

# A Rich Variety of Literature as the Word of God

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The Bible is the very Word of God. The Bible is also a rich variety of humanly-invented literary genres, some quite self-conscious and stylized (like an acrostic Psalm), others quite unself-conscious and artless (like the letter to Philemon). Both understandings of the Bible are important to the child of God as he seeks God's blessing and guidance through the written word. We shall try to hold these twin understandings in tension as we explore the Bible's uniqueness in the rich variety of its literary forms.<sup>1</sup>

How important the recognition of genre is to the understanding of a literary work might be best illustrated if I should read to you the New Ulm Telephone Directory as though it were a Shakespearian drama. If I had Lawrence Olivier's or Richard Burton's voice, I might attempt a demonstration. As it is, I leave to your imagination the incongruous results of such a misguided effort. A Shakespearian drama and a telephone book can be claimed to have some elements in common. Both have a cast of characters, rather a long list in each case, though the telephone book is short on character development. Both provide important information on people, but they enable you to make contact with these people in quite different ways. They are radically different genres; and they need to be approached and used in radically different ways. Treating a mere listing of names as though it were high drama is an absurdity and can have only absurd consequences.

Failure to recognize distinctive literary genres is not likely to happen when reading contemporary literature. The failing becomes more common when reading ancient literature; and the Bible is ancient literature. Our failure to recognize an ancient genre may partly be caused by the change of canons that has occurred within the genre between ancient times and the modern era. For example, the modern writer of history is bound to quote the speech of an historical figure exactly; word for word; he is not permitted to give only an approximation of what the personality said. In the ancient world no such requirement or prohibition was felt necessary. Another cause for the blurring of the distinctive genre to which an ancient literary piece might belong is that we read it only in translation, or even if some of us do read it in the original language, our knowledge of the language may not be sufficient to identify genre or the implications of genre for meaning.

I would like to propose that the question of genre is important enough that our traditional Wisconsin Synod view of reading the Bible with a professional level of expertise might better be defined not as historical-grammatical interpretation, but as philological-historical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The latter term includes the former; but it is broader, implying that other linguistic clues to meaning besides grammar reveal a writer's intention. One of those other clues is literary genre.

In the brief compass permitted us in this forum we shall not be able fully to explore each of the literary types which we find in the Bible; but we may at least enjoy a little bit of what it may mean that God has spoken and still speaks to man through humanly-invented literary genres rather than through some divinely-engineered communication pattern. Since the Bible is the Word of God and yet is rich in its use of humanly-invented genres, we do well to reflect humbly upon this mystery and so incite ourselves to holy wonder. And since we

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<sup>1</sup> "Christianity is the most literary religion in the world and the one in which the word has a special sanctity. The clearest evidence of this literary emphasis is the bible, which is not only the repository of Hebraic-Christian belief but is also a book in which literary form is of overriding importance." (Ryken 9)

<sup>2</sup> The term is being used currently. It seems that some bible critics have lost interest in the mad chase to find the sources behind the biblical text we possess. They have turned their energies upon the text itself to discover the different rhetorical ways in which the writers generated meaning for the lecturers and the hearers of their words. We find this term, for instance in the book by Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*. Fowler defines his approach more carefully as "reader-response criticism." A somewhat similar approach appears in an edifying book by John Paul Heil, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus*. Heil describes his book as a narrative-critical reading of Matthew 26-28. Unlike the historical-critical scholars who always seem to lose the gospel as they probe behind the text, Heil's fastening upon the oral narrative, as it actually was written and meant to be read, leads him to discover fresh and exciting nuances of meaning in a part of Scripture with which we are most familiar.

rightly believe that our glorious God is hidden beneath these human genres not accidentally but purposefully and precisely that he may be revealed—and revealed in a way which allows and invites us to “handle him and see,” we propose as our thesis the following paradox: The Bible wants to be read like *no other* book. The Bible wants to be read just like *any other* book.

### **I. The Bible wants to be read like *no other* book.**

The source for this claim is the uniqueness of the Bible’s focus and content even when it uses the traditional genres of Judaic and Hellenistic literature. St. John explains the basis on which he selected materials from Jesus’ life and the purpose for which he used them like this: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). When we read the Gospel of St. John, we need to read with this pre-understanding to capture the meaning of his narrative as he intended it.

