

# H2R P7- Literary Styles in the Bible

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## **E2 - Poetry, Narrative & Prose Discourse**

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### Speakers in the audio file:

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## E2 - Poetry, Narrative & Prose Discourse

Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. Today on the podcast, we're going to continue our conversation in the series on How to Read the Bible. If you're like me, the Bible can get really intimidating and even confusing. And one reason is because there are different styles of writing in the Bible.

In this episode, Tim and I are going to talk about three main types of literary styles in the Bible: Poetry, narrative and prose discourse. And of the three, perhaps the hardest one is poetry, yet, poetry in the Bible is really important.

Tim: One of three chapters in the Bible is not trying to communicate content or information to you. It's rather trying to create an experience that shapes how you feel and how you think. That's remarkable to me. A third of the Bible is this kind of literature.

Jon: In this episode, we break down some examples of biblical poetry, narrative and discourse and we talked about their differences. Here we go

33% of the Bible. That's a really clean number there.

Tim: Forget what the decimal's for when I did my...I did by chapters. Did I write it in these notes? I have it somewhere in my notes. Here it is. 502 chapters in the Bible are narrative, 387 are poetry.

Jon: Now, it's not always that clean. A chapter can have both.

Tim: That's true. I tried to round up because there are many poems that are embedded in stories, in which case, that's the narrative chapter. I didn't count it as a poetry.

Jon: Oh, so poetry actually has a little bit more—

Tim: Probably poetry, yeah. But some poems embedded in narratives are whole chapters. So yeah.

Jon: You would count that as a poetry chapter?

Tim: Yeah. There's probably another dozen to 15 chapters' worth of poetry embedded in small poems in either Paul's letters, he quotes a number of poems, or in other narratives. So yeah, it's probably more like 35%, maybe 36%.

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Here's the thing with poetry. This is like the Dead Poets Society. You can begin with a definition.

Jon: Let me put that on my list to watch again.

Tim: Remember when he's drawing on the board? They have somebody read from this classic introduction to the poetry and he's drawing a chart. He's drawing a chart and he talks about it, and then he's like, "Everyone...."

[crosstalk 00:02:49]

Jon: And everyone's like, "Ahh."

Tim: Here's the thing. We could read the Encyclopedia Britannica definition of poetry, we could read a sentence from one of the classic introductions to poetry by Lawrence Perrine, or we could read just an example, one of my favorite examples of the uniqueness of poetry in biblical literature. Do you might start with the example or start with the definition?

Jon: The example. Like an actual poem.

Tim: The example is actually reading a narrative that's told in the Bible. Then right after it is told, a poetic retelling of the narrative you just read. So you can see very clearly how narrative and poetry work differently.

So Exodus chapter 14, classic story. It's where the Israelites walk through the sea as on dry land and Pharaoh's destroyed.

Jon: This is the narrative?

Tim: This is the narrative. "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea all that night. The Lord drove back the sea with a strong east ruach, wind and turned it to dry land." All that language is echoing Genesis chapter 1. "And the waters were divided, the Israelites went through the sea as on dry ground with a wall of water on the right and on their left.

The LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak, the sea went back to its place.

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The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived." Epic scene.

Jon: So that's the character of Moses and the Israelites. The setting is the sea.

Tim: The sea of reeds.

Jon: The sea of the reeds on the way into the wilderness. The other character is Pharaoh and

his army.

Tim: The conflict is the Egyptians led by Pharaoh want to destroy the slaves that they just let go.

Jon: So they are off to go get them.

Tim: Through Moses, God fights on Israel's behalf and all Moses—

[crosstalk 00:05:09]

Jon: By taming the sea?

Tim: By taming the waters. Making the waters to [split? 00:05:13] just as they did in Genesis 1.

Jon: And then the resolution is Pharaoh gets ripped over.

Tim: So you walk away from the story going, "God's Creator of all things, and He's on a mission to defeat evil and rescue the helpless." That's the story.

Jon: All right.

