Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 18, Sociological Criticism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 18, Old Testament Literary Genres, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Dave Mathewson's Hermeneutics course explains **genre criticism** as a crucial methodology in biblical interpretation. The lecture emphasizes the importance of understanding a text's genre—its type of literature—to correctly interpret it, using the analogy of playing a game by its rules. It explores various Old Testament genres like **poetry, law, and prophecy**, highlighting key features and interpretive considerations for each. The lecture also addresses New Testament genres such as **the Gospels and epistles**, emphasizing the need to consider both the text's inherent logic and its relationship to similar works. Finally, it discusses the complexities of applying ancient literary conventions to modern interpretation.

2. 25 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 18 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).

Mathewson_Hermen_Session18.mp3

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts on Old Testament genres:

Briefing Document: Understanding Biblical Genres

Overview: This lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson focuses on the importance of genre criticism in biblical interpretation. He argues that understanding the literary genre of a text is crucial for proper interpretation, as each genre carries its own conventions, rules, and expectations for both the author and the reader. The lecture explores the nature of genre and then delves into specific genres found in the Old Testament, focusing on poetry, law, and prophecy.

Key Concepts and Themes

1. **What is Genre?**

- Genre, derived from the French word meaning "kind" or "type," refers to the classification of literature based on shared characteristics. It is a methodology for understanding how the "kind of literature" influences interpretation.

- Genre identification is a constant, often intuitive, process we engage in daily. We shift expectations based on the material we read (e.g., comics, news, letters, research papers).

- Genre is a crucial element in communication. Misunderstanding the genre can lead to misinterpretation of the text, as seen in the cricket/baseball analogy provided.

- Genre is likened to both a "game" and a "contract" involving specific rules and agreements between the author and the reader:

- **Game:** Authors and readers are expected to follow the rules of the genre.

- **Contract:** Authors use specific conventions of a genre; readers follow them to make sense of the text.

- A literary genre is characterized by recurring features of *form*, *content*, and *function*.

- Genre is a "heuristic tool," aiding in interpretation, not just classification. Example: understanding the form and function of a comic strip or political cartoon affects how the reader understands it.

1. *"A literary genre could be described as a group of works that share recurring features of form, content, and function."*

2. **Challenges in Interpreting Ancient Genres**

- Ancient literary genres may differ significantly from modern ones. This necessitates a more intentional and explicit approach to genre identification when interpreting biblical texts, as intuitive assumptions about genre may not apply.

- It is necessary to understand the *extrinsic genre* (the classification to which a book belongs, other similar texts) and the *intrinsic genre* (the work's own logic and structure).

1. *"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."*

2. **Horizontal and Vertical Understanding of Genre**

- *Vertically,* a biblical text belongs to a category of writing to which it corresponds.

- *Horizontally,* the text must also be read following its own unique structure and logic. Genre identification is helpful, but not always a complete solution for complex interpretation problems, and the text may transcend some generic limitations

1. *"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."*

- For instance, classifying the Book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature does not necessarily solve all its interpretive challenges.

1. **Old Testament Genres:**

- **Poetry:**Focuses on the conventions of parallelism and figures of speech.

- **Parallelism:** Lines in Hebrew poetry are structured to relate to each other, with the second line expanding on the first.

- *"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..."*

- **Figures of Speech:** Including metaphors and similes that create dissonance by juxtaposing two things that don't usually belong, compelling the reader to ask why the connection was made.

- Metaphors are important for both emotive and intellectual understanding.

- Metaphors invite reader participation by opening up a range of connections.

- English translations may not always fully capture the force of metaphors.

- **Law:** Must be understood as instruction and regulation for God's people within their covenant relationship with Him.

- Not merely a list of rules, but a demonstration of God's personal demands within a covenant relationship.

- Two primary types of law:

- **Casuistic Law:** Follows an "if-then" structure, stipulating a case and then its legal treatment (e.g., Exodus 21:2).

