

PART THREE: THE LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE

Syllabus Objectives	<p><i>Knowledge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• have a knowledge of how the Bible came to be written• be familiar with the variety of literary genres found in the Bible• have a detailed knowledge of certain key texts• be aware of the intrinsic links between the formation of the Bible and the formation of the Jewish and Christian communities <p><i>Understanding</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be aware that the Bible is made up of a variety of literary genres and that the identification of the genre is important for the understanding, interpretation, and application of the text <p><i>Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be able to navigate the format and structure of the Bible• identify and differentiate between some of the literary genres found in the Bible• compare and contrast certain key texts <p><i>Attitudes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• respect for the Bible as a living, classic, and sacred text• appreciation of the central place of the Bible in Judaeo-Christian traditions
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Procedure

Topic: 3.1 The language of story

Introduction the importance of narrative in the life of a community

For a practical approaches to storytelling see <http://www.eldrbarry.net/roos/eest.htm>
<http://www.eldrbarry.net/rabb/joy.htm>

Review Topic: 2.1 on the importance of narrative in the life of a community referring to how people are always interested in stories. They enjoy listening to a well told story or reading. Stories can inspire, teach, challenge, console. They can be used to explain the world around us, as for instance the origin of customs, place names, why things are as they are, and so on. Stories are a powerful means of preserving a community and sense of identity. To a considerable extent, we interpret the world, ourselves and other people through stories.

Or

Review some examples of local folklore referred to earlier e.g. the many stories that surround the lives of saints, holy wells, historical events (e.g. 1798 in the South East of Ireland), historical sites (e.g. Tara, Seir Kieran), placenames (Leaba Dhiarmada agus Gráinne, Devil's Bit). The great deeds of sportsmen are still recounted in story and song as for example the songs about John Joe O'Reilly the footballer from Cavan, Christy Ring from Cork. The Folklore Commission in Ireland has collected a large body of traditional oral material of which stories form a considerable part.

Discuss: What does this story show about the storyteller's understanding of their world?
What does this story show about the storyteller's understanding of themselves?
Etc.

the story of Job

Write the following proverbial phrase on the chalkboard:

“The patience of Job”

Discuss: What does this phrase mean?
Is patience a characteristic of Job?

Take feedback from the students and conclude that patience means steadfastness or perseverance. Job is not patient but he does persevere, despite the highs and lows of his experience (the phrase seems to derive from the Epistle of James -KJV).

Chart on the chalkboard student's recollection of the key points in the story of Job (the story of his trial and restoration is found in the prologue (Job 1-2) and the epilogue (Job 42:7-17) that form the framework. The poetic dialogue (Job3-31) deals with the theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of a just man. e.g.

- The characters of the story are Job, his wife, the Satan, Job's three friends and God. It has a plot that sustains the whole.

- The setting given the book may be thought of as the era of Abraham (c.1800 BCE), a man with flocks, camels and great possessions, but its date is anywhere between 1600 and 400 BCE.
- The story tells how Job, a man of great wealth and integrity (Job 1-2) is tested by God on the suggestion of the Satan. He loses all his possessions and his family, is smitten with a loathsome affliction of the skin and becomes an outcast of society. His wife urges him to curse God and die but Job retains his integrity. This sets the scene for the drama which follows in which Job is joined by three friends who come help him but who end up criticizing him and drawing from him ever stronger protests of innocence and the unmerited nature of his suffering. Job is searching desperately for understanding and is demanding an answer from God but is only met with the stock theological answers ('windy word') of his friends. The climax comes when God answers Job but not as Job had imagined it. Job's personal encounter with God changes everything for him. The dark night is over. His complete trust in God is restored. In the end his position is vindicated and his family and fortune are restored. There are elements of tragedy, comedy and irony in the story which follows a basic line that leads in the end to the happiness of the hero.

When the key points in the story of Job have been recalled conclude by explaining that the book of Job, one of the greatest monuments of Old Testament wisdom literature, is well recognized as one of the classics of world literature in that it is a timeless work which raises for every generation ultimate questions. The book is one long poetic dialogue (3:1-42:6), the longest ancient Hebrew piece of poetry that survives, introduced by a prose prologue (1-2) and concluded by a prose epilogue (42:7-11). Job's story has influenced modern writers such as Kierkegaard (*Diaries*), Kafka (*The Trial*), Jung (*Answer to Job*), has had a significant influence on modern existentialists such as Camus (*Myth of Sisyphus*), Addamov (*Notes et Contre-notes*), Beckett (*Waiting for Godot; Endgame*) and Bloch (*Atheism in Christendom*), and on modern playwrights (e.g. McLeish, Archibald (1961) *JOB: A Play in Verse*, Cambridge, Mass; Riverside Press; Neil Simon, *God's Favorite*).