Tim: All right. You turn the page to Exodus 15 and the Israelites sing the first worship song in the Bible. I've just excerpted these two sections that retell the story we just read. It opens with "The LORD is my strength and my song. He is my God; I will praise him. He's highly exalted." It goes on verse 4.

"Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the sea. The deep waters covered them;

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they sank to the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O LORD, majestic in power, your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.

By the blast of your nostrils waters pile up. The surging waters were like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea. You blew with your breath. The sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. So epic.

Some interesting things to contrast. It opens up "Pharaoh's chariots and his army hurled into the sea." That's a very different image than what we got in the story.

Jon: Right.

Tim: You do get the water standing, congealing like a wall later in the poem but in this first line, it just looks like God picked them up and just threw them into the water.

Jon: But when he says, "The deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea," it evokes more emotion for me than when he says just—

Tim: The narrative is a little clinical. It's just like, "And the waters parted and they stood up like a wall on the right and left."

Jon: I guess narrative can use poetic tons of phrases and stuff all the time.

Tim: All the time.

Jon: One observation is that the poetry actually made me feel like I was there more than the narrative.

Tim: Oh, interesting. Yes. It evoked your imagination more than the story?

Jon: Yeah, it did. And it might have just been the way the story is written - you said it's clinical, it is a little more clinical - because a good storytelling can do the same thing.

Tim: That's true.

Jon: But I mean, the blasting of his nostrils, pile up the water.

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Tim: Blast of your nostrils, you blew your breath. In the narrative, the description is, "the Lord drove the sea back with a strong wind." It's same word "breath" or "wind." Ruach. And it's God doing it. But nostrils and blowing?

Jon: It's connecting more ideas. So poetry—

Tim: Here. There's one more.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Whose hand is most important in the narrative?

Jon: Moses'.

Tim: Moses stretched out his hand. Then God says, "Stretch out your hand." And Moses stretched out his hand. So three times Moses' his hand is the key thing shaping the flow of the narrative. In the poem, it's God's hand. "Your right hands, O Lord. Your right hand."

Actually, the poem never even mentions Moses. In the poem, only God is the actor through his hand and his nostrils, and his mouth. In the poem, Moses is the main actor at the Lord command. Sorry. In the narrative, Moses is the main actor.

So that's the difference there, that the poem also is a level of theological reflection, where—

Jon: What did this mean?

Tim: If you were there, what you would see is what the narrative tells you. The poem steps back and uses metaphor "God has big nostrils." It's also interpreting the event in a really reflective way that Moses' hand was like God's hand. All of the vivid imagery of them sinking, the soldiers sinking, drowning—

Jon: The weightiness of - he's calling them lead.

Tim: Yeah, they sink like lead and like rocks. There we go. That's good. You get the experience. So what just happened?

Jon: Well, it seems like the poem was like, I'm not worried about making sure that the character...I don't know. That's the thing is like poems and stories, there's

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definitely an overlap. Like if you drew the Venn diagram, you could have right there in the middle this very poetic storytelling.

Tim: We're reflecting on the memory of an event or of an experience.

Jon: Because there's other poems that are so abstract that it gives you feelings and emotions and it might conjure up ideas.

Tim: Okay, sure. So that would be poems that aren't reflecting on a story. In this case, this one is.

Jon: This one it is. It is it seems like kind of in the middle. This poem has a storytelling—

Tim: It's a poetic retelling of a memory. That's right. In this case, this is why it's a good example because the poem's anchored in something that seems more familiar. So it's not like abstract poetry. But the techniques and the mode of communication is fully poetic.

Jon: The elements of story are there, but what else does it have that makes us think, "Oh, this is more poetry"? And that seems to be its loose structure. It's not really worried about sequence this much.

Tim: Yeah, sure, it's not about sequence. You mentioned your imagination was more ignited?

Jon: Yeah. And I think that's because much more liberal use of metaphor, which is making me connect the ideas that I either haven't connected before or that has helped me see maybe I have but it just is planting that idea right in front of me.