- *"One type of law is often referred to as casuistic law, and it basically follows an if-then structure."*

- **Apodictic Law:** Categorical commands such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)

- *"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."*

- **Interpreting Old Testament Law:** Understand the context of its giving, e.g., Exodus 20:1-2, which highlights God's gracious redemption of Israel and their covenantal response.

- Understand the original historical and cultural context of the specific laws. (e.g., Leviticus 19:27-28 regarding tattoos, beard-clipping).

- Determine the true intention of each law or principle, moving beyond the specific command (e.g., leaving part of the harvest for the poor to be generalized to welfare systems).

- Understand the law in light of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ; the law points to Christ as its goal.

- *"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."*

- **Prophecy:**Not simply fortune-telling, but a means by which God, often through a "covenant enforcer," calls Israel back to covenant obligations.

- Prophets don't arise to satisfy mere curiosity about the future.

- Prophecy encompasses both "forth-telling" (communicating a message) and "fore-telling" (predicting the future), with a primary focus on the former.

- Prophetic texts incorporate various literary forms like:

- Call narratives.

- Woe oracles (often developed from funeral dirges).

- Messenger speeches ("Thus says the Lord").

- Vision reports.

- **Interpreting Prophetic Literature:**Recognize that it is primarily a message for the present, calling people to repentance and obedience.

- Understand it in its original historical context.

- Prophetic language is often metaphorical and symbolic, so a literal interpretation should not be the default.

- *"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."*

- Prophecy refers to both the present and the future. Prophets often speak of events in their own time against a backdrop of God's broader purposes.

- Ask how a particular prophecy is fulfilled: in the Old Testament period, in the New Testament through Christ, or in the future eschaton?

Implications for Biblical Interpretation:

- **Genre Sensitivity:** Acknowledging the importance of genre in biblical interpretation is essential for correct understanding.

- **Context Matters:** All texts must be interpreted within their historical and cultural contexts.

- **Intentional Reading:** Readers must be intentional when approaching the Bible, particularly with ancient genres. They should not rely on intuition alone.

- **Multiple Interpretive Layers:** Texts should be interpreted, both vertically as part of larger generic classifications, and horizontally, according to their own internal logic.

- **Balance of Literal and Figurative:** The importance of recognizing metaphorical and symbolic language, especially in prophetic texts, is essential to understanding meaning and avoiding misinterpretations.

- **Christological Lens:** All Old Testament texts ultimately must be viewed in light of their fulfillment in Christ, as understood in the New Testament.

Conclusion

This lecture provides a foundation for understanding the importance of genre criticism in biblical interpretation. By recognizing and applying the principles related to literary genres, we can gain a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the Bible and its message.

This briefing document should help you understand and use the information in the lecture excerpts. Let me know if you need anything else.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 18, Old Testament Literary Genre

Literary Genre and Biblical Interpretation: A Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What is genre criticism, and why is it important for biblical interpretation?

2. Explain the metaphor of "genre as a game" in literary analysis.

3. Describe how genre functions as a "contract" between author and reader.

4. What are the three recurring features that define a literary genre, according to the lecture?

5. Explain the difference between reading a literary genre vertically versus horizontally.

6. What are the two primary features of Hebrew poetry discussed in the lecture?

7. Distinguish between casuistic and apodictic law.

8. What is the key context that must be understood when approaching the legal material in the Old Testament?

9. Why is it inaccurate to view Old Testament prophets as primarily "fortune tellers?"

10. What is the difference between "forth-telling" and "fore-telling" in the context of prophecy?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Genre criticism is the study of literary types and how they influence interpretation. It's crucial for biblical interpretation because it helps us understand the intended meaning of the text by understanding the conventions and expectations associated with its type of literature.

2. The metaphor of "genre as a game" suggests that authors and readers must play by certain rules, or conventions, specific to the genre. Understanding these rules is crucial for correct interpretation, just as knowing the rules of a game is vital for playing and understanding it.

3. Genre as a "contract" implies an agreement between the author and reader. The author uses conventions specific to a genre, and the reader is expected to understand and interpret the text accordingly.

4. A literary genre is defined by recurring features of form, content, and function. Form refers to the structure and shape of the text; content refers to the subject matter, and function refers to the purpose or effect of the text.

