Literary Forms Found in the Bible

➔ forms: myth, parable, prophecy, poetry, sermon, legend, list, letter, law, history
➔ do not take ALL the passage literally, but take it contextually

Myth:
➢ focusing on the acts of gods or heroes
  (explaining some mysteries of life in ways of a particular culture)
➢ subjects of myths are sometimes cosmological events (e.g. creation of the universe and its destruction in the flood) or prehistoric events (e.g. creation of humans, the first murder, the creation of different languages)
➢ not to be taken literally
➢ e.g. myth of talking serpent and why snakes have no legs and are hated by humans
➢ contain etiologies (explanations of the origins of certain phenomena) or etymologies (the origins of particular words)

List:
➢ a series of names, events, or words, usually in a set order
➢ e.g. Jesus’ genealogy at the beginning of Matthew is a list of names

Poetry:
➢ expresses the poet’s personal and inner feelings on love, God, life, etc.
➢ in the Bible, poetry is arranged in stanzas
➢ e.g. the Book of Psalms contain poetry throughout

Prophecy:
➢ made under divine influence and direction
➢ to tell of future events or to warn people about the consequences of their actions
➢ sometimes it doesn’t contain prediction but a message from God
➢ e.g. Major and Minor Prophets and the Book of Revelation
➢ often take the form poetry

Law:
➢ rules telling us how to behave
➢ the Torah (first five books of the Bible) contains 613 commandments
➢ e.g. Jesus issues new commandments in the form of Beatitudes

History:
➢ a record or account of past events
➢ difficult to tell what is history and what is myth
➢ typically try not to explain the origins of phenomena such as rainbows (Noah’s Ark) or different languages (Tower of Babel)
➢ narrate events without dialogue and contain literary references
Literary Forms Found in the Bible (continued)

Letter:
- a written message, sometimes of personal nature, written to individuals, or entire communities
- often begin with “Dear…” or “To…”
- e.g. Epistles in the New Testament have that expression in their opening paragraphs

Parable:
- a story to teach a lesson or provide insights into human nature, qualities about God, the Kingdom of God, and how we ought to behave
- Jesus used parables regularly
- not meant to be taken literally (as historical events) but as stories with deep spiritual messages

Sermon:
- a speech of a serious or solemn kind (based on a passage from the Bible)
- made to large audiences and contain advice on how to live
- Jesus and Moses were noted for delivering sermons

Legend:
- story about people’s lives, including dialogue and interaction
- other literary features such as suspense and climax
- difficult to determine whether legend, myth, or history
- decreased emphasis on etiologies and etymologies
- main characters are not god, although they are typically heroes
- emphasis on dialogue
- narrator is omniscient (narrator can see from all points of view)
- assigning God a minor role
- e.g. legends tell the stories of important characters like:
  - Abraham
  - Isaac
  - Jacob
  - Sampson