Tim: So ignited your imagination through its use of metaphors that you wouldn't have thought of. Like you'd never read the narrative and go, "Oh, God blasted with his nose." And then, emotion. You felt something when you think of God blasting with his nose breath?

Jon: Right. Or just the example of the wall of water. To me, that's the most magnificent image in the story is...Where is it in the story?

Tim: The waters congealing.

Jon: But where is it in the actual story?

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Tim: Verse 22. "A wall of water on their right and left." That's it.

Jon: Wall of water on their right and left. That's an amazing image.

Tim: Yeah, it is actually. It is.

Jon: That's an intense image. When I read it in the story, I'm like, "Whoa, that's intense." But then when I get into the poem, and it says, "The surging water stood up like a wall," now it's actually making the waters - What's the word? Anthropomorphizing the waters. The water stood up. The surging water stood up. So it's like giving the waters more of a character.

Tim: Yeah, or animating them.

Jon: Animating them. It wasn't just a wall. It was a wall that congealed in the heart sea. So I'm picturing the wall now and it is just as intense, but now there is even more emotion to it.

Tim: Yeah. It's like when Jell-O cool.

Jon: Congeal. What's the Hebrew word there?

Tim: It's a unique one.

Jon: It must be for them to use such a unique English word.

Tim: Qapha' [SP] from qapha. To thicken, condense or congeal. It's used here. It's used one time in Zephaniah when he talks about wine that's left to sit for too long.

Jon: It congeals

Tim: It gets all like thickens and gross. God says, "I'm going to search Jerusalem with lamps and bring justice on those who are complacent who are left like wine that congeals."

Jon: Does wine do that? Wine thickens if you leave it out?

Tim: Apparently. Maybe how they made wine. Then Job asks God, "Don't pour me out like milk. Don't congeal me like cheese." Oh, so that's like cheese coagulating from—

Jon: Coagulation.



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Tim: That's it. Those are the three times the word occurs in the Bible. Anyway.

Jon: That's amazing. Like Jell-O.

Tim: Yeah, hardening like Jell-O. Okay, all right. Let's back up. Let's allow Encyclopedia Britannica to give us a scientific definition of what just happened.

Jon: Oh, can I say one more thing that I noticed?

Tim: Yes, please.

Jon: The cadence.

Tim: Oh, yeah, yeah. Totally. That's very important.

Jon: There's a rhythm to it. I don't know why that's significant, but all poetry seems to have that.

Tim: Different cultures have different types of rhythmic structures, and a lot of the English European tradition have rhyme. Rhyming is way to do that. Not really a feature of Hebrew poetry, but Hebrew poetry definitely has a very intentional kind of structure to it. Itself communicate.

It's called parallelism, where basically you create little pairs, sometimes triads, most often pairs, where you pair two things and either you create them in a sequence, or you are saying the same thing twice. There's a whole variety of ways you can use it. But it creates a structure. Pharaoh's chariots and army hurled in the sea. Best of Pharaoh's officers drown in the sea. Deep waters covered them, they sank to the depths like a stone.

Jon: It's saying the same thing three times in a row. Three different ways.

Tim: Yeah, totally. "Your right hand, O Lord, majestic in power." "Your right hand, O LORD, shattering the enemy." That's a good example where you just said one thing. But "majestic in power" "shattering the enemy" are two very different things and you want to say both.

Jon: I remember learning this. Instead of rhyming sounds, they rhyme concepts.

Tim: Yeah. Then it gets you to pair or bounce off of each other two things that you wouldn't have thought. "Surging waters standing up like a wall" is paired with

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"deep waters congealing like jello." And you think, "Oh, how the walls become..." You know, it ignites your imagination. Then you're thinking about these two walls made out of jello.

Jon: Jellowy water.

Tim: Okay, perfect. Perfect. This is from Lawrence Perrin it's one of the classic Western introductions to poetry called Sound and Sense. He says. "Poetry is the kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language." It's not a not very technical description but I like it.

It says more and says it more intensely than normal language. So normal language says, the sea blows with the waters, they parted into a wall.

