

Week 8: NT Genre Studies – Gospels and Acts

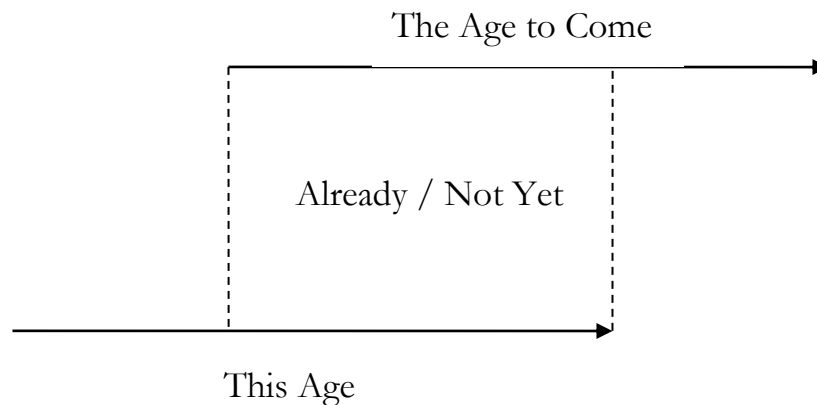
I. Having raced through the Old Testament, it is now time to delve into the rich world of New Testament genres.

II. Gospels

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

- a. “theological biographies”¹
 - b. “a narrative account concerning the public life and teaching of a significant person that is composed of discreet [sic] traditional units placed in the context of Scriptures...*Materially*, the genre consists of the message that God was at work in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection effecting his promises found in scriptures.”²
2. These books comprise the majority of the New Testament.
 3. Historical background is *moderately important* when dealing with Gospel.
 4. The “already” and the “not yet.” One key to understanding Jesus’ ministry is the idea of inaugurated eschatology. The idea is illustrated below:³



In Jewish thought there were only two ages; the present and the age to come. However, when Jesus brought the kingdom, he did not consummate the old age, but inaugurated the new one. Thus there are certain elements of the kingdom that are already present, and some that still await consummation. This is crucial in understanding the kingdom of God, which is the central theme of Jesus’ teaching ministry.

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997) 107.

² Robert Guelich, “The Gospel Genre,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. P. Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

³ I am again indebted to Brian Asbill for this chart.

B. Specific Rules

1. *Reading Horizontally and Vertically.*⁴

- a. Horizontally – comparing various issues between the gospels (e.g. how each gospel treats the feeding of the 5,000).
- b. Vertically – How a theme is developed in one gospel.
- c. Vertical reading takes precedence over horizontal reading.

2. *Literary Forms*⁵

- a. Pronouncement Stories – a short self-contained narrative that functions primarily to introduce a key climactic saying (or pronouncement of Jesus).
- b. Parables – Stories that call forth a response on the part of the reader.⁶
 - i. They are in some sense allegorical.⁷
 - ii. However the allegories fall into categories, which must be better understood. The following diagram illustrates this:⁸

Continuous Allegory Realistic Reporting

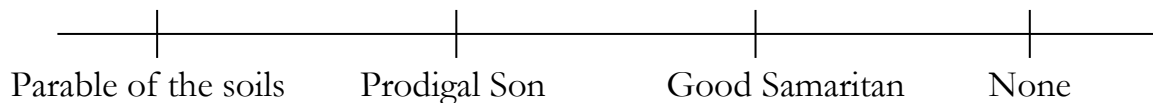
(most pts. have corresponding meanings)
(there is essentially no allegory)

Partially Allegorical

(a few main pts. have corresponding meanings)

Main-Point Allegory

(only the main thrust of the parable has a corresponding meaning)



Case Example #11: The Good Samaritan⁹

⁴ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 403-404.

⁵ Ibid., 411-418.

⁶ Ibid., *How to Read the Bible*, 138.

⁷ For a defense of this, see Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downer's Grove, Ill: IVP, 1990) 29-69.

⁸ Ibid., *Hermeneutics TTBE* 517, 30.

⁹ From Acns.com, *The Kingdom Parables*, available at: <http://www.acns.com/~mm9n/Kingdom/kingdom1.htm>.

In a classic example of allegorical interpretation, St. Augustine found the following symbolism in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho = Adam
Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell
Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality
thieves = the devil and his angels
stripped him = namely, of his immortality
beat him = by persuading him to sin
and left him half-dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he is half-dead

The priest and Levite = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament
The Samaritan = is said to mean Guardian; therefore Christ himself is meant
bound his wounds = means binding the restraint of sin
oil = comfort of good hope
wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
beast = the flesh of Christ's incarnation
inn = the church
innkeeper = Paul
the morrow = after the Resurrection
two-pence = promise of this life and the life to come

Why is this a bad example of allegorical interpretation, and how would you correct it? Also, what would an appropriate use of allegory look like in interpreting this parable?

II. *Acts*

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

a. “theological history”¹⁰

b. “narrative literature...written to enrich Christians in our purpose and identity as the people of God.”¹¹

2. Background information, is, like it was in the gospels, *moderately important*.

3. It is an accurate account of what happened in the early church,¹² and yet is strikingly theological, revealing the Spirit’s work in empowering individuals for ministry.

¹⁰ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 418.

¹¹ Ibid., *Playing with Fire*, 217.

B. Specific Rules

1. Remember that Acts represents a very unique period in the history of the church, and it is also a narrative. Thus, we must not consider every event in the book normative, and we must not make everything out to be prescription.
2. What *is* normative is what the book intends to teach.¹³ Thus, while Acts might say many interesting things about church leadership, the baptism of the Spirit, and the nature of the early Christian community, these are not normative unless the narrative intends to teach them.

Case Example #12: Acts 4:32-36

This passage seems to be promoting a communal lifestyle for Christians, where goods are distributed equally among the people. Some have even seen in this passage biblical precedent for Communism! Here are a few questions:

- What is the intent of the narrative?
- What principles here are normative for all believers at all times?
- What here was only applicable for the early church?

Hopefully, these kinds of questions should help you in sifting through the book of Acts and seeing what applies today and what doesn't.

¹² See esp. Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989).

¹³ *Ibid.*, *How to Read the Bible*, 108.