

PART THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 4 LITERARY GENRES

Literary genres are the usual ways or ways of narrating, expressing oneself and understanding of a certain era or region. It is very important to know them in order to interpret the Bible correctly:

“However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words... The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another” (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dei Verbum 12)

That is, God inspired the human author to communicate to us the truths necessary for our salvation. The human author affirmed or denied things using the ways of speaking of his time. Since what the human author affirms or denies is what God uses to teach us, it is convenient that we know those ways of speaking and expressing oneself of the time (those literary genres) in order to know what the inspired author really meant (literal sense).

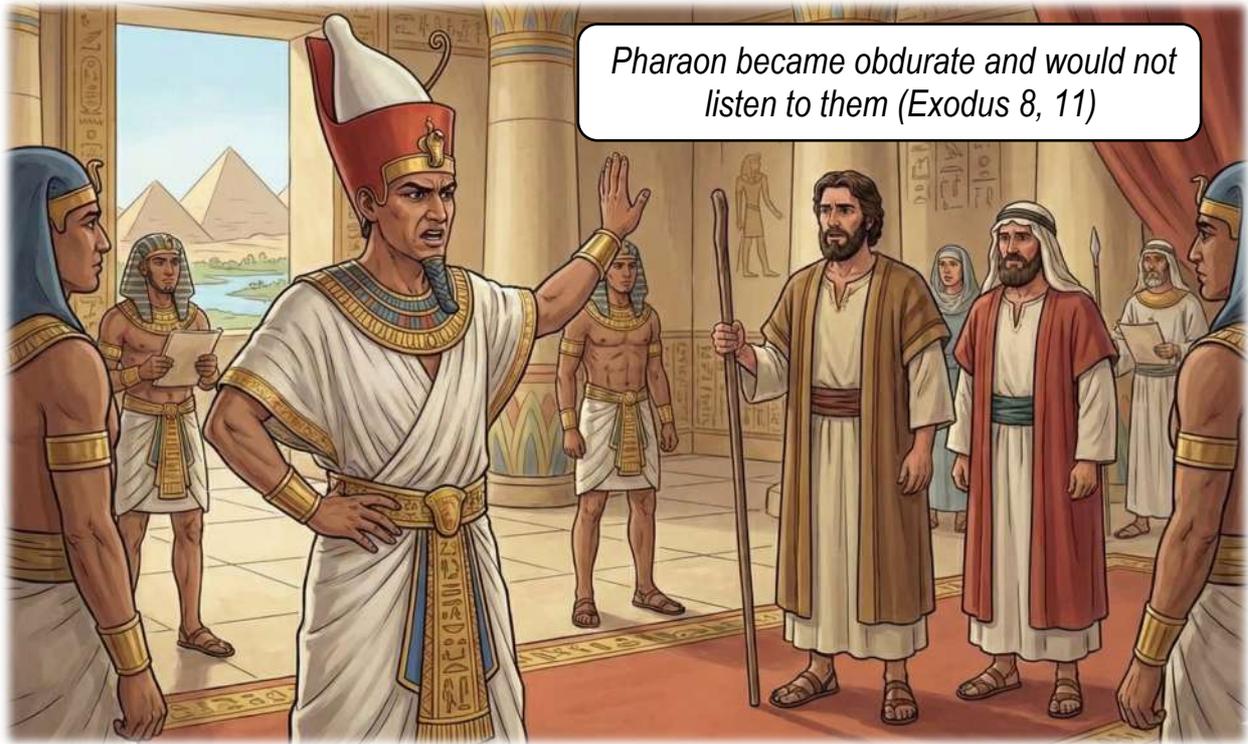
Let's look at two examples of how knowledge of literary genres helps us to properly understand what God wanted to teach us through the human author:

In the book of Exodus we are told that when Moses asked Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to free the people of Israel from slavery, Pharaoh flatly refused. And this the Bible presents as a direct divine action, since God says to Moses:

I will make him obstinate (Exodus 4, 21)

A person might misinterpret this text thinking, "God inspired Pharaoh with a lack of compassion so that he would not deliver the Israelites from slavery." But then, does God inspire evil? No. The correct interpretation of this text is found by analyzing the way of speaking that was used at the time in which it was written. At that time this expression did not mean that God directly hardened Pharaoh's heart, as if He had inspired such evil. God wanted the deliverance of the people of Israel. What this expression meant is that Pharaoh, in his freedom, became hardened, and God allowed such a thing (He did not punish him immediately for it) because from that bad decision of

Pharaoh the Lord was going to bring greater good for His people. This is what is known as God's *permissive will*: God allows something (that he does not want) because he will get greater good from that evil. Today we would surely have written: "God allowed Pharaoh's heart to be hardened...": But at that time the biblical author expressed this truth (*God's permissive will*) with the words we see in the biblical text (attributing Pharaoh's hardening directly to God) because it was the way they understood that this was allowed by God and entered mysteriously into his plan (God does not miss anything). In fact, Scripture itself makes it clear in another passage:



In this text it is very clear that it was Pharaoh, personally and freely, who stubbornly refused to let the people of Israel go free.

Second example. Jesus teaches us:

*If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.
It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled
than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire.*
(Matthew 18, 8)

Apparently with these words it seems that Jesus invites us to mutilate some parts of the body. But it should not be understood that way. Here the Lord used in His explanation a literary genre called *hyperbole* (which we still use today). It consists of exaggerating a reality to highlight it. With this exaggerated comparison, Jesus wanted to emphasize the need to radically remove from us everything that can lead us to sin.