Jon: There's a wall in left and right.

Tim: Yeah. You are saying more by calling the "surging waters standing up like a wall" "deep waters congealing." Just right there you're saying more and you're saying it more intensely. With the pairing of "standing up like a wall" and "jello congealing waters," now your imagination is set loose to create more meaning than any of those words would do by themselves.

That's what poetry does. It's a condensed form of language that uses and pairs new images, metaphors, ideas, and then you, the reader are set free to go on your own experience now. It's participation. Just like stories force you to participate, poetry forces you to participate through your imagination and through your emotions.

So poetry has this main aim to affect how you feel and how you daydream, you could say. Its primary goal is not to communicate information. This is a big hang up, I think, especially more Western religious traditions have is because we think, again, of the Bible as primarily moral instruction literature.

The fact that a third of it is poetry - and it shapes you and it affects how you think even morally - but its primary goal isn't to tell you what to do. Its goal is to set loose your imagination and make you feel.

Jon: This has reminded me of a poem actually. Have you heard of Billy Collins? He's poet.

Tim: Talk to me.

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Jon: He's a very accessible poet. He's got this poem called "Introduction to poetry." I want to read it. He's an also an instructor.

"I ask them to take a poem

and hold it up to the light

like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem

and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room

and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski

across the surface of a poem

waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do

is tie the poem to a chair with rope

and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose

to find out what it really means.

Tim: Wow, that's really good.

Jon: Yeah, it's good. Huh?

Tim: Whoa. What is that? Billy Collins?

Jon: Billy Collins "Introduction to Poetry."

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Tim: I'm just going to put that in for future lectures. That's awesome.

Jon: His poems are amazing. It's like the only poetry I've ever read recently that I just get absorbed in it. His poems are great.

Tim: Couple of things. I have two quotes down in the notes. One is, poetry is this a surprising form of language. This is from Thomas Long, who actually wrote a book called "Preaching from the Literary Forms of the Bible."

It's actually a whole book for pastors and teachers, helping giving you ideas for how you when you preach from the different kinds of literature from the Bible, you should preach in a totally different way. Like you shouldn't actually preach or teach from a poem with the same approach as a narrative. Poem isn't trying to communicate information; so don't teach it the same way you would teach Romans...

[crosstalk 00:20:35]

Tim: Yeah, totally. He has this great line where he says, "Poetry works to disrupt the customary ways in which we use language. Poetry stretches the ordinary uses of words and places them into unfamiliar relationships with each other, thereby, cutting fresh paths across the well-worn grooves of everyday language." He just did it in this sentence. Then what you just read, the Billy Collins is exactly waterskiing across the poem.

Jon: Put your ear up to the hive of the poem.

Tim: Yeah, totally. It's that.

Jon: That image is so intense to me because beehives are so —

Tim: You would never do that.

Jon: Yeah, you would never do that.

Tim: They're like alive with frenetic dangerous energy. And he's saying that's what a good poem is.

Jon: And to interact with the poem you've got to put your ear up to it. Sticks with you.

Tim: It's using language in surprising...The surging water stood up."

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Jon: Surprising. Waters don't stand.

Tim: Oceans don't congeal like jello, but in Exodus 15 they do. Just pause. I almost don't want to read the Encyclopedia Britannica definition because it's so sterile.

Jon: It's so clinical.

Tim: But it's interesting. Okay, I'll just read it. It's a long run on sentence. To me, it's actually so ironic that this is the definition of poetry. "It's a kind of literature that evokes a concentrated, imaginative awareness of one's experience or emotions by means of well-crafted language that is chosen for its meaning, sound and rhythm."

Jon: That's not bad.

Tim: No, it's not too bad. It's just a long, complicated sentence. There are three things. It evokes a concentrated, imaginative awareness. So concentrated—

Jon: It does more with less.

Tim: It does more with less and it's an imaginative awareness. You go inside your mind and start painting pictures. What are you aware of in that concentrated imaginative way of your experience and your emotions? And how do poetry do that? Through well-crafted language that is chosen for its meaning, which is also true in narrative, and also true in a good essay, but also for its sound and for its rhythm.

