

H2R P6 - Literary Styles of the Bible

E1 - Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

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Speakers in the audio file:

Jon Collins

Tim Mackie

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: Hey everyone. Before we start this podcast episode, I wanted to give you an announcement. The Bible Project made a beautiful coffee table book that's filled with all of the diagrams from our read scripture series and the scripts to those videos. It's bound together in hardback cloth. It's a big book. It's really well designed. We're very proud of it.

Now here's what we did. We designed this book and then we went and had about 10,000 of them. Not about. We had 10,000 of them printed, and we have those 10,000 reserved for supporters of this project. If you're a supporter, by now you've got an email about how to get one of those.

We are giving those to supporters at cost as a thank you, but now we want to open it up to everyone else and to supporters who wanted more than one. So we're going to do a second print run. We don't know how many to print in the second run. Print runs are kind of expensive.

So we started a Kickstarter, and you can pre-order the coffee table book or two on Kickstarter. These are going to be ready before Christmas, so yeah, order two, give one as a present.

Check out the Kickstarter. It's at go.jointhebibleproject.com/readscripture or you can just find that link in the show notes and it'll send you there to the Kickstarter page. But again, it's go.jointhebibleproject.com/readscripture. Check it out. And now on to the episode.

Hi, this is Jon. In this episode of The Bible Project podcast, I'm going to be having a discussion with Tim about literary genres in the Bible. If you've been paying attention to this project, you know we've been working through a series on our YouTube channel called How to Read the Bible.

The first video in that series was what's in the Bible - What can you expect to find when you open it. The second video was what's the story of the Bible, this unified story that ties everything together?

In this third video and the conversation we're going to have now, we're going to introduce the idea of the Bible using different literary styles to tell his story, namely, narrative, poetry and, prose discourse.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Tim: The big three main types of literature. All of those in the Bible have their own ways of thinking and talking that you have to become accustomed to. Then when you do, the goal is that living in these narratives that you begin to see your life in terms of these narratives. And that when you pray, that this poetry shapes how you talk to God and then hear from God. That's the goal is a lifetime of immersion.

Jon: The Bible is God's words to us, but it's also the literary creation of our fellow humans who are using language in specific ways to open our imagination and teach us things about ourselves about God and about others. Thanks for listening. Here we go.

We are preparing for video on the Bible as ancient literature.

Tim: Yes. Does that sound thrilling?

Jon: Actually, it does. And if it doesn't yet, it will, hopefully. The first video "what is the Bible," what's in it...

Tim: Yeah, what is the Bible, how it come into existence in a nutshell.

Jon: Second video, what's the whole story of the Bible?

Tim: Kind of unifying the whole thing?

Jon: So the whole Bible in five minutes. This one now is taking a step back and going, there's a bunch of different types of literature in the Bible. What does that mean for there to be different types of literature and why should I care?

Tim: It's a unified storyline that unites a small library of books. Then each of those books or even within each book, they're very different types of literature. Each of those requires a different skill set, different set of expectations, a different approach. Not to mention the fact that it's ancient.

Jon: Ancient types of literature.

Tim: Ancient types of literature. So there's adjusting my expectations from page to page, depending on what I'm reading—

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: So it's one unified story but it's composed of many different types of ancient literature. So an analog to that would be like, my body has a bunch of different types of cells but it makes one unified [inaudible 00:04:48]?

Tim: But that's just it. If that's the case, then what it means is becoming a more wise, effective reader of the Scriptures, it means, first of all, learning to appreciate literature and how different styles of literature work. Then second, learning the literature of another culture from another time. That's—

Jon: It's the nature of reading your Bible.

Tim: It's the nature of reading your Bible. It's a cross-culture literary experience.

Jon: I have many times bemoan that fact.

Tim: This is another way of saying in a maybe too fancy way, just describing why the Bible is challenging to read and why it poses so many difficulties for modern readers.

Jon: Why didn't God just give us a matrix upload to the Bible instead of having to learn ancient literature?

Tim: We've joked before. I'm looking at you in the recording room. You're wearing these huge headphones. But I think we've talked before about those UN, United Nation gatherings.

Jon: Gets translated into your language.

Tim: Yeah. Immediately whatever somebody is saying in French, it gets translated.

Jon: Yes, that's what we need.

Tim: That's what we think we would want.

Jon: What I would do is I would open the Bible and I put on the headphones, and as I read it would translate into like modern English. God would be translating.

Tim: Yeah, sure. That's what English readers have. I mean, we have modern translations. But those translations are still filled with a lot of ancient metaphors, weird phrases, figures of speech. This is what modern translations

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

that also paraphrase into modern Western imagery do. Like the New Living Translation, or Eugene Peterson, The Message.

That's a noble task. They're great translations to read for what they are because they get you thinking in your own language and imagery. However—

Jon: Can I stop you?

Tim: Yeah, sure.

Jon: The translations, they'll help you translate from Hebrew or Greek to English but they're not telling you, "Hey, this is the type of literature and why it's important that you know what type of literature."

