

An Introduction to a Literary Approach to the Bible

Opening Problem

Why do multiple accounts of the same event often seem so different?

Chronicles and Samuel both recount David's life. In Samuel, we are well aware of David's major accomplishments and major sins. He is even to blame for Israel's future problems:

10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' 2 Samuel 12:10

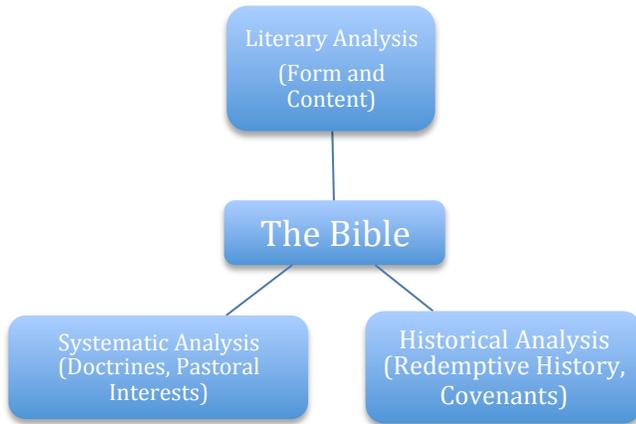
In Chronicles, however, David is idealized. Some of his sins are mentioned, but his major blemishes are absent.

Which history is to be believed? How do we reconcile the differences?

Should we:

- Choose one,
- Harmonize both,
- Only affirm what they hold in common, or
- Use all the data as part of the picture to reconstruct the real David?

I. A Literary approach



A. Literature does not mean Fiction

Some equate a literary approach with college classes entitled "Bible as Literature," which are essentially a nonreligious approach to studying the Bible. This makes the Bible something less than it is.

"Those who talk of reading the Bible 'as literature' sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about...But there is a saner sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are." C.S. Lewis

“a literary approach to the study of Scriptures does not imply, as some might think, a belief that the Bible as a whole is story, not history, or that it speaks of another world and not the real world of time and space.” Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 102

Failure to read the Bible with literary tools, however, will result in faulty conclusions. We will miss or look past God’s intended meaning for us.

B. Redeeming the Human Author

1. By elevating God’s “point” over the author’s point, we miss the point!

- **Mystical Book:** We might think that if every word is true and from God, then there might be patterns or hidden messages in the words that are not obvious to the casual reader. Our job is to uncover the hidden meaning.
 - Allegorical interpretation often comes from this approach.
- **Mystical Encounter:** We can also treat the text as if it had us specifically in mind. While we can learn about God and his purposes for us from scripture, be careful not to read our lives into it. Discerning original audience and the redemptive-historical context are essential middle steps prior to application.
- **Mystical History:** Beware of searching behind the text for the real message! Because we believe the Bible records real events that happened in time and space, we view the Bible only as one means to access those events and that the events themselves are of real interest.

The truth is God wants us to view these events from the His perspective and not from another perspective. Looking for the historical events will causes us to treat the Bible as an obstacle to finding out what really happened.

This approach will also cause us to miss the clear point intended by God and human author. Example: Jonah

The Lord said to Jonah, “Arise!” 1:2

And Jonah, in verse 3, “went **down** to Joppa” then Jonah, in verse 5, “went **down** into the inner part of the ship, and had lain **down**.” Jonah gets hurled **down** into the sea and the theme continues into chapter 2, verse 3, he is cast into the **deep**; he is sinking **down** to the roots of the mountains.”

Jonah (physically) is going down, down, down throughout his period of rebellion. And, his physical state mirrors his spiritual state.

What is the author saying about Jonah? The language is clearly full of **death**. Jonah is going down to the grave. His first act of rebellion, “going **down** to Joppa” begins

this descent. The description of Jonah in chapter 2 is full of Death imagery. As a result of Jonah's rebellion against God, he is spiritually...and very nearly physically Dead!

2:10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited **UP** Jonah upon the dry land. 3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, [2] "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." [3] So Jonah **arose** and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.

If we are trying to get behind the text to the real history, what will we miss?

2. The human author's point IS God's point

"If literature is an act of communication, then meaning resides in the intention of the author. The author has encoded a message for the readers. Interpretation then has as its goal the recovery of the author's purpose in writing." Tremper Longman 135

"The narrator always speaks truthfully and authoritatively because he is a prophet, God's inspired spokesman. The implied author's omniscience and omnipresence, apart from modern demands of documentation, are due to his heavenly inspiration, not his purely fictitious inventiveness. Nevertheless, the inspired author probably exercised his authorial right to represent what a character of the story, including God, said in his own terms, while being faithful to the historical reality." Waltke, An Old Testament Theology 101.

