

## B. Misidentifying the genre

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The genre issue comes into the reading of Genesis 1-11, the Book of Job, the Book of Jonah, and apocalyptic works like Revelation, Ezekiel, and Daniel. History is more replete with names, places, sequences of time; but myth, saga, novelle, and the like, may have these elements as well. Especially in myth, the place where an event happens may not be of prime importance because myth uses story form to teach timeless, universal ideas.

The difference between history and non-historical genres is not always easy to recognize from the piece itself. External information is usually not available for ancient literature. Saga and some other genres are somewhat historical. They take a core of historical events and embellish them for didactic and affective purposes.

1. Jonah (For a more complete coverage of the specifics for introductory elements to this book, see elsewhere “Introductory Considerations on Jonah.”)

Two views have been taken of the Book of Jonah: (1) the historical and (2) the literary. Under the former, Jonah chronicles actual events. In the latter, the work is a short story that expresses general beliefs about God’s attitude toward people outside Israel. The significance of the matter along with the procedure for determining the genre is dealt with below.

Literary genre determines hermeneutical method and truth base. (1) As to method, putting Jonah in the literary genre affects what and how much readers are to get from it. They take less since place, time, and specific actions are vehicles for what the story teaches; hence, they are not actual, but typical. Other times, places, and acts could as well have been chosen. The truth intended did not happen in history; it is affirmed by the author in historical form. Characteristic truths rather than discrete events are the writer’s intent.

(2) The danger exists of getting too much out of the book. Planted events purportedly bear the author’s message. That leads to attaching significance to more features of the writing. Selectivity in historical writing is the closest thing to creativity that history involves. History restricts what a historian can do with it. As a result, the reader supposes significance for elements in a made-up story because they have been manufactured for a purpose.

(3) A final hermeneutical consequence is that wrong ideas may come from misclassification. If a historical piece is purely literary, a historical setting that called it forth has to be discovered, which affects its interpretation. In the case of Jonah, scholars sometimes propose that the book came from the period of reconstruction in reaction to a hyper-nationalism in Ezra and Nehemiah. Thus construed, Jonah advocates a position opposed to theirs. One of these prophets’ two positions must then be questionable.

Putting a historical book into a literary category also alters the truth base for its contents. In history the fact of occurrence guarantees the truth; the only issue is giving it a proper reading. In literature the correctness of the author’s perception must guarantee the truth. If the events described in Jonah actually happened, their implications are true: God does control the affairs of non-Jews; he does care about the heathen; the principle that human repentance leads to divine forgiveness operates among Gentiles as well (note Acts 12:18). If the events in Jonah did not happen, the correctness of its theological import rests on the writer’s source of insight. Inspiration rather than experience could provide that insight; short

story as much as parable can legitimately communicate a divine message. But the truth base being altered, error is more possible, interpretation more uncertain, and faith less grounded.

## 2. Job

Stylistic repetition appears in Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19: “*... and only I escaped to tell you.*” In 1:7 and 2:2 stylistic repetition occurs in Satan’s response to God’s question about where he had been: “*From going to and fro and up and down in the earth.*” Satan tells God twice that if he does such and such, Job will renounce him to his face (1:11; 2:5). In 1:8 and 2:3 God’s description of Job is given in the same way. Job 1:3 and 42:12 record the numbers of his sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys with exactly twice the number in the latter as in the former. His original seven sons and three daughters (1:2) are replaced exactly (42:13). Coincidence strains to explain so many elements and the highly patterned series of speeches in the book; so Job is more than straightforward history; it appears to be a drama composed around a historical person.

## 3. Genesis 1-11

For our take on Genesis 1-3, see on this website a position paper: *A Rationale for the Structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3.*

## 4. The gospel accounts of Jesus and his miracles

As we read the gospel accounts, we find no difficulty distinguishing parables Jesus told from miracles he did. The virgin birth and resurrection are told as sober history. Endeavors to make his virgin birth, miracles, and resurrection into something non-historical have been motivated by an antisupernatural bias that wants to remove divine intervention from the record because such things do not happen in scientism based on naturalism.

## 5. Revelation 2-3

Is this set of chapters a parable for the future history of the church or a straightforward description of seven contemporary churches and no more?

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