St. Luke’s record of Jesus’ life and teaching takes us somewhat beyond what St. John claims as the essential pre-understanding for his New Testament Gospel. St. Luke identifies Jesus as providing the pre-understanding with which also the Old Testament Scriptures should be read. St. Luke tells us how Jesus in teaching the disciples identified the focus of the Old Testament Scriptures as well as their New Testament fulfillment. In a post-resurrection narrative St. Luke records Jesus as saying: “‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’” (Luke 24:44-48). According to Jesus himself, the Bible, Old Testament as well as New Testament, is clearly about Christ crucified, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>3</sup>

The apostle who was “abnormally born,” St. Paul, also knew what the Scriptures were all about and what he should pass on to the Corinthians “as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the (Old Testament) Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day according to the (Old Testament) Scriptures...” (1 Cor 15:3,4). In his very first mission to the Jews and Gentiles of the province of Galatia Paul had known well what he should write large on his audiences’ hearts and minds: not the majesty of his God (Who doesn’t have a glorious God?) but the outlandish weakness of the man he proclaimed as God. He wrote of his evangelistic activities: “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.”

Nowhere more clearly than in 1 Corinthians does Paul express what God wants to get into our hearts and minds and also how God wants to get it there. God does not pour the majesty of his divine glory into either the content or the process of his efforts to win us. He had gone that route with men before, in the grandeur of creation; and he had failed to win mankind to know him personally as Father. He failed not for the lack or the quality of his effort but because his creatures failed. As he counsels the Corinthians, Paul carefully contrasts God’s earliest and abortive effort to win men with his final and ongoing effort to woo men to himself. He does this in a single magisterial verse: “Since in [connection with] the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not [get to] know him [affectionately and experientially], God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21). What did Paul regard as the divinely ordained process and content of God’s saving reach into the world and the hearts of men? He writes: “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:22,23).

To put this in another way, God had once come to man “from above, from his majesty.” He had wooed him from beyond and above mere human history by the majesty and wisdom of his creation works. But no

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<sup>3</sup> In Luther’s “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels” he practically identifies Christ with the gospel and regards both as the essential key to open up to us the Scriptures: “Luke in his last chapter [24:45], says that Christ opened the minds of the apostles to understand the Scriptures. And Christ, in John 10 [9:3], declares that he is the door by which one must enter, and whoever enters by him, to him the gatekeeper (the Holy Spirit) opens in order that he might find pasture and blessedness. Thus it is ultimately true that the gospel itself is our guide and instructor in the Scriptures...” (LW 35, 123)

longer does he will to approach man “from above, from his majesty, from the top down.” He now comes to humankind from within humanity’s own history. He has entered into this history personally through incarnation. He also keeps on entering into the record of history through the weakness of human voices and human literature as his agents publish his word. His human witnesses proclaim and record not a miracle of divine glory and wisdom, but they proclaim the death of a human being in whom they have come rightly to recognize God himself, the Son of man, who is everything that a man should be, everything that God intended for man to be.

In other words, Adam and Eve’s spurning of God as he wooed them in wisdom did not move him to forsake either them or their children. He remained faithful in his love and chose to woo them in another way: by his foolishness and weakness, by man talk, by human talk, by the mere teaching and preaching of a crucified Christ. Under ordinary language, its words, forms, and genres invented by mankind, he now courts disaffected men and women. As God came to us through the human in order to deliver us so, in his members, he comes to us through humanly-invented language in all its variety to make us wise for salvation. This is the Lutheran theology of the cross in one of its important aspects.

The point of our argument is this: Whatever the genre of the Biblical literature we read, it should not be understood apart from the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross is the necessary pre-understanding with which we must come to all of God’s Word.<sup>4</sup>

Here we have the tap root of our insistence that *the Bible wants to be read like no other book*. The theology of the cross distinguishes the Bible from any and every word of natural man. Everything in this book is to be understood in its relation to the crucified Christ; nothing is to transcend the proclamation of the crucified Christ. There is a mountain in the Scriptures and there are valleys. Both are beautiful to the child of God, but it is the man whom Scripture has placed on the mountain that we adore, the man who “had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). It is Christ crucified that is the heart and soul of the Word. Once we understand this, we are ready to begin to think about what it means that *the Bible wants to be read like any other book*.

## II. The Bible wants to be read just like any other book.

Let us examine more carefully the justification for the proposition that the Bible, in its rich variety of literatures, wants to be read just like any other book. The sainted Dr. Martin Franzmann, to whom conservative Lutherans owe so much, teaches in his *The Word of the Lord Grows* that the Word of God

- a. has its origin in human history,
- b. takes its form from human history,
- c. is history, and
- d. makes history.

