Focusing on INFLUENCE

Introducing the Feature

INTRODUCE Throughout the first half of this course, the students have been collecting a great deal of information about the Bible as literature. At this point in the course, a summary, compilation, and review of the literary genres will be very helpful. Again, this is not just another lesson. This review should be handled in any manner you find most efficient, but it would be best if it were structured for maximum group participation.

Biblical Information

The following points will provide you with a ready reference as you go through the review feature:

Saul was the first ruler of the united monarchy of ancient Israel. His life is narrated throughout 1 Samuel.

David was a great king of ancient Israel. The narrative of his life extends from 1 Samuel 16:13 through 1 Kings 2:12.

Parables have two levels of meaning: the literal or surface meaning of the story, and a deeper, symbolic meaning. There are a few examples of parable in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5:1–2 and the story of the lamb in 2 Samuel 12:1–4, but the genre of parable finds its greatest scriptural development in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus’ parables range from brief aphorisms to detailed narratives, and often include interpretations. Parables occur in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Some of the more famous parables include the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32, Matthew 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–36), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). You may wish to have students look up and read one or more of these, as well as other parables. For further information on parables, see the Unit 8 Feature.

Contemporary scripture scholars differentiate between letters (which were written to individuals) and epistles (which were meant for communities). However, traditionally, all of the New Testament letters were called “epistles” (for example, in the King James Version), as all came to be circulated among the larger community.

P. B390, Literature—Literary genres

Focus on INFLUENCE

A Summary of Literary Genres in the Bible

Now is a good time to review and summarize the various literary genres in the Bible. The Bible is full of literary genres that engage the reader and relay the message in many different literary forms.

THE NARRATIVE

In the epigraph to his book Gates of the Forest, Elie Wiesel wrote “God made people because God loves stories.” Henry R. Luce, founder of Time Magazine, quipped, “Time didn’t start this emphasis on stories about people; the Bible did.” The narrative is the most common literary form in the Bible. A good narrative invites the reader to participate in the action, to share the experience with the characters. Here is a brief checklist of narrative elements in the Bible:

1. Setting: Physical, temporal, and cultural elements that support the narrative
2. Characters: A cast of engaging individuals or groups to carry the story forward
3. Plot: The movement of the story from a beginning to an end
4. Conflict: The elements that interrupt and even derail the movement of the story
5. Suspense: An element of uncertainty about the outcome
6. Reality: Even in the most fantastic of tales, a grounding in the familiar and the accessible
7. Unity and Coherence: The clans and dialog and action that make the story intelligible
8. Choice: Even in the most fatalistic of tales, the choices and decisions of the protagonist and the other characters that drive the story forward
9. Transformation: Change in situations and people by the end of the narrative
10. Spice: Foils, dramatic irony, poetic justice, and other elements that enhance the experience
11. A Point of View: The overall positioning of the narrative to get the reader invested in the experience and to bring his or her own thought and imagination to it

Here are a few recognizable narrative forms:

1. The Hesiotic Narrative: This kind of story is structured around the life and exploits of a protagonist. Such narratives are strongly biographical. The narrative of David in Hebrew Scriptures, for example, is one of the longest narratives in all of ancient literature.

2. The Epic: An expansive story that sums up a whole age. Epics tend to have a strong nationalistic interest, and they deal with the destiny of a whole nation. The most obvious epic work in the Bible is Exodus. For literary purposes, the key narrative sections are Exodus 1–20 and 32–34, Numbers 10–14, 16–17, and 20–24, and Deuteronomy 32–34.

3. The Comedy: The word here is used in the technical dramatic sense. It does not mean a series of jokes or a funny situation. This narrative form is most often a story that begins in prosperity, descends into a series of trials and troubles, and rises again to provide a “happy ending.” In literary terms, for all its misery, the Book of Job can be considered a comedy, as can the Book of Jonah.

4. The Tragedy: This term, too, is used in the dramatic sense. This form has much in common with some of the Greek dramas in that a flawed hero starts out well and then gradually is hit by the center of great personal and even national deterioration. The ending is usually catastrophic. This form is less pervasive in the biblical narratives, but it is an important form. The most dramatic example of a tragedy is the account of King Saul.

POETRY

Next to the narrative, poetry is the most prevalent type of writing in the Bible. Some of the books of the Bible are entirely poetic in form: Psalms, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Lamentations. Many others are mainly poetic. Job, Ecclesiastes (in which even the prose passages achieve poetic effects), Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, and numerous other prophetic books. There is no book in the Bible that does not require the ability to interpret poetry to some degree, because every book includes imagery and figurative language.

Poetry is the language of images. It uses many comparisons and is concentrated and more highly patterned than ordinary discourse. Poets do not vary in language and sentence structure that people do not ordinarily do when speaking. Poetry is used to intensify feeling or insight.