Tim: Yeah. You have to develop that skill set, whether you're reading I think in the message or the modern literature. Or if you learn Hebrew and Greek, you still have to learn how to adjust your expectations and what to look for in these different types of literature.

Jon: I never learned that growing up in the church. We never talked about that.

Tim: We met in college where we were taking classes.

Jon: And that's the first time totally thinking through literary genre.

Tim: Yeah. It took to go to a college with a dedicated biblical literature department program that we were first exposed to this. But it seems so common sense.

Jon: Right, sure.

Tim: This is my metaphor because I think it might help us organize the conversation and we go on.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Think of what a large grocery store is in modern Western culture. You walk into these huge places and there is a principle of organization.

Jon: Do you know why they put the milk in the back?

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Tim: They do it on purpose. All their fresh stuff, the milk, and the eggs, it's in the back so you have to walk all the way through the store.

Tim: You have to make it past the Doritos.

Jon: You got to cut through an aisle or you got to go all the way around, and then you're in the heart of the store.

Tim: Just to make you buy the ice cream to get to the eggs. I've never thought of that. There you go. These large buildings full of so many individual different items, but there's a clear logic to it and organization. I was just thinking more broadly like they put dairy together and apparently at the back.

They group like with like kind of dairy: milk, yogurt, juice. Produce, fruits and veggies, which they grow out of the ground or plants, but they're really different kinds of plants. Meat, the meat counter. I remember, oh, I was young and it struck me that the bread and the jelly and the peanut butter is all in one aisle.

Jon: Smart.

Tim: Then growing older, when I was a student studying overseas and so on, I realized like, "Oh, that's a very American thing." Peanut butter, jelly, sandwich—

Jon: You into grocery stores in other cultures and it's a wild experience.

Tim: Totally. The peanut butter and jelly sandwich isle is a very unique cultural thing. That's one thing. Second of all, let's say you are going into a new one. You usually go to whatever—

Jon: Fred Meyers.

Tim: Fred Meyers, which is north-west.

Jon: Which is really confusing. The one near me, they've got the organic section where they've got everything and then got the normal—

Tim: Which is a little mini organized universe under itself - the organic section.

Jon: Then they have the rest of everything.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Tim: Totally.

Jon: Literally, there's like three places you could find eggs.

Tim: Or three places you could get yogurt.

Jon: Yeah. It's so confusing.

Tim: Oh, the Fred Meyers by me is like that. But all the same, I love my neighborhood Fred Meyers.

Jon: Totally.

Tim: They're all organized slightly differently. When you go into a new grocery store, what you're looking for, let's say you're looking for snacks to whatever. You're having a movie night with friends, what you're looking for is you're just scanning, going down looking down long ways if you can't see the signs. But really what you are looking for is chips.

And the moment you see Doritos, all these other things light up in your imagination of what's supposed to be in that aisle. So if the Doritos are there, then that's where the salsa is going to be because that's where the tortilla chips are going to be because that's where the seltzer water is going to be, that's where the juice is going to be, that's where pop's going to be.

My point is just once you're familiar enough with how grocery stores works, you just need to see one item and then it will trigger all your expectations of what now to look for in that aisle. The question is, how did you learn all of that? We certainly didn't learn it in school. There was no—

Jon: I am still learning that to date. I don't shop enough. I hate it, man. I get into a store and I'm like, "Kimchi. Where's the kimchi? And then I'll spend a half hour looking.

Tim: I totally understand. That's a good example of being in unfamiliar territory and not knowing where to look for what or what to look for where. But to the trained—

Jon: The person who goes grocery shopping every week.

Tim: Yes, totally. It takes—

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: You just figure it out.

Tim: You just figure it out by actually being in the grocery store. You could think of a million analogies but this is helpful one I think. This is exactly what it's like to encounter the Bible. We're entering into another culture grocery store.

Jon: Whoa, which is crazy.

Tim: It is so overwhelming.

Jon: I remember going to like an Asian grocery store, it's just—

Tim: When I lived in Jerusalem—

Jon: You're like, "What is this?"

Tim: Yeah, going into grocery stores. And it depends. Are you going into Arab Palestinian grocery store or are you going into an Israeli grocery store? It depends because modern Israel's a mishmash of people from all kinds. So is it more like a Russian Israeli or is it the Spanish, Mediterranean? All these different...anyway. Yes.

You go to any city in the US and have a very cross-cultural experience by going to another grocery store.

Jon: Even within different cities.

Tim: Reading the Bible it's like that - I'm convinced of it. So that grocery store has a very intentionally thought out internal organization. When you are in the Mediterranean, whatever, Israeli or the Greek grocery store and you're beginning of an isle and you see tahini, it should trigger all kinds of other things related. "Oh, this is where I'm going to find the pickles, this is where I'm going to find whatever."