How unlike the eternal glory which Islam claims for its *Koran*. Islam can tolerate no mystery, no paradox, in the origin of its holy writing. Form and content are claimed to be eternal, without influence from the human, refusing to condescend to the human. Just like Allah himself. Not a beckoning, wooing word but a majestic word which puts man under orders from afar and from on high rather than from within and in freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Martin Franzmann, in his theses on hermeneutics, warns us that not all the books of the bible stand in a direct relationship to the theology of the cross. He describes a book like Proverbs, for example, as standing in a contrapuntal relationship to the *cantus firmus* of the bible. Nevertheless, right appreciation and understanding of the Proverbs cannot come without listening to the *cantus firmus*.

Prof. Franzmann has derived his understanding of the *cantus firmus* of Scripture from the Lutheran Confessions and he describes it like this “in the broadest possible way: God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ (the hidden center of the Old Testament and the manifested center of the New) creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.” In a footnote he remarks that the “may” of the previous sentence signifies “is permitted and enabled by God” and “must” indicates that “there is no second way.” He goes on to explain that

“This Gospel is radical in three respects: (1) In its recognition of the condemning law and wrath of God and the guilt and lostness of man; (2) in its recognition of the sole working of God in man’s salvation; (3) in its recognition of the transformation of man’s existence produced by the saving act of God. (Franzmann 30)

An eternal and uncreated word come down from on high by a glorious angelic recitation. Even now only by special authorization may the earth's faithful dare to lay unholy hands on this divine book to translate it from the Arabic to the human talk of today. By contrast the Bible takes its various forms from human history.

"Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). "Men spoke," Peter says of the Old Testament Word. The Word has its origin in human history. To be sure, this origin cannot be separated "from God," nor can this speaking be understood "apart from the empowering Spirit." Nevertheless the mystery must be maintained that the divineness of the word cannot be understood apart from its humanness: "Men spoke."

St. Paul speaks in a similar vein in describing his evangelism work among the Corinthians: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1Cor. 2:13). These are not the words of an ancient FAX machine transcribing mindlessly a message in which his own will, training, and intelligence had no part. *Paul* "proclaimed." *Paul* deliberately chose not to practice his Hellenistic rhetorical skills. He did choose to billboard Christ crucified. He spoke the divine Word in a language invented by man for man. He spoke the divine Word in an unadorned literary form invented by man for man. No special divine vocabulary, no new divine grammar, no literary form strange to man had to be learned by the speaker or his hearers.

A recent survey indicates that 40% of the Americans believe the Bible is the literal Word of God. What this may mean to those who were surveyed is unclear but in many cases it surely implies a simplistic understanding of language and literature. Without being conscience of genres and the figures of speech that the various literary forms employ, they too easily may read a verse and say: "The Bible teaches" or "God says." Simplistic understanding can lead to misunderstanding; Waco, Texas, represents only the latest, the most outrageous, and the best publicized example. It is time to examine several of the literary forms in the Scripture and think through the implications of genre for understanding.

### **Historical Narrative**

The most common genre in Scripture is narrative, chiefly historical narrative, a form so flexible that it contains within itself a large variety of other literary forms.<sup>5</sup> There are many varieties of narrative; but we must be selective. We shall fasten upon the historical narrative as it is presented to us in much of the Old Testament and particularly in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. As so often, the medium is the message. The God of the Old and the New Testaments is revealed as the faithful Lord of history already by the predominance of historical narrative.

Historical narrative presents, in religious terms, the founding events of life and faith, the threats to life and faith which surround, and the victory of divine order over disorder. The reading of historical narrative, whether devotional or liturgical, transports the reader or the listener into those foundation events, takes seriously the tensions and disorder that seem to characterize life at any moment, but comforts the reader with the victory over the chaos within and the chaos without by projecting him into the victory of God and his faithful people over all that threatens them. The future lies open to him. The resurrection which concludes the gospels is not an act of closure but a testimony that God's saving work is still in process.

Within the narratives of the Old Testament certain cultic acts are prescribed to help the readers visualize and appropriate to themselves the great, saving acts of God in history. Within the narratives of the New Testament a similar ritual act is prescribed to propel the reader into the central and saving act of all history, the death of Jesus Christ. The reenactment of God's historical work of salvation creates for the faithful a personal participation in the death of Christ and its salvific power.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael D. McGehee in *God's Word Expressed in Human Words* lists the following forms and suggests that almost all of them may be found within the narrative form: parables, proverbs, promises, hymns, letters, poetry, prophecy, ethical instructions, theology, genealogies, quotations, sermons, and myths (Table of Contents).

