the curiosity of the person that wants to know what's going to happen in the future, but 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. 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 fore-telling, that is forth-telling being communicating a message, forth-telling a message to the readership as opposed to fore-telling, that is predicting something that's going to happen in the future.

Old Testament prophecy is usually considered as containing both but focusing more on the former, that is again prophets are mainly there to communicate a message to the readers even when they do fore-tell the future, it's in a way that is relevant to and addressing the situation that the readers find themselves in. Within prophecy in general, just to make you aware of the fact, but again the best thing you could do is read other works that deal with prophetic literature and what it is and how it functions and how to read it, but 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, 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 that he's 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 a 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, a text that begins woe to whoever and then sometimes giving the reason for the woe. Usually the woe oracles are sometimes seen as developing from funeral dirges or funeral laments, but in the Old Testament text 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's often known as a woe oracle. Or 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'll find that form commonly appearing through prophetic literature probably again functioning to legitimate the message of the prophet 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 a vision. A common setting of the vision sometimes is standing by a river.

You find that taking place followed by then the account of the visionary experience itself and then followed by an account of what it was that the person saw. So my point is you're dealing even within prophetic literature you find various types of forms making that up but making up the prophetic text. What I want to talk about

briefly is to summarize again principles for approaching prophetic text based on what I think based on I think the type of literature it is.

First of all a very important basic hermeneutical principle is to recognize that prophetic literature is not primarily predictive. I don't want to say that it's not because it is but instead it's primarily a message for the present. It's primarily a message from the prophet directed at his contemporaries.

Again we said the difficulty is the prophets usually arise when Israel is in crisis when they've gone off into idolatry 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 one is one of calling the people back to obedience and to repentance and obedience.

Second like any other text although I'm always intrigued especially with many Christians 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's probably illegitimate to read prophetic text as predicting 21st century events or earlier or even later but 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 their first century or earlier historical context. Third is to recognize that often prophetic 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 but while prophet prophetic texts especially those that do anticipate future fulfillment or refer to future fulfillment

often they are couched in metaphorical symbolic language that means while the prophets are indeed anticipating the fulfillment of God's purposes in actual persons and events it communicates that symbolically and in metaphorical type language so that we what that means is we should not necessarily expect that the prophetic text will be fulfilled in what we might think of as some strict straightforward literal way. I was raised in a church context and I'll return to the same principle when we talk about Revelation and Daniel but I was raised in a church context that said one should interpret prophecy literally unless there's good reason not to. I think that should be turned on its head and to say that that prophetic language the metaphorical symbolic language should be interpreted symbolically unless there's good reason not to.

Again what that means is I'm 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 in a metaphorical language and 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 interpreting 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 will be taking place in the reader's own day or will take place just on the horizon very soon but then without warning it's as if the author is also all of a sudden using language that describes the ultimate end of history the eschatological end of history.

That is 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 and so sometimes interpreting prophetic text can be a little tricky in understanding when has the author moved beyond the prophet moved beyond his

own horizons in his own situations then to embrace a God's a vision for God's purposes for the entire cosmos. A fifth one and I'll just mention it and we'll pick this up in the next session a fifth important principle in interpreting prophetic text is to ask the question of how does this prophecy get fulfilled especially to ask a couple of questions. Number one is to ask it 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 does it get fulfilled ultimately in the future at the very end of the world and God's dealing with the entire cosmos.

So sometimes it's important to ask to see how the prophecy gets fulfilled does it get fulfilled in the the the day and age of the author and his readers 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 or is it a prophecy for the end of history for the 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'll look at that and give a couple of other examples a couple of examples of fulfillment and then list mention a couple more principles for interpreting prophetic text and then we'll move on to 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 in that on those because we've already dealt with the gospels and narrative criticism but I simply want to begin looking at new testament genres by just making a few further observations on how we read the gospels in light of the type of literature that they are.