The sound and rhythm communicate things that are really intangible but they communicate things as the poem did there. The famous example of this is Lewis Carroll. I actually don't know that much about Lewis Carroll.

Jon: Me neither.

Tim: He was a British English author, writer. He wrote "Alice in Wonderland."

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Then "Through the Looking Glass." But he wrote this famous poem called "Jabberwocky."

Jon: Oh, yeah, Jabberwocky.

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- Tim: And the "Hunting of the Snark."
- Jon: And he just uses this nonsense language, right?
- Tim: Yeah, yeah. The whole thing about Jabberwocky was using non-existing words.
- Jon: And the sounds carry the meaning?
- Tim: And the sounds carry the meaning and the rhythm of it. This is the opening line.
- Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.
- Jon: Wow. I pictured a meadow - kind of a dark meadow.
- Tim: That's the brillig. Oh, no. The wabe.
- Jon: The wabe?
- Tim: Yeah. And what's going on in the meadow?
- Jon: I mean, just like the wind's going through this maybe mist and just like—
- Tim: The slithy toves.
- Jon: There are these creatures in the meadow. It's kind of a swampy meadow.
- Tim: Yeah. It was all mimsy. But then the mome raths outgrabe. It's the beginning of plot conflict something.
- Jon: It's amazing.
- Tim: It's complete nonsense, but it communicates through rhythm and sound.
- Jon: That's cool.

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Tim: Then, once you're using words that you do understand in freshman. There you go. There you go. That's poetry. Poetry is amazing and I don't read enough of it. I'm actually disciplined this year; I'm going to—

Jon: Grab some Billy Collins.

Tim: That's good. I was going purchase TS Eliot, "The Four Loves," which I've heard is one of the most bottomless modern poems.

Jon: I should do that too.

Tim: What's funny is that it's the easiest thing to not do before bed or something. It's like the last thing. Because it's not functional—

Jon: And it's hard sometimes - oftentimes.

Tim: But I've found we've done a couple times recently where the last thing we do before turning out the light is reading a poem aloud.

Jon: Oh, cool.

Tim: I always go to bed with the full imagination.

Jon: I've also wanted to memorize poetry but never have.

Tim: Seemed noble. You want to be the kind of person that memorizes poetry?

Jon: Yeah. This is my ideal self is someone who has a lot of poems memorized. That's my ideal self.

Tim: So let's stop and just maybe land the plane on this one, and just say, a third of the Bible is this kind of literature.

Jon: That's crazy. One out of three sentences in the Bible. Or one out of three chapters.

Tim: One of the three chapters in the Bible is not trying to communicate content or information to you. It's rather trying to create an experience that shapes how you feel and how you think. That's remarkable to me.

The poems reflect on all kinds of concrete events sometimes. The book of Lamentation it's all about the fall of Jerusalem and—

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Jon: What if a third of the sermons you heard were poetic sermons?

Tim: Yeah. Very good question.

Jon: That to me, going back to the son versus the knife. We like to use the knife as a tool. It's easier to handle and it's quick and it's decisive.

Tim: It gets things done in very efficient way.

Jon: If I want to change people's behavior, I grab my knife, and I say, "Here's what this means. Here's what you should do. Here's how you should change the way you think."

Tim: And the scriptures are likened to a knife. Like in Hebrews, double-edged knife.

Jon: You need that.

Tim: You need that. That's right.

[crosstalk 00:27:34]

Jon: But then a third of the time you probably need to just sit in it and let it just put your ear up to the hive. What would that look like? I think most people would walk out of that Sunday service going like, "Well, that was weird."

Tim: But that one part was really interesting.

Jon: And yeah, but that sticks in you.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Okay. I think we landed the plane.

Tim: Yeah, on that one.

[00:28:20]

Tim: The last part of the bookstore in our biblical bookstore video.

Jon: The corner of the bookstore.