William A Beardslee writes this about the genre of narrative:

The structural order of the narrative is what makes possible the transition back into the reality of divine order. By creating its own ordered world, wherein, through struggle and action, an end is achieved, the story expresses faith in the ultimate reality of order and life. It does so far more effectively than any abstract or theoretical statement can do precisely because it expresses its faith through dynamic conflict and victory (including, of course, the resolution of tragedy as well as outright victory) rather than in static fashion (17).

Luther appreciated the power of historical narrative and recognized its distinctiveness as a means to generate faith and right behavior. In his introduction to a history written by Galeatius Capella Luther wrote:

The renowned Roman Varro says that the very best way to teach is to add an example or illustration to the word, for they help one both to understand more clearly and to remember more easily. Otherwise if the discourse is heard without an example, no matter how suitable and excellent it may be, it does not move the heart as much and is also not so clear and easily retained. Histories are, therefore, a very precious thing. For what the philosophers, wise men, and all men of reason can teach or devise which can be useful for an honorable life, that the histories present powerfully with examples and happenings making them visually so real, as though one were there and saw everything happen that the word had previously conveyed to the ears by mere teaching. There one finds both how those who were pious and wise acted, refrained from acting, and lived, how they fared and how they were rewarded, as well as how those who were wicked and foolish lived and how they were repaid for it. (LW 34, 275)

Misuse of the historical narrative form of the Bible occurs, however, when we do not read it with a nose for Christ, when we are not on the hunt for the saving work of God. We may have seen on a pious Lutheran's coffee table a dispenser of daily Bible verses. Each day the Christian is expected to draw out blindly a single Bible verse and read it as his divine guidance for the day. This approaches an ecclesiastical version of Jackpot Junction or consultation with the daily horoscope. It is precisely the genius of historical narrative to reveal the connectedness of life under God through the continuous reading of the story. Separating a verse from its context risks robbing it of its intended meaning and putting it at the mercy of our imagination. Fortunately, well-instructed Lutherans who follow this untutored practice may read the verse in the context of what they have been taught in confirmation instructions. The directive power of the theology of the cross may therefore not be totally lacking from the context in which they read and seek understanding.

But from such bibliomancy as well as from the agitation of his own spirit and the influence of gnostic religion came St. Anthony's trek into the desert and into hermit monasticism. One day when he went to church in his native Egypt in the mid 200s he heard the lector read: "'One thing you lack,' he said, 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'" (Mk 10:21). David Koresh too seemed to have failed to read the Word, in the context of the theology of the cross and as a witness to the historical Christ. Fascinated by times and by seasons and wrapped in an egomaniacal cloud, he appointed himself the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy and the self-willed lord of others like himself; heroically he cast himself as the protagonist in a self-invented, dramatic conflict between good and evil.

When men are blind to that which the Bible is all about, to the theology of the cross, they don't know what to make of the Bible's words and literary genres. They may turn what is narrative into what is normative. They may seek to support their current scientific understandings on the basis of this book which was given to us to make us wise to salvation. They may make it a textbook in science or psychology or the "only textbook you need for counseling," as Jay Adams has claimed. Or they may, in their eagerness to establish life upon principles rather than upon the Christ, hunt relentlessly for abiding norms in the counsels given to historical problems for which the historical context is uncertain.

That Biblical historical narrative does not conform itself to the canons of 20<sup>th</sup> century historical writing should neither trouble nor surprise us. Through the ages the perception of what makes for appropriate history has changed often. Of our twentieth century fashion for proper historical writing we can safely say, “This too shall pass.” In our modern positivistic approach to the writing of history, we demand that our narratives include only such material as can be verified by sense experience. This leads the secular historian to a disparagement of Biblical history in which the holy writer quotes God as speaking or represents God as acting. The child of God, however, insists that through the Spirit the Biblical historian may have had better eyes and better understanding than those who know not God (1 Cor 2). And children of God have no need to concede that the Biblical historian is so muddled that we must look for the real truth somewhere behind the account which he has given.<sup>6</sup>

### **Biography**

Mention of the Gospels has already been made in the paragraphs above, but the Gospels may more properly be considered a subset of historical narrative, namely, ancient biography. While critics often rightly point to the distinctions between the Gospels and other ancient biography, David Aune argues differently. In the opening chapter of his book on *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* he writes:

Ancient biography is a complex genre consisting of many subtypes. It is reasonable that the Gospels be compared to them. This chapter argues that the canonical Gospels constitute a distinctive type of ancient biography combining (to oversimplify slightly) Hellenistic form and function with Jewish content (Aune 22).