5. Reading vertically means categorizing a text based on similar literary works, while reading horizontally means interpreting a text within its own internal logic and structure. Both approaches are important for a thorough understanding of the text.

6. The two main features of Hebrew poetry are parallelism and figurative language. Parallelism is the use of two lines in relationship to each other, and figurative language (metaphor, simile, etc) is how the authors add meaning to the texts.

7. Casuistic law follows an "if-then" structure, outlining a case and its corresponding consequence. Apodictic law, on the other hand, is comprised of categorical commands that do not present specific cases, but are statements of law.

8. The legal material of the Old Testament must be understood within the context of God's covenant relationship with his people. The laws are seen not as arbitrary rules, but as expressions of God's will that guide his people within that relationship.

9. Old Testament prophets were primarily "covenant enforcers" rather than fortune tellers. Their role was to address Israel's behavior, calling the people back to obedience and warning of judgment for their covenant violations.

10. "Forth-telling" refers to communicating a message relevant to the present circumstances of the audience, while "fore-telling" refers to predicting future events. Prophecy includes both aspects but emphasizes forth-telling, which aims at calling the audience back to God.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Choose one of the following questions and write a well-organized essay that includes a clear thesis statement and supporting arguments. (Do not supply answers.)

1. Explain how a failure to understand literary genre can lead to misinterpretation, using specific examples from the lecture and your own understanding. How might a better grasp of genre enhance reading of biblical texts?

2. Discuss the significance of parallelism and figurative language in Hebrew poetry. How do these features function to create meaning? Why does understanding these features impact the understanding of poetry?

3. Analyze the different types of law in the Old Testament, focusing on their purpose and function within Israel's covenant relationship with God. How might we use these types of law today, in a contemporary setting?

4. Compare and contrast the Old Testament understanding of prophecy with common modern views. What role does the covenant play in Old Testament prophecy and how does that shape our reading of these texts?

5. Synthesize the principles for interpreting biblical law and prophecy, emphasizing how both must be understood within their historical context and in relation to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Apodictic Law:** Law characterized by categorical commands, such as the Ten Commandments, that do not present specific cases.

- **Casuistic Law:** Law characterized by an "if-then" structure, stipulating a case and then outlining the corresponding legal treatment or penalty.

- **Covenant:** A formal agreement between two parties, in the biblical context often referring to the agreement between God and his people.

- **Figurative Language:** Language that uses figures of speech (metaphor, simile, hyperbole) to create a non-literal comparison for the purpose of adding meaning to a text.

- **Forth-telling:** In the context of prophecy, it refers to communicating a message relevant to the present circumstances, often emphasizing a call to repentance or obedience.

- **Fore-telling:** In the context of prophecy, it refers to predicting events that will occur in the future, often used to encourage or warn.

- **Form Criticism:** A method of biblical interpretation that focuses on the structure and literary forms of texts.

- **Genre:** A French word meaning "kind" or "type." It refers to the type or category of literature, each with its own conventions, rules, and expectations.

- **Genre Criticism:** A method of biblical interpretation that focuses on understanding a text by its literary genre.

- **Heuristic Tool:** Something that assists learning through exploration and discovery, in this case literary genre.

- **Horizontal Reading:** Reading a text by considering its own internal logic and structure, rather than by categorizing it.

- **Intrinsic Genre:** The unique logic and structure within a literary work itself, which shapes its interpretation.

- **Messenger Speech:** A type of prophetic language or form in which the author is relaying a message from God.

- **Parallelism:** A literary device in Hebrew poetry where two or more lines are set side-by-side that are structurally, semantically, or grammatically similar.

- **Vertical Reading:** Classifying a text by comparing it with other similar literary works, reading it in a category, rather than solely on its own terms.

- **Vision Report:** A literary form used in prophetic literature describing the prophet's visionary experiences, whether through dreams or other ecstatic states.