Reading the Bible is the same exact way. When I start reading the book of Jeremiah, and the opening scene is kind of narrative and it's kind of poetry, but it's of a prophet being called, and the Prophet starts objecting, like, "Oh, I'm too young. I'm not a very good speaker," then it's like seeing the tahini and you go, "Oh, I know what I'm reading. I'm reading a prophetic call story." And all these other similar types of literature in the Hebrew Bible start lighting up.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: And now you are looking for things.

Tim: Now you're remembering, "Yeah, this is Exodus 3 and 4, the burning bush story. Oh, yeah, this is exactly what happened to Gideon when the angel appeared to him. So it's learning.

When I opened up psalm and the psalm begins, O Lord, hear my cry. Don't be far from me. I'm sinking in the pit," and you're going, "Yep, Psalm 3, Psalm 7, Psalm 13."

Jon: You saw the phrase "hear my cry" and that's like seeing Doritos in the aisle, and you are like, "I'm in that aisle."

Tim: Yeah. The biblical authors had their disposal of a wide variety of different types of literature, different food items, different literary items on the shelf and they're all connected.

Jon: Literary techniques.

Tim: Literary techniques. Really learning to read the Bible is learning to become familiar with this grocery store and how to find things. And then what expectations. The moment that I see the Doritos or that I see the organic eggs versus the normal eggs, all of a sudden I have like a drop-down menu in my head of like, "Okay, look for this, look for this, remember last time you were here, so look here. Let's compare." That's it.

It's becoming acculturated to a different environment that has a very well thought out system of communicating to you. But you just have to spend time in it.

Jon: Then I guess that would mean if it ever is breaking the rules intentionally, that becomes a massive...You're in the snack aisle and there's this little freezer of frozen food and you're like, "That never happens. What's that freezer doing here?"

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Totally. Great example. I was just reading the Book of Ruth this week. Man, everything in the Book of Ruth is keyed into the narratives of the matriarchs in the Book of Genesis. It's all so closely connected.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

It's these birth narratives, this type of narrative in the Old Testament where the family line is in danger. How's it going to get built up? Usually, in Genesis, it's through women of less upstanding character, or who were deceitful and scheming. And through their deceitful and scheming—

Jon: Like Rahab? Oh, she's not a schemer.

Tim: Like Rachel and Leah, they are these Aramean women who get brought in or Tamar who's a prostitute. Rebecca was also Aramean. She's actually pretty bad. Then Ruth is this non-Israelite Moabite woman but messianic line of David.

When you're reading Ruth, and you start reading, and you read about two Israelite sons who died, you start thinking of, "Oh, wait, I remember Genesis 38. Those two Israelite sons, they died too, and then the family line was put in jeopardy."

Anyway, all that to say it's like the Hebrew Bible grocery store. Everything's there and it's all connected and there's a real brilliant internal logic to it all. But it's learning—

Jon: To use an example that's even closer to the Bible is just movies. The movie genres.

Tim: Oh, yes, yes. Perfect.

Jon: Because it's like a rule if there's a gun in scene one, someone's going to shoot it in scene three. That's just kind of a rule. And why is that a rule? No one actually wrote some movie rule. It's just something that happens over and over and over.

If you're really good at watching movies, you understand movies, you see a gun and scene one and then you know something's going to happen in scene three. And if it doesn't, then you're like, "Whoa."

Tim: Dude, I just had this experience on a plane. I had been reading and then I looked up and it was on a Delta flight. They have the screens, you know. And you know, how when you become aware that somebody a couple of screens seats down is watching a movie?

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: Yeah, you kind of watch over their shoulder a little bit.

Tim: And then you kind of watch it because you're like, "I want to read, but it's hard not to watch." Anyway. So he's well into this movie. It was some kind of science fiction. I actually still don't know what it was.

Jon: Because you can't hear it.

Tim: I can't hear it and I'm dropping into the middle of story. I've no concept of what's going on. But it's two really brilliant, shining alien characters. I thought that they were having this close really meaningful conversation - they were animated - I didn't think they were angry with each other, but they were really intense.

Then all of a sudden, it did this cut to a sword lying on the floor at some distance in between them. Then I was like, "Oh, this is the struggle for the weapon story. This is the scene where it's the two finally facing off and there's only one weapon. Who's going to get it?"

Of course, immediately, that's what happened next. It was they were trying to get it and then wrestling, struggling to get to the sword. Then one got the sword and cut the other in half. But it was so funny. Without knowing the scene at first, I thought it was too friendly aliens having a conversation with each other.

Jon: But as soon as they showed the cutaway of the sword, you're like, "I know what aisle I'm in."

Tim: It was half a second, this cutaway to the sword, and I was like, "I know everything that's about to happen." And that's exactly what happened. It's that. You see the gun and you know. You see the sword that they're going to struggle, and then, you know.

Who taught me that? However, many movies I've seen where that exact same technique was used. You've seen the gun in scenes one and three of the movie. You're trained. You become a trained—

Jon: Darren, one of our animators, he's really good at that. He understands movies really well. It actually bumps him out when he's watching a movie and they

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

play their cards too fast and loose and go like, "Okay, I know what's going to happen."