Biography of sorts was exceedingly common in the Hellenistic world. We may deduce this even from St. Luke who credits a number of authors with having the ambition to record the teachings and works of Jesus. St. Luke refers to them when he writes:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitness and servants of the word (1:1,2).

A number of fairly early gospels have come down to us today. Their generally somewhat poorer physical condition has resulted partly, no doubt, from the fact that the church recognized them as inferior documents for the transmission of the faith and thus did not carefully preserve them.<sup>7</sup> While we might consider the early church’s arguments which limited the canon to just four gospels rather strange and unconvincing, we will not dispute for a moment the theological good sense which led the fathers to, admire and use the four we call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four were written out of a powerful admiration for the theology of the cross; the career-long sufferings, the Scripture-fulfilling death, and the well testified resurrection of our Lord are pre-eminent elements of their proclamation.

While Aune describes the Gospels as possessing a Jewish content, we might do far better in characterizing their distinctiveness as simply their commitment to the theology of the cross. The holy writers are not drawing the outlines of a Hellenistic hero but a suffering Servant. Their theology, much more than their Jewishness, accounts for the distinctiveness of their gospels from other ancient biography.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Franzmann refers to biblical historical narrative as prophetically interpreted history.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan in *Sourcebook of Texts for the Comparative Study of the Gospels* list the following: *The Gospel of James, The Latin Infancy Gospel, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, The Coptic Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, and The Gospel of Peter.*

## **The Parable and the Allegory**

One of the most striking forms of literature in the Bible is the parable. It was not invented by Jesus or by the Old Testament prophets who occasionally adopted the style. It is a common Oriental mode of instruction and a masterful teaching style.

Often the parable is a shorter narrative within a longer narrative. You usually know when a parable is coming because it is introduced with a formula that says so. Even when the introduction is less obvious, we tend to recognize the parable form. It's as self-conscious and as unobvious a literary form as a Garrison Keillor story about Lake Wobegon and only a bit more difficult to recognize than a tale which begins with the words "Once upon a time..." But that is where the obviousness of a parable stops.

A parable is usually not meant to give an immediately obvious meaning to the reader. If we feel we have exhausted the depths of a parable's meaning quickly, the teller will probably be disappointed in us. A parable's images are likely to evoke a variety of mental images, emotions, and applications. A parable is meant to trigger intensive thinking and often just as intensive feeling. For instance, the parable of the good Samaritan has engaged the hearers' mind and emotions dramatically: How base and self-serving are the priest and the Levite! Then when the emotions of the audience are at a high level, Jesus comes to the zinger: Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?...Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:36,37). Jesus' numerous parables mark him, like the rabbis in general, as a practitioner of the pedagogical art called active learning. Socrates sought, to evoke thoughtfulness about life by questions prompting analysis. Jesus sought to evoke thoughtful reflection by provocative images.

The proper reading of the parables depends first upon our commitment to the theology of the cross which is the larger context of the parable. The next clue to a parable's meaning is the immediate context in which it is found. The rule that a parable must have but one point is too simple to capture the richness of metaphorical expression; and yet it is a good rule to find the major direction into which the teller wants to channel our thinking. Since Jesus himself interprets the parable of the sower somewhat allegorically when he compares the four fields to four kinds of listeners, we need not be inflexible in demanding that there be only a single point of comparison within a parable. (McGehee 23)

A form of literature related to the parable is the allegory. It is a fictional narrative in which each major person, place, thing, or action in the story is meant to stand for something else in the real world (McGehee 21). As with the parable, the power of the allegory lies in its ability to make the reader take a fresh, closer, and more discerning look at a subject of spiritual importance.

## **The Proverb**

The proverb is to be found scattered throughout the Bible but a treasury of proverbial sayings is located in the books called Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. These books are identified as wisdom literature. These too should be understood in the context of the theology of the cross. By themselves they present no wisdom beyond that of the human, but men who love the cross can learn from them how they may well think and speak and live. The proverbs are an affirmation of the creation and man's God-given capacity to reason when he does so "in the fear of the Lord" (Prov 1:7). At the same time they affirm the inability of man to puzzle through the deepest secrets of life without the aid of God.

