

Biblical Interpretation

Semenari Theologji Malaysia

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Poetics and Rhetoric (Old Testament) 25 May 2019

This sheet does not aim to be a thorough treatment of the subject, but offers the student a brief overview of poetic genres in the Old Testament, as well as major rhetorical devices useful for the interpretation of scripture.

Poetics

Poetics can be defined as the study of writing/reading conventions. There are several subsections of this science, but for our purposes, a look at *genre* and at *rhetoric* will suffice.

Historical narrative needs to be read not as historical, but theological, because that is its purpose. I personally believe the historical writers of our Bible tried to do the best job of reconstructing history that they could with the materials they had available. Which is to say that they DID try to write *authentic* histories. But their purpose wasn't to record history. Their purpose was to reveal something about that history. In every case, the purpose is both theological and directed at the people around the author.

Mythological narrative is similar, though it has less grounding in historical reality. Did a snake really talk? Did a storm really attack Jonah and his ship? Did giants walk the earth—either before the flood, or at the time of David and Goliath? Did people once live for over a thousand years? The answer is both yes and no. These things *probably* did not actually take place, though of course with God all things are possible. Even so, the Bible is still authoritative, because these passages are NOT about recording history. It is interested in revealing God. We need to read them in light of that purpose—whether you think they are factual or not.

Legal material is, again, for the purpose of the people living in Israel at the time in which it was recorded. Sometimes it presents an ideal rather than a reality, whether it be ritual laws that were written down long after the rituals stopped, or ethical laws that were never practiced as described. The audience matters, and it can help us understand why God commands these things that we obviously do not do. (Don't eat pork, for example.)

Prophecy is strange to us, because it is not a genre we have today. Modern prophetic movements may exist, but they are different from Hebrew prophecy in some important ways. It may use future prediction, historical reflection, and contemporary signs and symbols to make its point. The most important thing to understand about prophecy is that it is about the *now*. This means that prophecy is never—at least from the prophet's perspective—about the historical Jesus, even when the Church's history has interpreted it that way. We must read it in its historical context *first* before moving to a Christological reading. Even then, perhaps we had ought to learn more from it about the One who is and was and is to come, than some simple prediction of an event in the early first century. God has more to tell us.

Apocalyptic is found in Daniel, Isaiah, and Zechariah, as well as in the New Testament Gospels and Revelation. Many other apocalypses exist from the ancient world. It is not prophecy, though prophetic voices sometimes use it. It is about the present, not the future. It is also NOT a secret code that has to be unraveled. Instead, it could well be likened to a science-fiction or fantasy novel. The way apocalyptic works differs from example to example. But it *always* has the same dual

purpose: To reveal the failings of the modern world, and more importantly, to give hope.

Poetic passages are more difficult. There's some discussion about whether poetry even exists in Hebrew. The defining feature of poetry is parallelism, where two lines stand in relationship with each other, often saying similar things, but with some movement. Hebrew poetry is succinct, and full of metaphor. This also help it be *beautiful* and lingering on that beauty is an important part of the reading and interpretation of the passage.

Wisdom literature is often expressed in poetry. It explores both the ideal way of living (which is different than Law) as well as the question of why bad things happen to good people (theodicy). Every wisdom book seems to have a different opinion. And these are all alternatives to the main threads of theology found in the Old Testament.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the study of persuasive speech, rooted in the Greek and especially Latin scholars writing for those working in the public sphere. The easiest way to begin looking at rhetoric is to consider rhetorical devices. There were four major devices identified in the ancient world.

Metaphor. The description of something as if it were something else, drawing out their similarity. "Cows of Bashan" Amos 4:1, referring to rich women in Samaria.

Metonymy. The use of one object to represent another, drawing out their connectedness. "Hear then, O House of David!" Isa 7:13, referring to King Ahaz (though possibly more than just him).

Synecdoche. The use of a part of a thing to represent the whole. "The hand of the Lord was upon him there" Ezk 1:3, doesn't mean just God's hand.

Irony. When appearance and reality do not match, and what happens is not what the reader expects. "You [Israel] only have I known of all the families of the Earth," God says in Amos 3:2, which sounds like a blessing. But then: "Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

Many, many more devices exist. A few additional that are useful for reading the Old Testament include:

Aetiology. An explanation (usually mythical) for some reality. Why are people afraid of snakes? "I will put enmity between you [snake] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring." Gen 3:15

Hypophora. Offering a question given by opponents, and then answering it. The entire book of Malachi is written in this style.

Merism. Representation of a whole by expressing the two extremes. "God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1) isn't telling us that God created two things, but that God created everything that exists.

Many more exist. See https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_rhetorical_terms for a much longer list of devices and other terms related to rhetoric.