

Week 5: Genre Studies – An Introduction

I. At this point in the class, we have covered roughly half of the course material! At this point, we narrow the hermeneutical lens, and focus specifically on the various *genres* of the Bible. However, before we can examine specific genres, we need to see what they are, and why they are vitally important in the process of interpretation.

II. *What They Are:*

A. Wellek and Warren – “Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both the outer form (specific meter or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose – more crudely, subject and audience).”¹

B. Zuck – “the category or the kind of writing characterized by a particular form(s) and/or content.”²

C. From these definitions, we may say that a genre is a particular kind of writing with certain defining characteristics.

D. I. Howard Marshall makes a few noteworthy observations about genre that help in making the concept more tangible:

“If I were to write an account of what I did on Christmas day, the style in which I would do so would vary depending on whether I was writing a letter to my aunt, or producing a report for a newspaper, or writing a Christmas story for children based on my experiences, or composing a poem about it, or even writing a song about it. These are different styles for different occasions.”³

1. From the above example, it becomes clear that genres are shared categories through which we communicate. Whether it is a novel, an investigative report, a legislative bill, the funnies section in the newspaper, or an autobiography, we instinctively understand and are wary of these genres as we read. Further, we know the controls upon these genres, and what they are attempting to communicate.

2. Just as there are contemporary genres through which we understand the written word, there are also biblical literary genres.

Here is a list of just a few of these genres:

- a. Narrative
- b. Law
- c. Poetry
- d. Wisdom
- e. Apocalypse

¹ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956) 219.

² *Ibid.*, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 126.

³ I. Howard Marshall, “How Do We Interpret the Bible for Today?” *Themelios* 5 (1980) 7.

- f. Prophecy
 - g. Gospel
 - h. Epistle
3. These genres function in a similar manner as do modern genres. As Stein notes,

“It is clear that there are various kinds of literary forms in the Bible. Each of them possesses its own rules of interpretation. The authors in using these literary forms consciously submitted themselves to the rules governing these literary forms in order to share their meaning with their readers. Each author assumed that his readers would interpret his words according to the rules governing that literary form.”⁴

III. *Why They are Important*

A. From the preceding, the question of *why* literary genres are important has been partially answered (albeit implicitly). However, it is necessary to look more closely at why these genres are important to understand, as some of the pitfalls of failing to take note of them.

B. A Few Considerations:⁵

1. Since genres are the shared conventions through which humans communicate, they cannot be dismissed as archaic and irrelevant. Dismissing biblical genres is just as hazardous as dismissing contemporary genres. This is because the dismissal of genre (in any case) is a dismissal of the controls upon meaning. When one dismisses these controls, he or she is dismissing the one of the crucial means available of determining meaning.
2. Further, genres are God’s *modus operandi* in communicating revelation. As the writer of Hebrews states; “Long ago, at many times and in *many ways*, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” God has used a variety of forms in communicating his truth (i.e. poetry, narrative, parable, epistle, etc.), and thus an understanding of these means is crucial in understanding God’s communication to mankind. This truth has a couple of profound implications:
 - a. *The genres of the Bible are accessible to common people.* God communicated scripture through shared literary conventions (i.e. genres) that were well known to common people. In light of this,

⁴ Ibid., *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 75.

⁵ Much of this is taken from Ibid., *Hermeneutics TTBE* 517.

genres are not a subject of study accessible only to the scholar, but are intended to be understood by average people!

b. *Scripture is understood through larger units of thought.* In the history of the church, many have erroneously believed that because every word of the Bible is inspired by God, individual words should be the main emphasis of interpretation. However, this is a misunderstanding both of how context works (as we saw in week 3), and how God communicates in scripture. Words are not independent entities chalked full of inherent meaning, but units of thought which only make sense within a given context.

Understanding that God communicates through genres helps in avoiding this view, for we see that the emphasis in God's communication is on larger units of thought (i.e. genres).

IV. Conclusion

Hopefully, this class has sufficiently demonstrated the need to understand genres. Genres are indispensable in understanding the meaning of the biblical text, for they control the meaning intended in a given context. In virtue of this, it should be clear that we ignore genre at our own peril. If you have any remaining doubts about the legitimacy of studying biblical genres, the following case example should dispel them.

Case Example #6: John Dominic Crossan, the Resurrection, and Genres

A few years ago, noted Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan debated world-famous Christian apologist William Lane Craig on the issue of the Resurrection.⁶ Craig argued that the Resurrection was a literal, historical event, while Crossan argued that the event carried only figurative significance. One of the most important points Crossan made related to the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁷ He says that we can spend all the time we want investigating whether or not there actually was a Good Samaritan, but we are missing the point, which is that we should emulate his behavior. The implication was obvious. The significance of the resurrection was not that it actually happened, but that it was a story embodying important spiritual truths (e.g. hope, joy, victory, etc.). Note that the Good Samaritan falls into the genre (or sub-genre) of parable. Are the resurrection accounts parables? Would this have any bearing on Crossan's

⁶ See Paul Copan ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

argument? The answer is clearly yes, for the resurrection accounts do not meet even the first qualifications of being parable, and thus the argument is fallacious. What a difference an awareness of genres makes!