## **Poetry**

The poetry of the Bible is located mainly but not exclusively in the Psalms. Some of the psalms may have been composed for private meditation but for the most part they are hymns chanted or sung by a group. In either case, to read them as though they were a narrative or a creedal statement is to misunderstand their function. Ps. 37:25 reads: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." These words are wonderful expressions of personal and even group faith, but they are poor candidates for inclusion in a church's creed. They articulate the exuberance of holy praise, but no church will insist that the offspring of the righteous have never at some time had to beg in order to live. They are truth in the sense that they reflect the unfailing faithfulness of God to his people. They are not truth in the sense of

conforming to literal fact. We will not dogmatically say on the basis of such a verse: “The Bible teaches that the child of a righteous man will never go hungry.”

And yet Luther learned much of his theology of the cross while lecturing on the Psalms. He learned from them that God comes to us through suffering rather than through glory. In suffering we experience the grace of God that leads us to call to him “out of the depths.”

A latter day student of Martin Luther has written a tiny but beautiful introduction to the Psalms. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* opens up to the reader the secret of how this literature serves the gospel:

It is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christian, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one’s heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer 9, 10) .

...Only in Jesus Christ are we able to pray, and with him we also know that we shall be heard.

And so we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him.. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. By means of the speech of the Father in heaven his children learn to speak with him. Repeating God’s own words after him, we begin to pray to him. We ought to speak to God and he wants to hear us, not in the false and confused speech of our heart, but in the clear and pure speech which God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words which come from God become, then, the steps on which we find our way to God (Bonhoeffer 11, 12).

Many of the titles of the Psalms which are difficult to understand are directions for the musicians. This also applies to the “Sela” which often occurs in the middle of a Psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the Psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther).

The Psalms were probably most often sung antiphonally. They were particularly well suited for that through the verse form, according to which the two parts of a verse are so connected that they express in different words essentially the same thought. This is called parallelism. This form is not simply accidental. It encourages us not to allow the prayer to be cut off prematurely, and it invites us to pray together with one another. That which seems to be unnecessary repetition to us, who are inclined to pray too hurriedly, is actually proper immersion and concentration in prayer. It is at the same time the sign than many, indeed all believers, pray with different words yet with one and the same word. Therefore the verse form in particular summons us to pray the Psalms together (Bonhoeffer 23, 24).

Hymns often appeal most strongly to the affective dimension of the human personality and often to our sense of nostalgia. Don’t we tend to love old Christmas and Easter hymns? Don’t we sometimes dislike new hymns? Hymns and psalms evoke feeling, and they help us give expression to the feelings which the Spirit has generated within us. They put us in touch with our emotions, and when we sing them together with others we sense our communion with them. The most elaborate of the psalms is probably Psalm 119. One hundred

seventy-six verses in 22 sections of 8 verses apiece comprise the psalm. Each of the 22 sections is named for a different letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet. Each verse in the section named after a letter begins with that letter. The very form of the poem reinforces its emphasis on the orderliness which characterizes God's will and is found in his law. A perfect marriage of form and content. The Hebrews enjoyed poetry. They recited and sang their songs again and again. If the poetry of Homer expressed and then created a common culture among the Greeks, the same could be said of the psalms. But, in fact, the psalms are only a part of the poetry of the Old Testament. A rapid count of the Old Testament pages that are written in verse form suggests that about half of the book is poetry.

### **Prophecy**

Another favorite genre of the Old Testament is prophecy, often written in verse form. When we read Biblical prophecy, we should not expect to read a lot of prediction about the future. The term prophecy means to "speak before" an audience rather than "speak before" an event happens. St. Paul describes prophecy, 1 Cor 14:3, as speaking "to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." An examination of the Old Testament prophets quickly reveals that they were frequently calling God's people to repentance for their brutal lovelessness, their selfishness, and their lack of repentance toward God. They also encouraged to hope for God's salvation through repentance. In encouraging Israel to hope for salvation, the prophets did from time to time speak Messianic prophecies, foretelling the coming of the servant of God who would become their righteousness. The New Testament writers, in their evangelistic interest to show that Jesus was the fulfilment of long cherished hopes, often quote or refer to the Messianic prophecies of the prophets; but on balance the prophets' subject matter deals much more with the past and the present than with the future. Men, however, have always been preoccupied with times and seasons, particularly the last days and their character. Anything to escape God's call to repentance now!

