

Bible Study and Literary Forms

The Bible, written over a period of several thousand years by numerous human authors is expressed in a variety of literary forms, from poetic imagery to careful logic.

The literary form by which a writer conveys his ideas influences the meaning that they have upon a reader. If we ignore the form, we cannot accurately understand the meaning. (Mickelsen, p. 44)

Often a book or even a particular passage will contain more than one type of literary form. For example, Paul sometimes moves from a detailed theological argument to a heartfelt personal greeting. Recognizing the form being used will help us understand the meaning and application of the passage.

There are many ways to classify literary forms. A few suggested types and their characteristics and examples follow:

Form	Characteristics	Examples
Instructive Discourse	logical arguments with careful attention to detail	Paul's letters, Jesus' sermons
Prose Narrative	stories, history, biography	Gospels, Acts, OT stories
Poetry	figurative language, parallel ideas, emotions rather than rigid logic	Psalms, parts of Job, Isaiah 1
Prophecy	foretelling or forthtelling	Isaiah
Wisdom Literature	short sayings, examples from everyday life; reflections on meaning of life	Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes
Parable	analogy, down-to-earth story with accompanying spiritual truth	Mark 4
Apocalyptic	symbolic, predictive visions	Revelation