Discuss: What questions does the story of Job raise?

- Questions of divine justice
- The meaning of suffering in the life of a good person who believes in God
- The meaning and purpose of human existence
- How it is possible to continue to believe in a world where evil is so prevalent
- Etc.

• *parable as genre*

A parable is a story drawn from everyday life which conveys religious or moral teaching in a vivid and memorable way and aims to evoke a response, a decision or action or a change of heart.

Jesus did not invent the literary form. The parable was already found in the Old Testament where it was known as the *mashal*, translated in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) by the term *parabolé* which means 'comparison'. Parables are to be found in the Old Testament (e.g. parable of the vineyard, Is 5:1-9; the parable of the ewe lamb, 2 Sam 12:1-8) and rabbinic Judaism.

What are referred to in general terms as parables may be classified into the following three groups:

1. *The Similitude*, the most concise type of parable, is an extended simile or comparison which makes use of a typical or regular occurrence with which the hearers are familiar e.g. leaven being added to meal (Mt 13:33), grain ripening for the harvest (Mk 4:26-29), mustard seed being sown (Mk 4:31-32).
2. *The Parable* strictly speaking is an invented or freely composed story or narrative which tells of some interesting or particular case - what happened on one occasion - in a vivid and stimulating way. It does not refer to a typical event or situation but remains true to life. A sower went out to sow (Mt 13:1), a rich man had a steward (Lk 16:1), a man gave a great banquet (Lk 14:16). As in the similitude the things compared are dissimilar.
3. *The Illustration* or exemplary story is also an invented story subject to the same laws of storytelling as the parable. It presents a particular example which illustrates a general principle. In this case the two things compared are similar. Notice how the story of the Good Samaritan ends: 'Go and do likewise' (Lk 10:37).

• *the following parables of Jesus:*

- Mt 13:1-9 *The Sower*
- Mt 20:1-16 *The Labourers in the Vineyard*
- Mt 25:1-13 *The Ten Wedding Attendants*
- Lk 16:1-13 *The Unjust steward.*

<i>parables</i>	<i>describe the context of a given parable</i>	<i>explain the impact for the original audience</i>	<i>explain the impact for the early Christian communities</i>
Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3-9)	Told by Jesus while sitting in a boat on the lake teaching the multitude (Mt 13:1-2). It is the first in a chapter of seven parables two of which are accompanied by explanations. The central theme of his preaching here is the Kingdom of God. The original context for the parable is probably early in Jesus' ministry	The parable was originally told to encourage his hearers who may have been discouraged by the lack of success of his preaching. It contrasts the present lack of success with the certain extraordinarily abundant harvest in the future.	The parable was retold in the early Christian communities where an interpretation was added which applied the parable to the word of God and its reception by Christians, exhorting them to withstand the trials and tribulations that may affect them.

Discuss: What are the implications of this parable for contemporary audiences?

<i>parables</i>	<i>describe the context of a given parable</i>	<i>explain the impact for the original audience</i>	<i>explain the impact for the early Christian communities</i>
The Labourers in the Vineyard/The Generous Employer (Mt 20:1-16)	Told to Jesus' disciples (20:1) but may originally have had a different audience.	One approach is to see it as teaching the limitless generosity of the householder and thus illustrating the 'overflowing generosity of God's love which ignores claims of human merit and works' (Meier, <i>Matthew</i> , 224), 'the grace of God's reign' (Boucher, <i>Parables</i> , 89), that there are no degrees of reward in heaven but that all is based on generosity (Bauer). Jeremias who entitles it 'The Parable of the Good Employer' argues that the original parable is not about limitless generosity since all receive only one denarius, a bare subsistence wage, but is about compassion and sympathy for the poor (<i>Parables</i> , 136).	For the early Christian communities the parable may have been seen to defend God's freedom to extend God's salvation to whomsoever he chooses - God loves and rewards all equally. The parable challenges discrimination between people

Discuss: What are the implications of this parable for contemporary audiences?