It's like you have to get more subtle in order to get the real movie buff to appreciate what you're doing. You have to get more and more subtle. But you don't abandon the rules, you just get more subtle.

Tim: Yeah, you get more subtle. Then as a reader or a viewer—

Jon: That gets back to the literary genius thing is when you are better and better at the tools at your disposal, you become more subtle, which makes it even harder to appreciate on first glance. Is that true for the Bible, do you think?

Tim: Say that again.

Jon: If you are a really good director, you know movies really well, and you're using all the tropes and all the techniques, but because you're such a genius, you're doing in a way that's more subtle and sophisticated.

Tim: Oh, I see. I see.

Jon: So that means that at a casual viewing you might miss so much of what's happening. But then the deeper you go in, you see more and more and more. That's the genius.

Tim: Of biblical literature or just genius of good art - good literary art.

Jon: The same thing could be said for the literary genius of the Bible I'm imagining.

Tim: Yes, yes, like to the nth degree. That's exactly right. That's a bottomless pit.

Jon: These guys knew what they were doing?

Tim: In the best sense possible.

Jon: That's a metaphor there.

Tim: Now to the point where it's like, "I'm 20 years in." I just realized this September 2017 will mark 20 years since I took my first Hebrew class...

Jon: I like to say decades when I tell people how long you've been in school.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

- Tim: ...and I still feel like I'm scratching the surface of a deep—
- Jon: That's disappointing. You must feel like you're beyond the surface at some point.
- Tim: Well, here's the thing. I was talking with a friend and read this recently—
- Jon: You've taken core samples of the depths of the—
- Tim: The Dead Sea Scrolls. So here's a community of many of whom were disenfranchised priests from Jerusalem. They thought Jerusalem was going to hell in a handbasket so they parachute out and they start this community of prayer and scripture study out in the wilderness. The entry requirement is 10 years of reading and meditation what they called the scroll of meditation.
- Jon: To be in this community?
- Tim: Yeah, 10 years.
- Jon: This sounds like a Buddhist kind of thing. It's like you have to stand at the door.
- Tim: Then once you're shown proficiency, you enter into the life of this community, which is rigorous, rigorous. It functions a lot like ancient monastery where, you know, you wash dishes, you keep the aqueduct going, that kind of thing. But the main thing is your whole life cycle's around these sessions of prayer and scripture study for another two decades.
- Jon: Wow.
- Tim: And this is all in your own language. So this is the kind of culture—
- Jon: Oh, you don't have to learn another language?
- Tim: Yeah. It's all in Hebrew and Aramaic. You already know these languages. But you're spending a decade meditating on—
- Jon: One scroll?
- Tim: Well, it's a shorthand for Psalm 1, the Torah of Yahweh of the God of Israel. The scriptures. It's their shorthand for the scriptures in their Bible.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Jon: So you spent a decade with the Torah?

Tim: Yeah, and you already know Hebrew. And that's the entry requirement to the rest of your life intense study and meditation on the scriptures. This is meditation literature. It's bottomless. Anyway, don't get me going. But the point is, is that there is a whole—

Jon: They appreciated how sophisticated it was.

Tim: Yeah. It's extremely sophisticated. The goal is that you don't understand on your first read through completely. You will never understand and make all the connections. But the purpose is that it's for meditation - a lifetime's worth of meditation.

As you do so, these texts start to mess with you and shape you in really deep and profound ways so that their way of organizing the world starts to become...I think going into this Mediterranean grocery store, the goal is that you start to organize your kitchen like that. So then you organize your tahini and your pickle thing.

Jon: You're organizing the way you view the world through these.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. There are all kinds of little sub-points of literature, like prophetic literature, or parables or, but this video, I just want it to be about the big three main types of literature.

Jon: The big three aisles?

Tim: The big three sections of the grocery store. So it's like produce, nonperishable goods, and then meat and dairy or something. I don't know. It's not going to be a precise analogy.

The three big ones in the Old and New Testaments is narrative, which is 43% of the Bible. It's the vast majority of these narratives. Poetry, just 33% of the Bible. That's over three-quarters of the Bible right there is narrative and poetry. Then prose discourse which accounts for about one-quarter of the Bible, 25%.

All of those in the Bible have their own ways of thinking and talking that you have to become accustomed to. Then when you do, the goal is that living in

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

these narratives, that you begin to see your life in terms of these narratives. And that when you pray that this poetry shapes how you talk to God and then hear from God. And that this pros discourse, the way that you think and reason through decisions and problems and opportunities that it's shaped by biblical discourse. That's the goal is a lifetime of the immersion in biblical narratives, poetry, and discourse.

Then within each of those three are little sub things that we'll explore in future videos.

[00:28:19]

Tim: Here's another way to think about it. Maybe think about it in terms of relationships. I've long quote from CS Lewis here. Think about relationships. The most formative relationships in our lives are people in our lives who are like us. We actually like to accumulate people in our lives who are like us because it's less risky, and their shared interest and so on. But formative relationships tend to be people who, even though they are similar, there's something about them that's really different and it enriches our lives, because of that difference.