Tim: The corner because it's only one quarter.



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Jon: It's only one quarter.

Tim: One-quarter of it. 24% of the Bible is prose discourse.

Jon: To go back to the grocery store thing, that's where we should put the discourse in the back so you have to walk through the rest of the store. You come in for the discourse, but you have to walk through the poetry aisle to get there.

Tim: That's actually kind of how the Bible is organized if you start on page 1 and if you start on page 1 of the New Testament. Anyway. So with prose discourse, that may not be a quiet prose. In American terminology - I don't know what is in British - prose discourse is not nonfiction. We call this nonfiction in our culture. It's not narrative. It's not literature. We call it. literature. It's not poetry. It's essays.

Jon: And articles.

Tim: Yeah. You feel like you're hearing someone give a speech, a little mini-speech or a little essay embodied form.

Jon: It's the quickest way to convey information.

Tim: Yeah. It has two main goals, typically. Usually, it's to get your listener to do something and you persuade them by a set of arguments or set of facts that you arrange as an argument to persuade them to do something.

Actually, that's a really important part is that even prose discourse, the main purpose isn't just to give you information. Still, it's to get you to do something, to persuade you that you need to make certain kinds of choices. And it'll do that by engaging your intellect, engaging your reason, your rational capabilities. If this is the case and if this is the case, and because of that these things follow. And in light of all of this, therefore, you should do X, Y, and Z.

That kind of staged sequential, linear process of thought and reasoning leading to rational outcomes and decisions, that's a very specific way that our brain works. Totally different than narrative and poetry. And a quarter of the Bible is this kind of literature.

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In the Old Testament, the best example is the book of Deuteronomy, which is mostly Moses seeking to persuade the Israelites to be faithful to the covenant.

Jon: It's one long lecture.

Tim: Yeah, the whole book is set as one long lecture. Then the essays, there are laws within it and even little mini-narratives. But the biggest sections in the first half and the end are these kinds of discourse. "Remember this. That taught us this. From this, we know this is true. Therefore, do this." That kind of thing.

But Ecclesiastes is mostly this. Ecclesiastes has many embedded poems within it. Actually a lot. But the main framework, the way the philosopher thinks through things is very much "I saw this, and I conclude this. Therefore, I'm going to do this." And that kind of thing.

This literature is littered with logical connector terms, like, "and" "therefore," "but," "because," "so that." "as a result." That's actually how you learn how to follow it.

I remember when we took our introduction to reading the Bible from Ray Lubeck, actually, we did one semester on narrative and poetry - we studied the book of Jonah - and then we did one semester on prose discourse. And we did Ephesians.

And do you remember, one whole exercise was going through...? Well, I think I made a photocopy. Then I just highlighted in pink all of the logical connective words. "And," "But," "therefore."

Jon: I don't remember.

Tim: He had us do a paragraph. That's what we did. Actually, he had us do a sentence diagramming exercise.

Jon: I remember that. I remember the sentence diagram.

Tim: And you diagram it, you shape the diagram, by means of the "ands" "therefores" you subordinate things, "because," "so that," "as a result." There you go.

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All of the New Testament letters are shaped by this kind of structure. However, embedded within them are poems. Paul's constantly embedding poems within.

Jon: And stories sometimes.

Tim: Yeah, little mini story sometimes too. This is really significant. Narrative, I think, engages both hemispheres of the brain because you're seeking pattern and connection.

Jon: Which is the right side.

Tim: But also through your imagination. Poetry is mostly engaging your right brain in which is image, experience, emotion, feeling sensory. Then discourse is mostly left brain, which is also about patterns like in narrative but in a more abstract way.

Jon: It's connected to the logical and it's connected to language. All language is going through your left brain. So you can't read language without engaging your left brain. The whole to brain thing is very interesting. You know how people say, like, "I'm more left brain or more right brain?"

Tim: Oh, that's not true. Everybody's using their whole brain.

