

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 or 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 aetymologies
- 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