PROVERBS

Biblical proverbs, or short moral sayings, play upon both imagination and human experience. Proverbs are striking and memorable, simple, and profound.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: LANGUAGE ARTS

Suggest that the students set aside a section of the notebook they use for this class or part of the journal they are using to keep track of the literary genres they discover during the rest of the course. Remind them that these literary genres do not have to apply to an entire book of the Bible. Examples of these genres can be found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, and the New Testament. Encourage the students to make the literary genres a focus of the lessons to come.
Jesus posed a question to the questioner: “And of these, of this unidentified man. At the end of the narrative, Jewish man, are contrasted with a Samaritan—a for-
takers who give money to the innkeeper to take care
of those that take money from the unidentified presumably
a group of robbers. The story is graphic. The robbers,
Jericho who is beaten, stripped, and left for half-dead by
He told of a man going down the road from Jerusalem to
did not give an explanation but told a story—a parable.
Parables are
characters, and an interesting counterpoint between wisdom
and folly. The proverb form is found throughout the Bible.

PARABLE

Parable is derived from a Greek term that means “to put
things together in order to compare them.” Parables are short stories—sometimes only a sentence or two—that create a comparison in the listener’s mind. As a literary form, they occur throughout the Bible. Isaiah, for example, told a story comparing Israel to a vineyard. However, they are perhaps most associated with the teachings of Jesus.

When Jesus was asked, “And who is my neighbor?” he
did not give an explanation but told a story—a parable.
He told of a man going down the road from Jerusalem to
Jericho who is beaten, stripped, and left for half-dead by
a group of robbers. The story is graphic. The robbers, those that take money from the unidentified presumably
Jewish man, are contrasted with a Samaritan—a for-

taker—who gives money to the innkeeper to take care
of this unidentified man. At the end of the narrative, Jesus poses a question to the questioner: “And of these,
who proved to be a neighbor?” The parable led the hear-
ers to a new and important conclusion.

VISIONARY LITERATURE

A particularly fascinating genre is the apocalyptic or visionary literature. In such literature, descriptions are often symbolic rather than literal. Events are described that have not happened. Such writing engages the imag-
ation of the reader. Visionary literature is an assault on familiar patterns of thought in an effort to shake the reader out of complacency with the normal flow of things. Visionary literature is a revolutionary genre. It announces an end to the way things are and opens up alternate possibilities. At the same time, these visions provide comfort in times of crisis.

The Book of Daniel in Hebrew Scriptures is vision-
ary literature, as is the Book of the Revelation. Both contain visions of God in a time to come. There are other characteristics of such apocalyptic literature:

- Symbolic Visions: Apocalypses often present visions or dreams filled with elaborate symbols. These symbols can be of strange animals, numbers, or cosmic events.
- A Heavenly Mediator: Usually apocalyptic writing has a figure that explains the visions. This could be an angel or, as in the beginning of the Book of Revelation, Christ.
- The End of the World: One major theme of such literature is the end of time. This is particularly evident in the Book of Revelation.

Adapted from How to Read the Bible as Literature by Leland Ryken

WORKING WITH THE TEXT

Focusing on INFLUENCE

COLLABORATE Have students prepare to give examples of each of the six literary genres covered in the feature. Have the students look for examples that include as many of the 11 characteristics of the narrative as possible. If it is not possible to assign this feature in advance, divide class time into two parts—study time and discussion time. During the study time, divide the class into five small groups. Have each group look for examples from the narrative genre and examples from one of the other genres. During the second half of the time, harvest the results of the study.

DISCUSS Narrative: Elicit the examples the students have found of both the characteristics of narrative and the forms of narrative. Let the students react to the discoveries that have been made.

DISCUSS Poetry: There are instances of poetry in almost every book of the Bible. Look for examples that are outside of Psalms, the Song of Solomon, or Isaiah. Also look for discoveries of poetry that do not stand out because the version of the student’s Bible uses a poetic form in the typography.

DISCUSS Proverbs: Again, look for discoveries of proverbs that are outside the context of the Book of Proverbs. The proverbial form is also scattered throughout the Bible, and discoveries of these short moral sayings in other books will demonstrate a real grasp of the form.

DISCUSS Parable: The students will most likely go to the parables of Jesus because the text does center the description of parable on the parables of Jesus. Some, however, may uncover stories in the Hebrew Scriptures that also work as parables. (Nathan’s parable of the lamb used to confront David in 2 Samuel 12 is a notable example.)

DISCUSS Epistles: There is no real need to belabor this form. Accept all reasonable examples of the letter and of its five constituent parts.

DISCUSS Visionary Literature: This genre will generate a lot of discussion because of the unusual nature of this kind of literature and the current popularity of stories of the fantastic and the surreal. You might invite some comparison of current visionary writing with the visionary literature of the Bible.

Chapter 20

Other Jewish Texts in the Christian Bible