- **Woe Oracle:** A common form in prophetic literature that expresses lament or judgment, often beginning with "Woe to..." followed by a reason.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 18, Old Testament Literary Genre, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Biblical Genre Criticism

- **What is genre criticism in biblical interpretation, and why is it important?**

- Genre criticism involves identifying the type of literature a biblical text is (e.g., poetry, law, prophecy, narrative) and understanding how that genre's conventions influence interpretation. It's important because different genres communicate meaning in different ways. Failing to recognize the genre can lead to misinterpretations by applying inappropriate rules and expectations to the text, similar to trying to understand cricket using baseball rules. Genre acts as a "contract" between the author and reader, guiding how the text is intended to be understood.

- **How do we identify the genre of a biblical text, and what are the challenges in doing so?**

- Genre identification involves looking for recurring features of form, content, and function that a text shares with other works. However, a significant challenge arises with ancient texts, where the literary conventions and genres may be very different from those we use today. This requires us to be more intentional and explicit in our identification efforts, rather than relying on our intuitions. Additionally, some texts may blend or combine genres, requiring careful analysis.

- **How does the concept of a "contract" relate to understanding biblical genres?**

- The metaphor of a contract is used to describe the relationship between the author and reader within a genre. The author follows the conventions of a particular literary genre when producing the text, and the reader, in turn, follows those same conventions in their interpretation. This mutual understanding creates an implicit agreement that enables effective communication. Like a contract, genre provides guidelines that both sides need to abide by for the message to be received as intended.

- **What are some key characteristics of Hebrew poetry, and how do they influence our interpretation?**

- Hebrew poetry, unlike much of modern poetry, does not rely on rhyme or meter. Two main features are *parallelism* and *figurative language*. Parallelism is the way in which lines of poetry relate to each other, with the second line often expanding upon or defining the first. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, juxtapose things that usually do not belong together, inviting the reader to explore connections and creating both intellectual and emotional appeal. Understanding these features helps uncover the deeper meanings within the poetic text.

- **What are the primary types of laws found in the Old Testament and how should we understand them?**

- There are two main categories of laws in the Old Testament: *casuistic law* and *apodictic law*. Casuistic law uses an "if-then" structure, where the 'if' part states the case or issue, and the 'then' part stipulates the legal treatment or consequence. Apodictic law, like the Ten Commandments, is a more direct command ("You shall..."). Understanding these laws requires recognizing they were given within the context of God's covenant with Israel and were intended to regulate the life of God's people. These laws are not just rules, but personal demands within a relationship, stemming from God's grace in rescuing Israel.

- **How do we apply Old Testament laws to our lives today, and what role does Jesus play in that?**

- Applying Old Testament law requires considering the original historical context, the true intention of the law, and its fulfillment in Christ. Rather than strict adherence to the letter of the law, it is important to ask what driving principle gave rise to the law, then how we might live in light of that principle in a new context. Ultimately, Old Testament law is understood through the lens of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The sacrificial system, for instance, finds its fulfillment in Christ's sacrifice, and the Sabbath command is fulfilled in resting in Christ. While we still seek to understand the true intention of each law and live it out as appropriate, we do not literally follow every aspect of it.

- **What is the main focus of Old Testament prophecy, and how should we approach its interpretation?**

- Contrary to common modern understanding, prophecy in the Old Testament is not primarily about predicting the future. Instead, it is more about *forth-telling* a message to the prophet's contemporaries, often calling them back to their covenant obligations with God. While prophecies do contain fore-telling, such predictions are aimed at addressing the situations of the prophet's audience. When interpreting prophetic literature, it's essential to consider the original historical context, understand metaphorical language symbolically and be cognizant of how the prophecies find fulfillment, whether in the prophet's time, Israel's history, in the New Testament, or at the end of history.

- **What is the relationship between "literal" and "symbolic" interpretation in prophetic texts?**

- Prophetic literature often uses metaphorical and symbolic language to communicate its message. Therefore, interpreters should first look for symbolic meaning rather than assuming strict literalism. Rather than treating metaphorical language as an exception to the literal, it is the reverse. This doesn't mean prophecies are not about actual historical persons and events, but that they are frequently described in symbolic and metaphorical ways. The primary aim is to discern the author's intended message, not to map symbols onto a literal timeline.