<i>parables</i>	<i>describe the context of a given parable</i>	<i>explain the impact for the original audience</i>	<i>explain the impact for the early Christian communities</i>
The Wedding Attendants (Mt 25:1-13)	The parable of the ten 'wedding attendants' or the ten virgins as it is more commonly known is set in the Last Judgement discourse of Mt 24-25 and may have been told to a general audience	It illustrates the saying in 24:42: 'Watch therefore because you do not know in what day your Lord comes'. The parable is a realistic story, reflecting Jewish customs at the time - the wedding feast at nightfall, the accompaniment of the bride to the bridegroom's house first, the women going to meet the bridegroom and accompanying him to the house for the feast (Jeremias, <i>Parables</i>). In the parable the kingdom is compared to the whole complex of events that is narrated about the wedding festivities. The parable said to the original audience- that the bridegroom may be delayed and that like the wise attendants one must be prepared for this; certainly, that one should not be so unprepared as to find oneself excluded from the eschatological feast; otherwise the door may be shut - and then it will be too late.	The message for Matthew's community is that it too must be prepared for the Lord's return.

Discuss: What are the implications of this parable for contemporary audiences?

<i>parables</i>	<i>describe the context of a given parable</i>	<i>explain the impact for the original audience</i>	<i>explain the impact for the early Christian communities</i>
Unjust Steward (16:1-13)	parable on poverty and riches. It is told to the disciples (16:1) in the hearing of the grumbling Pharisees (15:2; 16:14) but was probably originally addressed to a general audience.	In first century Palestine there were large owners who had stewards who transacted their business with full power. What the steward did was simply call in debtors and eliminate his own commission from the original bonds. It is this action that is praised, not the falsification of accounts. The remission of the debt would reflect well on the landowner who would be lauded for his generosity with the result that he might reinstate the agent, or give him a favourable recommendation. The steward's plan paid off. He is praised for his 'shrewdness'. He has at one stroke benefited his employer, his clients and himself. What is praised is the steward's prudent use of material possessions to ensure his future security. It is his prudence that is praised. As a prudent man who uses material possessions for his own good and also the good of others, he is a model for the Christian disciple.	The attached sayings of vv.8b-9 represent the first application of the parable. Christians could learn something from the prudence of the 'children of this world' who are equated with the steward. Disciples are urged to make prudent use of material possessions. The point of the second application in 16:10-12 is that of responsibility and faithfulness. The third application in 16:13 sums up a general attitude towards wealth: one must choose God or mammon.

Discuss: What are the implications of this parable for contemporary audiences?

Written Questions:

- Outline the structure of a parable, using an example of a parable you have studied.
- Pick a parable you have studied and say
 - What was the message of this parable for the original audience?
 - What message might this parable offer for an audience today?
- The book of Job is an example of the bible as story. What makes Job's story so compelling?

Outcomes

As a result of studying this section, students should be able to -

- discuss the importance of narrative to a community
- identify *Job* as an example of storytelling and give three illustrations of how this is so
- outline the structure of a parable
- describe the context of a given parable
- explain the impact for the original audience
- explain the impact for the early Christian communities
- suggest implications for contemporary audiences.

Topic 3.2 The Language of Reflection

the purpose and language of poetry

the poetry of Psalms

Discuss: What is your favourite poem?

Why is this poem a favourite for you?

Take feedback from students and conclude that poetry is an attempt to express in exalted language convictions, insights, feelings and emotions that are not easily expressed in prose.

Explain that an awareness of the rules and conventions of a particular type of poetry is helpful if we are to fully appreciate it. This is particularly so with poetry that originated in a culture that differs from our own.

e.g. The poetry of Psalms

The depth of thought and feeling that is expressed in the Psalms, the great collection of Hebrew poetry, calls out to the deepest yearnings and emotions in the reader.

The psalms use imaginative language e.g.

- The righteous person is like a flourishing tree (Ps 1:3)
- One's enemies are 'bulls' or 'dogs' (Ps 22:12,16)
- The Lord accompanies the believer even in 'the darkest valley' (Ps 23:4)

Examples of animal imagery are to be found in Psalms 7:2; 32:9; 42:1

Examples of bird imagery occurs in Psalms 17:8; 55: 6-8; 84:3; 102:6-7

Case Study: Read Psalm 1

Discuss: How does Psalm 1 answer the question 'How can one be happy'?

The main feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism i.e.

SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM

ANTITHETIC PARALLELISM

The thought of one line is repeated in different words in the next line e.g. Ps 6:9	The thought expressed in the second line contrasts with the thought of the first line e.g. Ps 1:6
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Case Study: Read Psalm 114 and identify examples of synonymous parallelism

Talk feedback and explain that every verse of Psalm 114 is in synonymous parallelism. But to understand the psalm fully we must know, for example, that in v. 1 the word 'Israel' means the same thing as 'the house of Jacob', and we must be aware that turning a rock, or flint, into water (v. 8) refers to the action of Moses who brought water from the rock in the desert (Ex 17:1-7).

Case Study: Read Psalm 145 and identify examples of it being an acrostic psalm

Ps 145 is an acrostic psalm, that is, a psalm in which every verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a psalm in praise of God's goodness, seeing him as king, provider and saviour.

WRITTEN QUESTION: Outline how the Psalms are a unique style of poetry.

Outcomes: As a result of studying this section, students should be able to

- illustrate the rhythm, imagery and emotions associated with poetry
- suggest how any *Psalm* displays similar forms
- outline the ways in which *Psalms* are a unique style of poetry
- demonstrate familiarity with any acrostic *Psalm*
- demonstrate familiarity with any parallelistic *Psalm*.

Topic 3.3 The Language of Symbol (Higher Level only)

examples from literature of the use of symbolic language

Research Assignment:

Present students with extracts from literature or poetry and ask them to find examples of the use of symbolic language in them e.g.

- The plays of Shakespeare - King Lear; Macbeth
- The poetry of John Keats - Ode to a Nightingale
- Milton's - Paradise Lost
- T.S. Eliot's - The Wasteland
- W.B. Yeats - Sailing to Byzantium, and Byzantium (Byzantium a symbol of art and culture),
- James Joyce's - Ulysses

Take feedback and explain that in the bible, symbolic language abounds not just in the psalms, the prophets, and in apocalyptic writing where it is especially prevalent, but throughout from Genesis to Revelation. The language of symbol is used to describe God, to clarify God's will and activity e.g.

- God is spoken of in anthropomorphic terms (potter, father, mother, king, judge, gardener, etc.).
- God is present in a pillar of cloud by day, in fire by night (Ex13:21-2), in a storm (Jer 30:23) or a still small voice (1 Kings 19:12-13).
- The serpent that Moses raises in the wilderness is a symbol of life (Num)
- Massah and Meribah (Ex 17:7) become symbols of rebellion in biblical literature
- Sodom becomes the symbol of a place of depravity
- Egypt becomes the symbol of the place of bondage

- Jerusalem becomes the symbol of the holy city, the temple, the place where Yahweh dwells
- In the New Testament symbolic language is used to convey the significance of Jesus - titles such as the Son of Man with its echoes of Dn 7:14, Messiah, priest, prophet and king,
- In the gospel of John Jesus is the Logos made flesh (1:1-18), the lamb of God, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10), the way that leads to life.
- Other examples of the language of symbol in the gospels e.g. parables, miracles
- Other examples of the language of symbol in the writings of Paul e.g. the cross, the great symbol of life and love
- Apocalyptic writings are full of symbolic language e.g. Dan 7-12; Rev, animals, colours, numbers and places are all endowed with special symbolism

myth in the Bible
epic in the Bible
apocalyptic texts in the Bible

Assignment: Match the following words with the definitions given below:

Apocalyptic ○ Epic ○ Myth ○

This comes from the Greek word <i>muthos</i> that means speech, story or narrative. It refers to a story or narrative which uses traditional motifs, is set in a very different time from that of the narrator, and deals with topics such as the gods and legendary heroes of old, the origin of the world and of humanity, the reasons for the human condition being as it is or other great questions that human beings ask.	A
A long narrative poem on a grand scale, told or written in an elevated style, centered on a heroic figure who transcends ordinary human limitations and has a central role in a series of events that are significant or foundational for a people or nation. The term is not confined to poetry but is also applied to prose accounts, novels, dramas and films.	B
This comes from a Greek word meaning 'disclosure' or 'revelation'. These writings are intended to give hope to the suffering faithful that God will triumph over the powers of evil in an imminent divine intervention which will deliver them from their suffering and usher in a new era of salvation. They involve conflict of cosmic dimensions between the forces of good and evil.	C

Take feedback from the assignment and conclude that myths (A above) usually deal with great questions that humans put to themselves and the answers are usually set in time before history began. Myths often give the reason why something is as it is. The ancient Israelites lived in a cultural context (Canaan, Mesopotamia, Egypt) where such myths were commonplace (e.g. Enuma Elish; Epic of Gilgamesh). They took over ideas from such myths but refashioned them and used them from their own faith.