### **Epistles**

The numerous letters of the New Testament, in respect of form, are born very directly out of the Hellenistic epistles by which learned pagans communicated with each other or framed for public reading a wide variety of compositions. Schools and the prevailing etiquette prescribed forms and appropriate conventions for letters, but the genre remained flexible enough to accommodate a host of purposes, materials, and rhetorical styles.

St. Paul makes frequent use of the epistle. He writes them from an official viewpoint, as an apostle of the Lord; but he exudes an extraordinary love and concern: His letters tend to be prompted, to at least some degree, by a specific concern or concerns originating in the receiving church. With an exception or two, they are written to be read aloud to the receiving congregation. They therefore include a number of rhetorical devices and at times reveal a fine literary artistry, such as we have in the final verses of Romans 8.

While the Gospels are meant to provide the church with an historical record of the life of Jesus Christ to which they can return again and again, Paul's letters, for the most part, are occasional, not dispassionate essays but concerned counsels addressed to an immediate need. They are, nevertheless, incredibly rich through their insight into the meaning of Christ's life and death. Though Paul will disclaim special insight into the matters of this world, through the Spirit he knows what the cross reveals about God's heart and the good news that is for the world. He humbly concedes "we have not received the spirit of the world;" but he claims he has received "the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1Cor 2:12). Through the Spirit he interprets to his readers what it has meant for the world and what it means for our daily lives that God sent his Son to suffer and die. Paul's exposition of the Gospel is full, clear, and unequivocal.

But Paul's letters are not written for publication in the ordinary sense that he conforms everything in them to the needs of a general audience by supplying the context necessary for them to be understood fully by strangers to the local circumstances. His letters arise from a compassionate concern for his contemporary addressees and that concern dominates his style and content. Paul's counsels regarding local congregations' affairs sometimes read like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. The listeners in the room who

can hear only the one side of the conversation risk jumping to wrong conclusions about the meaning of the words they hear because they cannot hear what is being asked or said at the other end of the telephone line. The listeners dare not think that it is unimportant to know only one half of the context of what is being said. Herein lies a caution for the modern reader of Paul's epistles lest he unreservedly universalize and eternalize counsels which Paul has addressed to concrete contexts fully known to the first-century churches but only partially known to us. Deeply rooted as his counsels are in the circumstances which prevailed among his readers and which were well-known to both him and them, the clarity with which we understand his intent much depends upon our knowledge of the local situation.

Acquiring this knowledge is no small task and sometimes frankly lies beyond our ability. Fitting ourselves into cultural situations so totally different from our 20<sup>th</sup> century world requires no little imagination and creativity, and that informed by painstaking historical research. Even then what will be clearest in Paul's letters is the theology of the cross because this was the central and crucial element of his witness. And he will be pleased if we make it the central element of our study and witness. Great caution should be advised in expounding those matters in which Paul has not troubled himself to give his modern day readers a total context. Extrapolating normative counsels for our current social situations, so radically different from those which were addressed by Paul, risks returning the modern church to the *modus operandi* of the experts in the law at Jesus' time as they heroically sought to apply the 1500 year old law of Moses to a much changed Hellenized and urbanized civilization. And theology becomes an exciting matching of exegetical wits rather than a joyous forthtelling of the gospel of the Crucified for the salvation of the world.<sup>8</sup>

### Apocalyptic

The genre of Judaic and Judaic-Christian literature called apocalyptic occurs in the canonical books principally in the Revelation of St. John. Someone has written: "Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation. Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation, resulting from a fundamental misapprehension of the work's literary form and purpose" (Johnson 512). In his 1522 introduction to Revelation Martin Luther concedes that he also has difficulty with the style: "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it. But to teach Christ, this is the thing which an apostle is bound above all else to do...Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely" (LW 35, 399). While his 1546 introduction to the Revelation is more favorable, he still struggled with obtaining a good understanding of it.

Apocalyptic literature in general and Revelation in particular have become a bit more intelligible to the modern reader through the growing availability of ancient books in this genre and through our discovery of its norms.<sup>9</sup> While Revelation does not observe all the rules of apocalyptic, it does follow many of them. Apocalyptic literature tends to take off from and elaborate an Old Testament prophecy. The writer claims visionary experiences which interpret history and particularly the remote end of history. In order to make his points the writer uses pictures, allegories, and symbols, often in wild profusion. Unlike most apocalyptic literature, St. John's Revelation is not written under a pseudonym to increase its dignity. Nor is it speculative about the future. It does not take off from some single, crucial Old Testament prophecy; but, if anything, Revelation is rooted in the Old Testament far more than other apocalyptic literature.