This was a point that CS Lewis made about reading literature decades ago. In 1961, he wrote a book called "Experiment in Criticism" - Literary criticism. It's Cambridge University, 1961, but I think he wrote it much earlier than that.

His point here is that reading good literature, biblical literature, or in this case, he's not talking about the Bible, what it does, is it's like bringing new and very different people into your life and learning about the story of their experience so that you begin to see life in a richer way through their experience. Just like going to the grocery store of another—

Jon: It's why people travel as well.

Tim: Yeah, this is why people traveled. Exactly.

Jon: Or it should be. Maybe you just travel and then go to some Americanized store.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Tim: Cross-cultural travel is a horizon-broadening enriching experience. In miniature, that's what forming new relationships with other people is like. It's another culture of that human life and experience.

This is how CS Lewis puts it and why learning how to read new and different kinds of literature is actually a really important way of expanding our humanity. And I've slightly adapted the quote here. I mean, he wrote half a century ago in British idioms.

Jon: You've translated it?

Tim: I have slightly translated to make the English a little more understandable. "People who have been readers all their lives, seldom fully realized the enormous extension of their being, which they owe these authors. We realize it best when we talk with children who haven't lived along or read widely. They're full of goodness, but they inhabit a tiny world.

How sad is the adult who is content to remain in that world? That is the tiny world of their childhood. It's virtually a prison. My own eyes are not enough for me; I must see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many is not enough. I must see what others have invented as well."

In other words, he's saying, "I just don't want to hear the historical experience through the literature of other people." He wants fiction and science fiction. He wants to see alternate realities that are invented.

Then he says this. "I regret that animals cannot write books. Very gladly I would learn what face things present to a mouse."

Jon: What face things present?

Tim: See, I told you, British idioms. "Very gladly would I learned what face things present to a mouse or to a bee."

Jon: What face?

Tim: Face meaning things present themselves to a mouse or to a bee, what face? What do they see?

Jon: What's their worldview?

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

- Tim: Yeah, what's their view of things. "More gladly still, would I perceive the world of smells that is charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog."
- Jon: Totally. Someone just told me how a good way to think about how a dog smells is the way that we perceive colors visually and we can easily distinguish between colors and the nuanced colors, that's how a dog smells. They smell color.
- Tim: Can you imagine?
- Jon: That'd be really great. I guess some winemakers probably would do that too.
- Tim: Lewis regrets that dogs cannot write books about what their experience is.
- Jon: That would help you understand that more.
- Tim: Yeah. This is great. This is a concluding line. He says, "In reading great literature, I become 1,000 humans yet remain myself. Like the night sky in a Greek poem, I see with a myriad eye, but it is still I who see. Here as in worship and love and moral action, and knowing, I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do. So good.
- Jon: Lewis is a good writer.
- Tim: His point is that literature is actually the easiest way to expand our humanity because you are opening yourself to new and different ways of experiencing the world. It's an argument for reading just literature. Of which biblical literature it's one of the most significant shaping collections of literature in human history.
- Jon: I see. So you're saying as a human being, I should already be intensely interested in literature to be transcendent human being, to be someone who is not locked in a small prison by myself?
- Tim: Correct, that's right. Overcoming the cultural gaps and hurdles and reading biblical literature is a very important discipline. It's the same as the discipline of just engaging in healthy relationships with people who are different than me. It's the same exact type of habit.

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

To me, that's such a different way. Well, it's a liberating, inspiring way to think about overcoming the hurdle of reading the Bible.

Jon: It's interesting that in a more modern, industrialized society, the classes and skills that are prioritized are math and science and that kind of stuff. Pretty much more practical. And English class it's kind of like, you know. It's important, but if you go and get an English major, it's like, "Well, good luck on you."

Tim: "Good luck to find a job with that."

Jon: Which is true.

Tim: Yeah, it is true.

Jon: But as far as shaping you as a human, what it seems like Lewis is saying is, is the most important discipline that you can have. Next to relationships with other people and other things, we already know is important to our humanity.

Tim: I totally agree. I mean, I was in school for far too long. Where I got my Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, the fate of the humanities, basically, their budget is - as a state school - constantly, constantly shrinking. Personally, I think that's a very dangerous place for our culture to find itself.

Jon: It's interesting. Man, if you go back and you read all of the early presidential speeches - and I haven't read all of them, but I was forced to read some of them along the way - I remember my mind being blown at how sophisticated...

Jon: How well-read they were.

Tim: I'm just thinking of Lincoln - reading some of Lincoln's speeches. First of all, they're just really logically complex. And they were speeches. Not books, speeches. Then second, how often someone like Lincoln was alluding to literature using phrases drawn from whatever.

It's like what Lewis says here, "how I think about transcendence, how I think about love, relationships, how I think about moral action, what's the right thing to do, how I think about how I know anything." These are all shaped for

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

us by literature, especially by narrative. There's no coincidence that nearly half of the Bible has just straight up narratives.