Assignment: Read one of the following - Genesis 1-2; Gen 6:1-4; Is 27:1; 51:9, Psalm 74:14; Job 41:1
 Explain how the Bible reference you have chosen contains –

- A story or narrative which uses traditional motifs
- Is set in a very different time from that of the narrator
- Deals with topics such as the gods, legendary heroes, or other great questions that human beings ask

The epic (B above) developed in an oral culture when a people or a nation was reflecting on its historical, cultural and religious heritage. Literary epics are learned imitations of the oral form e.g.

- The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh (3rd millennium) is the earliest epic in existence.
- The *Iliad*, which recounts the story of the Trojan War,
- The *Odyssey*, which recounts the story of Odysseus' return home from the Trojan War.
- The Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*,
- The Indian *Mahabharata*
- Táin Bó Cuailgne (cf. M. Dillon, ed., 1985 *Irish Sagas*, Cork; Mercier 93ff.; T. Kinsella, Táin, 1990 or Faraday, L.W. *The Cattle-Raid of Cuailnge* (Tain Bo Cuailnge), translated from Leabhar na h-Uidhri and the Yellow Book of Lecan available at http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/tain_faraday.pdf <http://www.thetain.com/>)
- Virgil's *Aeneid*, an account of the founding of Rome
- The French *Song of Roland*
- Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Assignment: Read extracts from the Exodus story, or view extracts from a film such as the "10 Commandments" etc.

Explain how the Exodus story is an example of an epic.

Take feedback and conclude making reference to how it describes -

- A foundational event for the people of Israel, an inspirational event ‘central to the traditions and belief of its culture’
- The story of how one man Moses, with God’s help and guidance, led his people from slavery in Egypt across the Reed Sea to freedom and to a covenant with God at Mt Sinai through which Israel became God’s people, and how he brought them after forty years wandering in the desert within sight of the Promised Land but died before he could enter it
- The epic story is recounted every year during the feast of Passover
- It uses the language of symbol to describe God’s great act of deliverance. God is presented as a ‘man of war’(Ex 15:3) whose arm is powerful (Ex 15:16), whose right hand is victorious (Ex 13:6; Ps 44:3) who repeatedly hardens Pharaoh’s heart (e.g. Ex 7:13) and frees Israel from bondage

Take feedback and conclude by explaining the term apocalypse (C above) is a Greek word meaning ‘disclosure’ or ‘revelation’. The term apocalyptic is applied to writings dating from about 200 BCE to 200 CE that have a similar worldview. These are to be found in Jewish and Christian literature but in the Bible there is only one complete work, the Book of Revelation, and parts of others (e.g. Daniel 7-14; Mk 13 and parallels).

- An apocalypse may be described as a book or part of a book in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being such as an angel to a human ‘seer’. Revelation may be given in the form of dreams or visions of the heavenly world. The seer’s account of these visions or dreams may take the form of a narrative which describes historic events leading up to the seer’s own time and assuring God’s saving intervention in the future. Sometimes heavenly mysteries such as God’s divine plan for the future are revealed.
- Apocalypses tend to make extensive use of numbers, animals and colours as symbols that are interpreted for the seer e.g. Dn 7 there is the vision of the four beasts which represent the empires of the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Greeks. The number 4 is to be found in Rev 7:1-8 where it refers to the divisions of the created order (earth, wind fire, water) and in Rev 6:1-8 the four horsemen of the apocalypse each of whom rides a horse of a different colour (White, Red, Black, Pale Green). Symbols used in Book of Revelation include:

White	=	victory, also the brilliance of the divine glory (6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 13:14)
Red	=	violence and war
Black	=	famine and suffering
Pale green	=	decomposition and death
Lamb	=	sacrificial martyrdom
Lion	=	royal kingship of Jesus
Beasts	=	Satanic figures (Roman Emperor)
- The apocalyptic writer nearly always uses a pseudonym, presenting himself as a worthy figure from the past (Abraham, Moses, Enoch). The author of the only apocalypse in the New Testament identifies himself as John. There are other Christian apocalypses that were not included in the Christian canon (e.g. Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter).

Written Questions: The Bible is made up of many literary genres. Explain.

Outcomes: As a result of studying this section students should be able to

- present two examples of symbolic use of language from literature
- explain myth, epic and apocalypse
- give examples from biblical literature of symbolic language in myth, epic, and apocalypse