The symbols and images of apocalyptic literature have fixed meanings which only the student of the literature and the times can sense. We may usefully compare the genre to a Renaissance painting such as Jan Van Eyck's double portrait of "The Betrothal of Arnolfini." The precision of Van Eyck's brush suggests such realism that the modern dilettante may not sense the abundant symbolism which gave the painting a special meaning for the Renaissance viewers who expected and understood the symbolism. The puppy at the foot of the

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<sup>8</sup> In this matter of hermeneutics and exegesis Dr. Franzmann warns against "the delusion that any 'art' or 'method' can be substituted for long, patient, affectionate, and responsive association with the sacred text." (14)

<sup>9</sup> David Aune lists the following books among the apocalypses: *1 Enoch*, the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Book of the Heavenly Luminaries*, *2 and 3 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and *The Apocalypse of Peter*. (229, 230)

bridal pair hardly suggests to us the idea of faithfulness in marriage which the Renaissance man quickly read into the symbol. That the bridal pair have kicked off their shoes might suggest to us a carelessness about the solemnity of the moment; but to the Renaissance man it suggested the opposite. It reminded them of Moses' removal of his shoes in the burning bush incident and suggested an appropriate awe for the holiness of the sacramental moment of marriage as medieval theology understood it. The list of such symbols in the painting could go on and on. The point is this: If Revelation seems to some to be a starkly realistic description of the future, it is because readers do not understand the artistic symbolism of the book. They must learn to put themselves into the place of the original readers and pour into those images the historically-determined meanings which the original readers found naturally by their living in that age.

As with most works of art the Revelation of St. John is directed more to the affective domain than to the cognitive. Its strength lies not in its clarity to instruct but in its power to impress. If, we do not understand these natural limitations of the genre, we give the book too much credit—or too little.

Imagination, undisciplined by historical background information and uninformed by the theology of the cross, leads to the violent perversions of St. John's meaning that our generation has perpetrated again and again. Lack of poetic imagination, a common failing in our scientific age, ministers to a decided coolness to Revelation's forms. But the abundance of literary varieties which we have in Scripture assures that no one will find all genres in this holy book inaccessible and unappealing.

### Conclusion

Much more that is helpful to an intelligent appreciation of the Bible could be said about each of the literary varieties we have sampled. Many more literary forms might have been adduced. We content ourselves with these.

Luther, sensing that truth exceeded all simple human formulations, enjoyed paradoxes and none more than *simul iustus et peccator*, "at the same time righteous and a sinner." That same gospel paradox—we have called it the theology of the cross—is the underlying explanation for the paradox which we have presented as our thesis: The Bible wants to be read like no other book; and the Bible wants to be read like any other book.

We should also be aware that whatever literary form the Bible takes, the Word of God wants to be spoken even more than it wants to be read. "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Rom 10:14). "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Lk 11:28).

Luther sensed the misunderstandings that can result precisely because the Word has had to be written rather than spoken orally. In his "Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels" he wrote: "The Gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth. So we go on and make the gospel into a law book, a teaching of commandments, changing Christ into a Moses, the One who would help us [Christ] into simply an instructor [Moses]" (LW 35, 123).

Readers of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians will also recall him lamenting that he cannot speak face to face with them but must convey his affection for them from a distance through a pen and a secretary. He wrote in a moment of tenderness: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone" (Gal 4:19,20). How much more did readers of the King James have to beware of letting the written gospel become a law! The obvious verse pattern tended to suggest that the reader was dealing not with ordinary literature but with the prescriptive and restrictive stipulations of a legal document like a home insurance policy. The sublimating of the verse numbers and use of the paragraph format, which modern printing technology permits, provides some relief from this impression but not a total delivery. Despite the convenience of versification for the Bible student, the convention of numbering verses, someone has insisted, has done much more harm to the church than good.

We conclude with this exhortation to all who trust and love the crucified Christ: His Bible wants to be read like no other book; his Bible wants to be read like any other book; and his Word of the cross wishes to be

proclaimed for the salvation of all nations. We have not fulfilled our task as his disciples and witnesses until we have done all three.

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