

Literary Genre: Prophecy and Apocalyptic

Literary genre is a category of written works. Recognizing the type of writing prepares one for how to read and observe the text. For example, prophecy is a category of writings of the major and minor prophets of the Bible who exhorted the nation of Israel to be true to their covenant promises.

Apocalyptic literature is included in this genre, because the prophets (i.e. Daniel, etc.) and the apostles (i.e. John, etc.) received visions that “revealed” the future of last days. This period of time is the last attempt by God to encourage people to restore their relationship with Him before final judgment takes place.

There are lots of examples of this genre: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Revelation.

Recognizing some characteristics of this genre will help you read and understand it. What’s the main problem? What images or figures of speech are used? What does it say about God? Why did God include this in the Bible?

1. Prophets, in their tireless call to Israel to remember their covenant, would pronounce God’s judgment for Israel’s failure to uphold their part of the Mosaic Covenant. Punishment of God’s faithless people placed an emphasis on God’s sovereign rule and authority.

Therefore, I will bring the worst of the nations, and they will possess their houses. I will also make the pride of the strong ones cease, and their holy places will be profaned. When anguish comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none. Disaster will come upon disaster and rumor will be added to rumor; then they will seek a vision from a prophet, but the law will be lost from the priest and counsel from the elders. The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with horror, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. According to their conduct I will deal with them, and by their judgments I will judge them. And they will know that I am the Lord. (Ezek 7:24-27, NASB)

2. The ancient historical background and context of the prophet matters. For example, Daniel’s apocalyptic prophecies were quoted or referred to the most in the New Testament, and while it was the shortest book of the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), history has shown that Daniel contained the most fulfilled prophecies than any other book of the Bible. Daniel stands unique among the Major Prophets for his ability to interpret the prophetic dreams of Gentiles (Dan 1:9, 17, 19).

3. Prophets in the New Testament placed a different emphasis in their prophecy. The New Testament portrays Jesus Christ as a judge in the future at the end of human history and with a greater emphasis on individuals rather than the nation of Israel as a whole.

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. (Matt 16:26-27, NASB)

How should you read prophetic or apocalyptic literature?

Predictions of the future are not this literary genre’s primary function. Instead, it is to proclaim the words of the Lord for the sole purpose of bringing His people back to Him. The prophet is the spokesman for God.

The message of the prophets is similar in content as when God spoke to Moses: a constant reminder to the nation of Israel to keep to their covenant promises and commitment.

Coming directly from God, the tone of warning and judgment is ominous and reflects the binding nature of God's divine covenant.

When referring to the future, most prophecy dealt with the future of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them. These prophetic predictions were largely fulfilled and can be understood with knowledge of ancient history. Some prophecies have yet to be fulfilled.

Because of some florid figures of speech, this literary genre is challenging to understand, but typically end with hope and restoration for God's people and the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

Try this example as a class exercise. Old Testament prophecies that pertain to Jesus Christ are known as Messianic prophecies, and often, they are not recognized as such until they are referred to in the New Testament.

In this example, as you compare the prophecies of the Old and New Testament, what do you observe? Does the New Testament reference help clarify the Old Testament prophecy? Can you take its literal meaning? What was Malachi referring to? What does this reveal about the Magi?

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Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

**'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'**" (Matt 2:1-6, NASB)

Literary Genre: Prophecy and Apocalyptic Teacher Notes

Literary genre is a category of written works. Recognizing the type of writing prepares one for how to read and observe the text. For example, prophecy is a category of writings of the major and minor prophets of the Bible who exhorted the nation of Israel to be true to their covenant promises.

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It is very important for the student to understand that the Old Testament prophecy is largely about the nation of Israel’s covenant commitment to God and their failure to comply. Take a moment to review their commitment as you read Exodus 19:4-9. Imagine being there as a member of the nation of Israel who just witnessed the supernatural events and experienced the Exodus. And remember that it is within the context of God’s promise to Abraham, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7).

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.”

So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. **All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!”** And Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord. **The Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.”** Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord. (Ex 19:4-9)

2. The ancient historical background context of the prophet matters. For example, Daniel’s apocalyptic prophecies were quoted or referred to the most in the New Testament, and while it was the shortest book of the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), history has shown that Daniel contained the most fulfilled prophecies than any other book of the Bible. Daniel stands unique among the Major Prophets for his ability to interpret the prophetic dreams of Gentiles (Dan 1:9, 17, 19).

Explain to the student that the challenge of recognizing and understanding prophetic literature often requires a sense of ancient history. Take for example a phrase that signals prophetic literature such as "Day of the Lord" found in major prophets like Isaiah (Isa 13:6, 9) and minor prophets like Amos (Amos 5:18-20).

The "Day of the Lord" is a reference to divine judgment that will occur in the future; it can be God's judgment of people or a nation including the nation of Israel. It may refer to the near future (less than 100 years), distant future (hundreds of years) or eschatological future (at the end of human history).

In cases where the prophetic "Day of the Lord" is fulfilled by a historical event, it becomes apparent that the "Day of the Lord" took place over a period of time instead of a single 24 hour day.

Not all prophetic literature is difficult to understand. Take for example God's words to Abraham:

God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. (Gen 15:13-14)

Because you know the background and context of both Abraham and the Exodus, you understand the prophecy God is revealing to Abraham.

3. Prophets in the New Testament placed a different emphasis in their prophecy. The New Testament portrays Jesus Christ as a judge in the future at the end of human history and with a greater emphasis on individuals rather than the nation of Israel as a whole.

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Encourage the student to ask questions of the text to aid in their observation. Remind them of biblical resources that they could use to find their answers. If they ask certain questions, provide answers that could inspire them to discover the meaning of the prophecy.

Who is Micah? Micah was a minor prophet during the 8th century B.C.

Who did he prophesize to? He confronted the Southern Kingdom Judah for their covenant infidelity and spoke of God’s coming judgment.

What was the prophecy in Micah 5? Micah speaks of the future, after Judah has been judged, when there will be a new Ruler from Bethlehem

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

**‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.’” (Matt 2:1-6, NASB)**

What do you observe about the Magi? With careful attention to Micah's prophecy, they know that the Savior was born in Bethlehem. Through astronomical observation, the magi from the east determine the approximate time and location of the birth of Jesus. Somehow the magi understood their astronomical observations in the context of Malachi's prophecy. The Magi were clearly Old Testament Believers.