Jon: Because that's what narrative does too is it shapes those categories.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Let's just dive into each of the three of these. I have some quotes and interesting things about biblical narratives, biblical poetry, and biblical discourse.

Jon: Let's dive into all three. I just want to try to verbalize something. I'm trying to connect them. So literature is important but then the next step is to say, "Well, if the Bible is God's Word to us, then is really important literature so it should be at the top of the pile for us, even though it's a different language.

Tim: Meditation literature.

Jon: It should shape us more than any other literature if you follow Jesus.

Tim: And it has shaped our culture's literature more than any other literature.

Jon: Even if you don't follow Jesus, just to understand Western culture. But the other thought was, I was bemoaning the fact that it's so much work and then wish we had these UN headphones.

But seems like you take this quote from Lewis and you think about how literature shapes you as you interact with it. And that's a very active participatory process. But if you were just a passive listener through UN headphones, it wouldn't be working on you in the same way that the actual exploration...I think you use the phrase "it does stuff to you." "It works on you." Maybe that's the value of it being hard work.

Tim: Yes, that's right. Literature, in general, is usually not easy to read - good literature. It's participatory. It's a great way of putting it. Biblical narrative and poetry, which is over three-quarters of the Bible, it's participatory. The narratives are not...their meaning is not self-evident. You know what I mean?

Page one raises a million questions. Page two, Garden of Eden. Page three, a talking snake. So we get frustrated because we think a good narrative ought to just get to the point. And we're short-circuiting the very heartbeat of other things, which is to draw you in to an experience and actually it's teaching you

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how to read and how to think, and how to ask questions. Doing so, you are developing the skills of doing that with your own life.

So you run into a snake on a hike or whatever, you have a random thing happen in your day that weirds you out as much as reading about a talking snake. But you...

Jon: You make the connection?

Tim: ...you began to learn how to ask questions of your own life as you're asking questions of these texts. They're training us as being humans. That's what literature does, and that's what biblical literature does as with ninja type skills.

[00:40:16]

Jon: We're going to do the big three.

Tim: Yeah, big three: narrative, poetry, and prose discourse.

Jon: And the narrative is 43% of the Bible.

Tim: Like 43% of the Bible. It's enormous.

Jon: Nearly half. And by narrative, you mean story?

Tim: By narrative, I mean people - more than one person - in a place or multiple places.

Jon: It can't be one person?

Tim: No, no. If it's one person...I'm sorry. Let's start very basic. A person in a place doing something that generates conflict that escalates and that must be resolved. Usually, conflict requires another person so that the conflict is between two people.

Jon: There's the story of the guy has just chopped off his arm or his leg because he gets stuck in the wilderness.

Tim: Oh, yeah, totally. Hundred and something hours. I was thinking of "Cast Away." There, the two characters are Tom Hanks and the island. The island is

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the other character. presenting all the obstacles. The setting, the place is a character in that story, which is often the case in the biblical narrative too.

So you have character, setting, and a plot. Character is a person or two people in a place or places.

Jon: The reason why you say characters is because anytime something brings enough conflict for you, no matter what it is, even if it's an inanimate object, it becomes a character at that point?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. What makes stories interesting is watching somebody who we identify with facing a challenge in a setting that they then have to overcome or find resolution to. There you go.

So why is it that very basic structure of communication - first of all, is nearly half of the Bible - but why is it that it's actually the most universal form of human communication?

Jon: Because it's how we experience the world?

Tim: That's exactly right. I've a great quote from a former teacher both of us, Ray Lubeck, from his excellent introduction to reading biblical literature called "Read the Bible for a Change." There's another great book on biblical just called "Reading the Bible for All It's Worth."

Ray Lubeck, "Read the Bible for a Change." "Recent research suggests that our brains are actually hardwired for narratives. Neurobiologist, Mark Turner argues that 'story is the basic principle of how the human mind works. Most of our experience, most of our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as a set of stories.'"

Lubeck goes on. "Narrative structure is essential, not only for effective communication but for thinking itself. When children asked to hear a story it's not simply a biological craving for amusement, or demand for attention." Which it might also be, but it's not simply that is his point."

He goes on. "It arises out of a genuine human need to make sense of the disparate experiences of our lives. And that need is addressed and storytelling. Through stories, we learn how to see patterns, we learn about cause and effect, we learn how to discover the consequences of our choices,

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

our sense of right and wrong and of what is most important or least valuable in life. All of these are shaped for us by the stories we hear, and then live."

So yes, there's no coincidence that both smaller stories all unified together into a mega-story is the Bible's basic way of communicating. From the first page to the last page, literally, it's "in the beginning" to "forever and ever." Then within that mega story that unifies itself around Jesus is hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of little mini-plots and stories.

Jon: Through stories, we learn how to see patterns, cause and effect, consequences of our choices. I've thought of it as a type of virtual reality that you get to experience. Then Daniel Taylor, that book - what's that book?

