

INTRODUCTION

A student of English literature who does not know the Bible does not understand a good deal of what is going on in what (s)he reads: the most conscientious student will be continually misconstruing the implications, even the meaning.

—Northrop Frye

Literary scholar Northrop Frye was not a religious man. But because he was an expert in literature, he knew that the Bible was the single most influential library in western culture. He was disappointed by his students at Harvard University and the University of Toronto for their lack of biblical education. While these students were otherwise bright, Frye was unable to discuss the works of English greats like Shakespeare and Blake without also schooling them in what he called “The Great Code.” In other words, you cannot unlock poets like William Blake without a reservoir of prior biblical knowledge.

For many religious folk, the Bible is sacred and holy. It communicates the very words of God Almighty. But aside from matters of religion, every person from every walk of life must know something about the Bible to be culturally relevant. Without an understanding of the Bible, the average person will misunderstand key aspects of Jesus, Mohammed, St. Francis, Michelangelo, Galileo, Dante, Spinoza, Blake, Milton, Shakespeare, Bach, Whitman, Lincoln, Darwin, Malcolm X, Tolkien, Bob Dylan, Stan Lee, Stephen Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino, Kanye West, and J. J. Abrams. This list could go on indefinitely. Add also the numerous ways in which the Bible influences politics, geography, and history. In short, a better understanding the Bible will help westerners better understand their culture, their world, and themselves.

So then, where to begin?

Let’s begin with a very basic definition: the Bible is a collection of ancient texts authored over the course of centuries. These ancient poems, stories, histories, myths, letters, and visions are from times and places quite different from our own. So not only is the Bible a library of books all wrapped into one volume, but these books vary in “genre.” Everyone with a Netflix queue has seen the word *genre*. It is a French loanword that means “kind” or “type.”

Question: What kinds of film do you like best?

Answer: I like Science Fiction, but I also enjoy dark comedies.

This is a question of genre. Genres of film include drama, comedy, action, horror, etc. The same goes for books. In the case of the Bible, we are dealing with several overlapping genres. These include:

Poetry—this can be found in Genesis, Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Malachi, Luke, etc.

Narrative—this can be found in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Judges, 1 Kings, Jonah, Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Acts, etc.

Legal Instruction—this can be found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, etc.

Prophecy—this is can found in Genesis, Numbers, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Daniel, Malachi, Matthew, Mark, Revelation, etc.

Apocalyptic—this can be found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Mark, 2 Peter, Revelation, etc.

Aphorism—this can be found in Proverbs, Matthew, Mark, Luke, etc.

Genealogy—this can be found in Genesis, Numbers, Matthew, Luke, etc.

Letter—this can be found in Romans, Hebrews, 1 Peter, Revelation, etc.

Parable—this is quite a difficult genre to define, but it is most obvious in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

As these examples show, very few biblical books are confined to only one genre. Isaiah is primarily prophetic, but is written in verse in the style of poetry. Jonah is narrative, but shifts to poetry in the middle and then back to narrative. All the while, Jonah has been traditionally thought of as a “minor prophet.” Job is a long poem that tells a story, but the poem is bookended by narrative. Luke is largely a narrative that incorporates short sayings of Jesus (also called aphorisms), but Luke also contains hymns (poetry) and a genealogy. Half of Daniel is narrative and half is apocalyptic/prophesy. The Book of Revelation is apocalyptic/prophesy but also includes short letters.

So biblical genres are numerous and complex. Most folks divide the Bible into the following categories: Old Testament (Law, Prophets, and the other Writings), and New Testament (Gospels and Acts, Letters, and Revelation). While these categories are generally helpful, it is better to recognize the varying genres within these larger sections.

Most of the time, genre is simply implied. If I begin with “Once upon a time . . .” it is implied that what follows will be a fairytale. If I begin with “Today the Associated Press reports . . .” it is implied that what follows is news. If I begin with “So a priest, a rabbi, and a penguin walk into a bar . . .” it is implied that what follows is a joke. Likewise, biblical poems don’t announce themselves by saying, “This is a poem!” They simply begin. The poets of the Bible simply assume that their audiences know how poems work. When Malachi launched his prophetic argument, he assumed that his audience would know how prophecies work. The first step in understanding the Bible is recognizing how different genres function.

In addition to recognizing genre, it is also important to learn how each genre functioned within the various cultures that produced the Bible. It will be important to know a few things about the historical backdrop of the biblical authors. It will often be helpful to explore the peculiarities of the “original” languages. After all, the Bible

was composed in Hebrew, Aramaic (not to be confused with Arabic), and Greek. These languages very rarely allow for a literal word-for-word translation.

My hope is that this guide will unlock a few of these literary and cultural keys as you begin to study the Bible. I trust that in unlocking the sacred texts of the Bible, you will acquire better keys to unlock the many cultural and artistic expressions that require a biblical education. I will go a step further: very few people who read the Bible seriously remain unchanged. Do not be surprised if Bible study leads to personal development. Perhaps you too will learn why so many people have considered the Bible sacred and life-giving.