

MC101 Reading

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House, Paul R., and Eric Mitchell. *Old Testament Survey*. 2nd ed. Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2007.

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how the Writings comment on how faithful persons lived given Israel's historical situation.

In other words the Hebrew Bible's sequence shows what happened to Israel, why it happened, and how believers responded to both. By surveying the Old Testament in this order, the ways history, theology, and faith work together in Scripture become evident. Certainly the New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament in this unified manner.

LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

No piece of literature, sacred or secular, can be understood unless readers know some basic facts about the material. Characters and plot are the starting points for all literary analysis. They exist within specific historical settings. Themes and symbols add meaning to story lines. Different types of literature operate in different ways. Certainly some knowledge of these aspects of the Old Testament will aid beginning students.

Characters

Analyzing characters means more than simply noting who appears in a story. Once characters have been identified, the reader needs to know their natures. Is the character positive or negative in the story? Does the character make a significant impact on the account? What are the character's motives? What do other characters say about the individual in question? Or does a disparity here point to character weakness or plot irony? Further, do the character's actions and words agree? Asking these and other questions about Old Testament figures will guide the reader's perception of the significance of each individual character. Normally, the characters who impact the plot the most are the most significant in the story.

Plot

Plot involves what happens in a story and why it happens. Good plots are formed by the ideas, dreams, and conflicts of its characters and are logically ordered. A mere tracing of events does not explain a plot. Rather, motives and explanations determine plot. The fact that Israel leaves Egypt (Ex 1) tells a story, but to know that God causes Israel to be freed uncovers a plot.

Generally plots may be comic or tragic. Tragic stories begin hopefully but eventually end sadly. For example, Israel's failure to enter the promised land (Nm 13–19) is a tragic account. Comic plots are

not necessarily funny or satirical. When literary scholars say a plot is “comic,” they mean the story has a pleasant, or happy, ending. All may seem negative in the middle of the story, but any problems are resolved by the plot’s end. David’s rise to Israel’s throne despite Saul’s hatred (1 Sm 16–2 Sm 4) represents a comic plot. Realizing whether a plot is comic or tragic is vital to understanding Old Testament stories.

Themes

Locating themes in literature helps the reader understand the purpose behind characters and plots. Why certain accounts appear in Scripture can often be explained by a book’s theme. For example, the major theme of Judges is, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Jdg 17:6; 21:25 NRSV). Therefore, the author includes many occurrences that may shock or repulse the reader.

Many students fear the word *theology*. Though the study of theology can become complicated, at its beginning level theology identifies and studies great Bible themes related to God and human beings. When readers begin to locate major themes in the Old Testament, they are doing basic theology. For example, to see that Isaiah stresses salvation is a first step toward defining salvation in the Old Testament.

Symbols

Simply put, symbols are images, words, or phrases that represent something beyond themselves. Symbols point to deeper meaning or reality. The temple represents God’s presence among Israel. Ezekiel uses his vision of dry bones (Ezk 37:1–14) to illustrate Israel’s renewal. In the Prophets, Hosea’s wife Gomer is unfaithful to her husband. Hosea then claims that Israel is just as unfaithful to God. So symbols make themes come alive. They challenge readers to envision and think about a message.

PROSE

Most of the Old Testament is written in a nonpoetic style. This statement is particularly true of the Law and Former Prophets. Prose is action oriented. It describes events and the importance of those events. Rarely will standard prose convey abstract meaning or reveal in great detail the inner feelings of a character. Books that have a fixed starting and stopping place, like Samuel and Kings, are best served by prose since they tell specific actions and events.

Prose proceeds logically. Whether a text describes the life of an individual, tribe, or nation, prose has a beginning, middle, and end. The author may comment on why events happen but always bases those comments on the story itself. Each story has unique elements that make it creative and artistic.

POETRY

Each major section (Law, Prophets, or Writings) of the Old Testament contains poetry. The Prophets and the Writings use poetry the most. Old Testament poets write sermons, songs, visions, complaints, and predictions. Obviously, then, ancient poetry is flexible.

Hebrew poetry differs from English verse. Rhyme seldom appears in Hebrew poetry, and stanzas are not immediately apparent in translation. Its rhythm does not always follow a set pattern, which separates it from much traditional Greek, Roman, Italian, and English poetry. Old Testament poetry has its own pattern, however, and uses imagery, word play, and other poetic devices.

Old Testament poetry is shaped by thought and sense patterns. Rather than two lines rhyming, Hebrew poetry matches the ideas of consecutive lines. Two lines may say basically the same or almost opposite things. Several lines often work together to present a message. At least three types of poetry appear in the Old Testament. The first type of poetry is called synonymous poetry; the second, antithetical poetry; and the third, synthetic poetry.¹

In synonymous poetry two successive lines say practically the same things, as in Psalm 3:1:

O Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!

Together the two lines drive home the writer's desperate situation. Proverbs 19:4 illustrates antithetical poetry, in which two successive lines state opposite ideas:

Wealth brings many friends,
but a poor man's friend deserts him.

Even though the phrases are opposites, they both show the relative importance of wealth. Since synthetic poetry normally uses many lines, an example will not be quoted. Passages like Zephaniah 1:14–16;

¹ These categories were first recognized by Robert Lowth in *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753; repr., Andover: Codman Press, 1829).