Tim: "The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist" by Daniel Taylor. So good.

Jon: There's a bunch of little essays. In one of them, he makes the observation that the reason that we love story so much is that we actually crave something more than story. We're craving something deeper that story is actually kind of scratching that itch. There's a deeper itch.

He calls that itch, basically, explain to me what's going on? why I'm here? what this is all about. It's the why. If you really step back and think about it, we're on a planet floating through the universe. We're in a space rock.

Tim: We're in space rock floating around a hot ball of gas connected to a whole network of other hot balls of gas that are themselves floating around, "What is happening here?"

Jon: What am I doing here and why do I have these thoughts that I have and these emotions that I get? Why does that irritate me, and that excites me? What is this urge? What is all this?"

Tim: "How do I organize all of this to make sense? How do I make sense?"

Jon: And that's the itch that story scratches.

Tim: Yes. Man, we're just referencing books. This is in the notes here. After the quote from Ray Lubeck, a really helpful informative book for me in college

Literary Styles of the Bible E1 – Literary Genres & the Stories We Tell Ourselves

that Ray Lubeck introduced me to was about worldview formation - how we learn how to make sense.

It's kind of philosophy of Christian worldview but really, it's stepping back and looking at all the religious or non-religious cultures of our world, and saying that if every coherent claim about life having meaning or purpose, whether it's religious or nonreligious, is grounded in some fundamental narrative about the world. A way of telling the story of the people on the space rock to give it meaning. And they organize it in terms of questions.

So where are we? What is real in the world? Where do we find ourselves? That's setting. Who are we? What is the nature and purpose of human beings? Characters. What's wrong? Like, what is wrong with the world? If we think there's something wrong, what is that's wrong and how do we account for that? That's plot conflict.

What's the solution? Is there any hope that things could change or be better? That's the resolution of the plot? Then there's what time is it? Where in that story am I located? Where in the story of plot conflict to resolution, at what point am I at in that story? That's the narrative time or the plot time.

So character Plot Setting, and then conflict resolution, whether it's Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism, atheism, agnosticism, they all have to provide these basic coordinates to provide an account for the world. You can't live as a human being without having one of these. You might not explicitly live by one of these stories, but you are implicitly unconsciously living by some story that's been provided for you or that you've chosen

Jon: Also, I've been told or have read, I don't know, that we're able to live with conflicting stories. So within yourself, you can have two different types of narratives that are actually in conflict, but you're able to keep moving forward. You feel the tension, but it's not a deal breaker for you. And if someone pointed out you, you'd be like, "Oh, yeah, that doesn't add up."

Tim: I think that's exactly where many religious people in modern West find themselves.

Jon: Oh, the cross stream?

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Tim: The cross-pressured. Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher really important book called "The Secular Age," he talks about the situation of, of Western culture is of cross-pressured where even religious people have to choose to believe. For many, or most people—

Jon: Which wasn't always the case.

Tim: Wasn't always the case. 500 years ago, the default category was believing in God and supernatural.

Jon: You didn't have an alternative story.

Tim: And it was compelling. It was actually seemed irrational and ridiculous not to believe in God and so on. Now, his point is that the secular age, the rise of modern secular age is not that you have lots of people who now don't believe all that. It's not about belief versus disbelief.

His point is that it's an age where everyone is uncertain about what is ultimately true. So even if you do believe, you're aware that there are other rival worldviews, at least even if you don't believe them, you know that they're coherent, and you know that rational, reasonable thinking people hold those views.

Jon: And even inside yourself. That's why Daniel Tylor calls it "his inner atheists."

Tim: Even though he's a Christian, he has an inner atheist. That's exactly it. To bring us back to narratives, yeah, I think in the modern West, religious people find themselves with rival narratives.

Jon: And we're balancing and we're trying to figure out how they work together.

Tim: Which is why you could argue there's never a more important time to develop the habit of immersing ourselves in the biblical narrative. Well, just to say, if I'm going to believe in the story of Jesus, I'm going to have to actively, consciously cultivate that belief. It's not going to feel like a default for me.

Jon: Because the default stories are going to be a different story.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: The modern secular or whatever it is, capitalistic or consumeristic—

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Tim: In America, it's totally bound up with capitalism and former democracy.

Jon: It's totally depend on where you are.

Tim: The point is we have many voices claiming and exerting pressure on us.

Jon: It's a unique time in history where you have to choose "which story am I going to lean into the most?" And you can't just pretend that these other stories aren't pressuring you, you're being cross-pressured.

Tim: Totally, yeah. We will live out a story. And the question is—

Jon: Do you think everyone experiences that?

Tim: No, no. I don't think everyone experiences that on a conscious level.

Jon: Does it become an existential angst for everyone?

Tim: But not everybody's temperament is...

[crosstalk 00:52:10]

Jon: I think it becomes a temperament thing sometimes.