Nature of Scripture according to B.B. Warfield:

"And there is the preparation of the men to write these books to be considered, a preparation physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives, and, indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them. When 'inspiration,' technically so called, is superinduced on lines of preparation like these, it takes on quite a different aspect from that which it bears when it is thought of as an isolated action of the Divine Spirit operating out of all relation to historical processes...

"...the human characteristics of the writers must, and in point of fact do, condition and qualify the writings produced by them, the implication being that, therefore, we cannot get from man a pure word of God...so any word of God which is passed through the mind and soul of a man must come out discolored by the personality through which it is given, and just to that degree ceases to be the pure word of God. But what if this personality has

itself been formed by God into precisely the personality it is, for the express purpose of communicating to the word given through it just the coloring which it gives it? What if the colors of the stained-glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely the tone and quality it receives from them?"
B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 155-6

3. Process to Canon

Everything we just said about the human author does not exclude the possibility of reliance on other sources. For some this might appear to threaten the integrity of the text as we have it now, but should it?

Form Criticism- focuses on the period of oral transmission. Traditionally, this method of analyzing the Bible looks for the original form of a text. It devalues the final form, citing a cynical view of later compilers who added or shaped the story for their agenda. How would we respond to this?

[1:1] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, [3] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, [4] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:1-4 ESV)

Demythologizing (Bultmann): Form critics seek to remove the husk of myth in order to get to the kernel of truth. What's dangerous about this?

Source Criticism- is the attempt to establish the sources a biblical author used to construct the narrative.

Why do some stories in the Bible seem to be alternative versions or "borrowed" versions of myths/stories from other cultures? Does Genesis borrow from the Mesopotamian myth *Enuma Elish*? Is Noah's flood an adaptation of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*? Should this trouble us?

Redaction Criticism- seeks to determine how and why the redactor (editor) put the sources together the way he did. This can be positive, but it can rely on too much conjecture about sources and how the author has manipulated them.

“Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors stripped the ancient pagan literatures of their mythological elements, infused them with the sublimities of their God, and refuted the pagan myths by identifying the holy Lord as the true Creator and Ruler of the cosmos and of history.” Bruce Waltke

For a helpful guide to seeing just how biblical authors used sources (often for the purposes of taunting!) see John Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament*

“In the end, it is the canonical text that is authoritative, not the process, nor the self-understanding of the interpreter.” Brevard Childs

4. The human author’s point may expand or gain detail in light of further revelation. When put in context of the entirety of the Bible, the human author’s point is not weakened or ignored but more light from other passages is shed onto its original meaning.

[17] For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

(Matthew 13:17 ESV)

[10] Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, [11] inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. [12] It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

(1 Peter 1:10-12 ESV)

Organic development of a text over the course of redemptive history

“It is sometimes contended that the assumption of progress in revelation excludes its absolute perfection at all stages. This would actually be so if the progress were non-organic. The organic progress is from seed-form to the attainment of full growth; yet we do not say that in the qualitative sense the seed is less perfect than the tree....in the seed-form the minimum of indispensable knowledge was already present.” Geerhardus Vos

C. Intentional Communication

1. God wants to communicate and wants us to understand! That is the type of God we serve. He is not trying to deceive us. His communication is not a mystery for us to solve.

WCF 1. 7. *All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.*

Functions of Biblical Literature (from Longman, 137-9)

Historical: The Bible intends to convey historical information concerning God's message and acts for his people.

Theological: The Bible intends to interpret history in the way that God would have us understand it.

Doxological: The Bible intends to praise God and to encourage God's people to praise him in response to the historical and theological truths the text presents.

Didactic: The Bible intends to shape the reader's ethical behavior as a proper response to the message.

Aesthetic: The Bible intends us to pay attention to and reflect on the structure and language used to communicate God's truth.

Entertainment: The Bible intends to engage our emotions and will, as well as our intellect.

Genre

God wants us to understand his word. He uses multiple styles of writing that are familiar to us: stories, songs, letters, legal documents, and artistic/symbolic poetry.

Genres are the categories of types of literature by one or more traits they have in common. Grouping biblical books or passages by genre is essential for interpretation. We first have to know how a text means before we can understand what it means.

You always come to a reading with certain expectations. Like different kinds of games have different rules and shape your expectations (you shouldn't need shoulder pads to play chess), so genres shape your expectation of getting at the authors meaning.

Types of genres in the Bible: Narrative, epistolary, poetic, wisdom, law, parable, prophetic, and apocalyptic literature.

"If Paul has one point of view and Peter another, then each can be at best only approximately correct. This would actually follow, if the truth did not carry in itself a

multiformity of aspects. But infallibility is not inseparable from dull uniformity.”
Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* 8

Further Reading

Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*

Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*

Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*