Jon: Everyone's using the whole brain unless you've severed your - What is it called? Whatever. That thick cable of brain that connects your two hemispheres. If that's been severed, then you're in trouble. There's been a ton of interesting studies on people who have a suffered brain. But everyone has that thick cable and so you can use both sides of your brain.

But it is true the hemispheres they have disciplines that they do it much better than. The language goes through your left hemisphere, but experience an emotion is more generated from your right hemisphere.

Tim: I feel like you would know more about this than I do, about the unique—

Jon: Cerebral cortex. That's it.

Tim: Who was it? Was it Aristotle or Plato, who said, "What makes humans is that there's a reasoning animal"? Humans uniquely are able to abstract things, ideas into this symbolic and then create whole hypothetical chains of cause and effect to try and illuminate a decision before me. "Do I take this? Do I eat

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this berry? Do I not eat this berry? Or do I swim in that lake or do I not?" Humans uniquely have this ability to create this elaborate cause-effect feedback loops.

Jon: It doesn't seem like we know exactly how uniquely because we don't experience life like animals, or as CS Lewis wished animals wrote stories, so we could know.

Tim: Maybe it's not a difference in kind, but maybe just some degree?

Jon: Well, yeah, there's definitely a difference. It's like we have language the other animals don't have, which allows us to understand things in a much more abstract way and create more concepts. And then we have the ability to think about life as a story. So the past it can then inform how we think about now and the future, and then we can imagine futures and work towards futures.

Animals just don't do that. Like a squirrel when it's burying a nut isn't thinking like, "Hey, next summer, or next winter, I'm going to be so glad I buried this nut." It actually just has this instinctual urge to bury the nut. And it doesn't know why. Most likely the case. I don't actually know. Never been a squirrel. That's unique...

Tim: That's it. Something about humans to a degree that no other species on the planet does, we're able to abstract out cause-effect patterns in long chains to motivate behavior that makes no sense.

Jon: And we're constantly telling ourselves stories of why things happened and creating meaning through the stories so that we can have motivation to continue. Animals just don't do that.

One really interesting thing I've been thinking about is, there's a certain kind of - what do they call it? Heuristics. There's a certain kind of heuristic. It's the sunk cost...I don't know what they call it. But it's kind of like the sunk cost heuristic, where it's like, if you've already put a bunch of energy into something, you're now more committed to that thing. So even if now it's not going to work out, it's harder for you to abandon that project because you've put so much energy into it. It doesn't make sense logically—

Tim: Oh, sure. It becomes utterly irrational why you'd keep doing that thing.

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Jon: But to us, we've attached so much meaning to all of our labor and we've told the story about why it's so important, we can't abandon it. And humans just do this all the time. Where like a dog won't do it.

Like if a dog's been sitting at a certain door waiting for days for the store to open for to get a treat, and he's just waiting and waiting and waiting and it never happens, and then the door opens like 10 feet away, a different door, the dog's not going to be like, "I'm just committed to this door, though."

The dog will never do that. It'll just go to the next other. "Oh, there's a treat over there." But humans will actually do that. They'll just sit there like, "No, I'm committed to this store." Why do we do that? It's we're attaching all this meaning to it. This might be more about story than actually discourse at this point.

Tim: Well, but there, I think the point is that we've abstracted the value of sitting at the door. It may be a bigger story about it, but the point is we've turned the value into an idea that we use to motivate ourselves. I like the squirrel analogy too. On a basic level, we're impulse sensory creatures also, and so maximize pleasure, and minimize pain.

Jon: The lizard brain.

Tim: Yeah. But we will also deprive ourselves of pleasure for some long-term goal and will convince ourselves to do it based on an abstract set of reasoning.

Jon: That is the difference between the lizard brain and the neocortex. All animals have a neocortex. Even like a mouse, it's like the size of a postage stamp. It's very thin, and it's a small covering of their brain, but it's that neocortex that allows them to observe the things have happened and then learn from it. A lizard can't do that. A lizard all instinctual.

Tim: It's always in the moment impulse, you are saying?