Tim: Yeah, totally. But everybody on a practical level is making choices based on a value system. And those values are shaped by a sense of who am I, where am I, what's the problem, and what's the solution to those problems?

Jon: There's a way I like to think of these. It's a little bit different. I'm curious what your thoughts are. Where are we: setting. That's the same. Who are we, you have it done here, what is the nature of the purpose of being humans? I'm wondering if you could just boil it all down to desire.

Who am I? Why do I want this and also want this? It's just every day I wake up with certain desires, the ebb and flow. That seems to be kind of if you boil down to myself in a way. And then, what's wrong? When my desire encounters resistance, that's conflict. Almost any conflicts you could boil down to desire encountering resistance.

Tim: Here's what's so fascinating. In terms of ancient literature - there's lots of ancient literature from the time of the Bible that's even way older than the

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Bible - nothing like the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible has come out of the ancient world.

Their story about ancient Gilgamesh. Epic. It's a whole story about a guy wanting to live forever to overcome his mortality. Well, there are ancient stories of the Egyptians about the afterlife, the Book of Dead and these kinds of things. But the size and complexity and sophistication of a huge thing like the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, it's totally unparalleled in terms of emerging out of the ancient world.

The whole story begins with a conflict for human desire and then our human desire to know and to have power.

Jon: Which is two basic desires to know and have power.

Tim: To know and to be able to influence and have power over others and over...

[crosstalk 00:54:16]

Jon: There are a very strong power desires that we deal with. Then there are others. To be known is a desire.

Tim: To me it's just fascinating that the story is set it's not about the afterlife. That's the Egyptian focus. It's not about overcoming death as such. It's about a desire to know and then a desire to have power over my environment.

Jon: It's very basic desire.

Tim: Every worldview on offer today has to have some version of telling that story.

Jon: What do you do with that desire and what do you do when that desire encounters resistance?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: That phrase "what happens when desire encounters with resistance" to me is story. It's character. Then the resistance is the conflict. Then the what happens, that's the resolution or the narrative itself.

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Tim: There you go. These are all big, high-level reflections, but it's very intentional that the majority of the Bible is this kind of narrative. We mistake the Bible for moral instruction literature - fancy word is didactic.

I think you can see now why that is such a—

Jon: About 80% of preaching is taking that and then breaking it down into three points so that you can remember them.

Tim: Yeah, totally. We domesticate and diminish biblical literature when we...I mean, most of these stories are full of people you never want to be like.

Jon: And might not even want to run into on the street.

Tim: Or they are full people who are just a mixed bag just like me. So there's a realism there. Now, it does instruct. That's what the word "Torah" means: instruction or teaching. It does instruct you but on a way deeper level.

Jon: The way that stories are instructed.

Tim: The way that stories shape you, so that they're formative stories.

Jon: I've tried to explain this concept before of the knife versus the sun. I feel like didactic literature is like a knife. It's decisive, it cuts through, it can segment things.

Tim: "Jimmy stole cookies; he got grounded." And you walk away from that story going, "Oh, I shouldn't steal cookies."

Jon: Or just a list of like, "Here are the things you can't do. Don't steal the cookies. Always wash your hands after you pee." That's very clear quick. Like a knife cutting through, very quick. But the way that you form a star is a slow burning that has to take a lot of time and a lot of friction and a lot of tension and heat.

At the end of the day, what's more powerful? A sun or sharp knife. Well, the sun's just going to just work just over that knife, but it takes time and tension and pressure. And that's to me kind of the difference between story and law.

Tim: That's good. You just in a way, summarized Psalm 19. "Opens up the heavens declare God's glory. God's importance substance. Then the whole thing is

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about the sun. God in the heavens, God pitch a tent for the sun like a champion running its course, rising from one end. It covers all of creation. Nothing escapes its heat.

Then the second half of the poem is about the Torah. The instruction of God, it's perfect. It illumines the simple.

Jon: So thinking of it like the sun.

Tim: Yeah, it's comparing the way the sun is in the world with what Hebrew Bible is. It illuminates. They give joy...In Hebrew....You have to go through it. Our English translations sometimes don't make fully clear the almost all the verbs in Psalm 19 talking about the scriptures have something to do with light or heat as metaphors. So to illuminate, to give joy, means to give lightness to. They illuminate the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, which means bright. So it's like the sun.

Jon: The sun. The Torah is like the sun.

Tim: Anyway, what's what came to me. It's totally cool. Biblical narrative it's unbelievable, and it makes sense why there's so much of it in the Bible.

Jon: Thanks for listening to The Bible Project podcast. We're going to continue this series and discuss in detail the three different types of literary styles, the big buckets, narrative, poetry, and discord, and how the Bible uses each of those as tools to tell one unified story that leads to Jesus.

We have a video coming out soon that will explain all this quickly and visually. It's going to be really great. Thanks to all of you who listen to this podcast and thank you to those of you who support this project. We are thrilled to be working on it and we couldn't do it without you. You can learn more about our project at thebibleproject.com. Thanks for being a part of this with us.