Jon: Yeah. It can't observe another lizard do something unique and go, "Oh, I should do that." A mouse can. A mouse can observe another mouse do something and go, "Oh, interesting. I should do that," and learn from experience. That's because of the neocortex. Then humans have this thing folded neocortex. We've got this massive one that's all over the brain.

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Tim: In terms of biblical literature, this is fascinating. Think of a letter like Ephesians, which was the first...it's what we studied when we were introduced how to study this type of literature. It's a great example of prose discourse that's designed to persuade through information and then change of behavior because it's cleanly broken into two halves connected by the word "therefore" at the beginning of the second half in chapter 4.

The first half, actually it has a poem opening and closing it. It has a lot of storytelling within it, but basically telling the story of Israel as the covenant people, and then how through the Messiah, Gentiles, non-Jews are now included in the covenant Family of God, and he's brought eternal life, and he's defeated evil, and he's created a new family. That's more story driven, but he has full of there for us.

But then chapter 4, it says, "Therefore." And then he gets pretty abstract. He starts talking about "keep your unity." He's writing to a multi-ethnic community. Think of impulse behavior, like attracts like. It's a very strong behavior. And ethnic groups keep kind of high boundaries around themselves. And then the Greco Roman world of Paul's day, it's a very multi-ethnic world.

Jon: Your lizard brain will tell you not to trust people that aren't like you.

Tim: Don't trust people that aren't like you. What Paul was able to accomplish was communities that intentionally remove the barrier as he talked about in chapter two, remove the ethnic barrier to realize their common humanity in the Messiah. That they are actually one new humanity made up of all kinds of different people.

So he starts saying, "Listen, we have one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Sounds like Holy Spirit language. One spirit. Then just on the basis of those ideas, he was able to create communities of people who chose to override one of the most basic human impulses, which is to withdraw from people who aren't like you. Such a powerful example. It's like eating. Such a powerful impulse.

Humans are able to override...

Jon: With rationality.

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Tim: ...by means of rational chains of thought to override our basic bodily or our most basic impulses. And that's the power of this literature is it gets you to think in new ways to accomplish change on a fundamental level in the lives of the people who read this. That's all what Paul's letters are designed. All these letters in the New Testament engage your brain to invite you to do a new story turned into a set of ideas that you then turn to motivated whole different course of action. That too is a quarter of the Bible literature.

It's very much in the first century. It's no joke that most of it is in the New Testament letters. Those letters are influenced by conventions of Greek and Roman letter writing, Greek and Roman argument and philosophy.

Here's the interesting exercise. Paul grew up in Tarsus and so people have tried to reconstruct what his education would have been like because as an educated Jewish man, cosmopolitan, Tarsus. Man, you go through it and you read some of the classic educational texts that people were raised on and you feel like...so there's one in Seneca.

Jon: He would have been reading Seneca?

Tim: Correct. Seneca, Tacitus. No. Was he later? I forget. There's a set of my Amazon wish list. It's about four books. The first time I read this it was reading a section of Seneca and I felt like I was reading the letter to the Romans. The idioms, the manner of speech and "What should we say then? In light of this, tell me this. Do you say this? I tell you this. But if that is so how can this be?" You feel like, "Oh, that's how Paul writes."

Then you realize like, "Oh my gosh, where did he learn how to write? He went to school." And how did you learn back then? You just immerse yourself in the educational classics.

That's a good example where the writing didactic reasoning style of prose discourse of the New Testament is very much this melting pot of Jewish biblical culture and imagination merged with the Greek philosophical tradition.

Jon: Interesting.

Tim: Yeah, it's really cool. Anyway, all that say this literature makes you think and makes you think in deeper ways than you probably would normally. And

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that's his goal is to engage your brain so that you'll make new different kinds of choices.

Jon: Thanks for listening to The Bible Project podcast. We'll be continuing this series on How to Read the Bible through this summer. It's also a series on our YouTube channel. You can check that out at [youtube.com/thebibleproject](https://youtube.com/thebibleproject). All these resources are free, and it's thanks to your generous support. So thanks for being a part of this.