

## How an appreciation of genre shapes interpretation

Jonathan Appleby, February 2008

The Bible is literature. This may sound obvious, but in fact it is often overlooked by students of the Bible, who perhaps have a tendency to look 'through' the Bible to the authors and events described, without paying too much attention to the text itself. This can be a mistake, as I hope to show, and can sometimes lead to us misinterpreting texts.

The Bible is God's revelation to humanity. This revelation was to human authors and editors, who sought to express that revelation in human language. In committing that revelation to a literary form, those human authors used literary language; the words were not just written down 'on the spur of the moment', but were the product of much creative and artistic talent – one could draw a parallel with art and say that (at least for most of the Old Testament) the literary quality is more akin to a fine oil painting than a rough sketch drawing. Writing about the literary language of the Bible, Tate describes it as

Creative and imaginative language, language adorned with artistic devices that transform and intensify ordinary language or everyday speech. This literary quality requires interpretation, and of central importance in interpretation are the concepts of genre and sub-genre.<sup>1</sup>

So what is genre, and how does it shape interpretation? Genre is simply the literary form or type which a text exhibits, such as poetry or narrative (story) or

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<sup>1</sup> W.Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation, An Integrated Approach*, Rev.ed., (Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p67.

letter. Each genre has a different set of literary codes and conventions which govern its use; without a knowledge of those codes, there is a risk that the text will not be interpreted correctly. Robert Alter states that 'a coherent reading of any art work, whatever the medium, requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates.'<sup>2</sup> The challenge then, for today's student, is to recognise the relationship between what is said (content) and how it is said (genre), and so avoid misinterpretation of a text.<sup>3</sup>

Within the Hebrew genres of narrative and poetry are literary forms (sometimes called sub-genres) such as hyperbole, euphemism, metaphor, simile, symbolism and personification. Some of these sub-genres are familiar to modern readers; others are alien to us as a result of cultural distance or the passage of time. These sub-genres are used creatively by the author to enhance the meaning of the text, and again, the challenge for us is to recognise the significance of these literary devices as we read the text.

In order to illustrate the significance of genre for biblical interpretation, we will look firstly at the literary form of Genesis 1-3.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (Basic Books, 1981), p47.

<sup>3</sup> W.Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation, An Integrated Approach*, p70.

### Genesis 1-3

The stories in Genesis are amongst the most familiar in the whole Bible, often being taught in Sunday Schools as an accurate record of real events. There is a tendency for the modern reader to either read these chapters as historical narrative (a genre which we are familiar with in other contexts), or to dismiss them as myth – something entirely fictional. So what is the genre of Genesis 1-3?

Scholars have compared Genesis 1–11 to other ancient origin stories, and have noted many similarities in form and style with e.g. the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics from Babylon, and the Sumerian Flood Story and Sumerian King List. These ancient texts contain much that is extraordinary, and yet also much that clearly had a basis in history. For instance, the names of kings have been verified from other sources, and many places referred to have been discovered by archaeology. Genesis contains several genealogies, and these would have been regarded as historical by the Israelites, together with the personalities described – Adam, Noah, Abraham, and so on. However, Wenham notes that ‘the first three chapters of Genesis do suggest that they are dealing with a different world from the present’<sup>4</sup>, citing in particular how Chapter 1 is an ‘overture’ to the whole book, and Chapters 2 and 3 are ‘set in an era quite distinct from the historical period’.<sup>5</sup> Wenham tentatively categorises Chapters 1 to 3 as *Urgeschichte*, (that is, Protohistory) or Origin Story.

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (SPCK, 2003), p14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p15.

Genesis 1–3 differs from the other creation epics from a theological point of view. Whereas the other accounts noted above spoke of the origin of the world being the result of the action of many different gods, Genesis reveals that everything is the result of the action and will of one supreme and moral God.<sup>6</sup> The author of Genesis 1–3 has written his account primarily for the purpose of communicating this theological truth.

Further clues to the correct genre can be found by studying the structure of Genesis 1. There is a clear logical ordering of the days of creation, with days 1-3 concerned with providing structure to creation, and then days 4-6 concerned with filling that structure. This ordering follows the prototype given in Genesis 1:2 where we are told that the earth was a) without structure and b) empty.

There are other significant aspects to the structure of Genesis 1. Days 1-3 and then days 4-6 involve, respectively, progression from heaven to earth. In an article on Genesis 1 Watts sees 'the preparation of the land (Day 3) and the formation of humanity (Day 6) respectively as the climactic moment.'<sup>7</sup> Watts notes the highly stylised literary pattern, and advises against taking a literalistic reading of this text.<sup>8</sup>

Yet another clue to the genre of Genesis 1 lies in the fact that it appears to have been used in worship; it has a liturgical form to it. Most modern translations of

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, p17.

<sup>7</sup> Rikki Watts, 'Making Sense of Genesis 1', *The American Scientific Affiliation, Science in Christian Perspective*, <<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Bible-Science/6-02Watts.html>> p4 [accessed 11 Jan 2008].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p4.

this chapter present it in the form of a hymn or poetry; 'a meditation on the work of creation so that we can understand that the creation is related to God'.<sup>9</sup>

Summarising this section on Genesis 1-3, we can say that these chapters can be described as a unique combination of different genres, including poetry, hymn, and a sort of theological narrative. The term mimetic narrative is sometimes used to describe such a narrative which re-presents or re-arranges history in an artistic form, to 'guide the reader into the discovery of some universal truth'.<sup>10</sup> This is an apt description of Genesis 1-3, with its emphasis on the one God as creator and sustainer of the universe. It is clear from these observations that we should be very wary of interpreting these chapters in a literalistic sense.

## **Prophecy**

Prophecy is sometimes described as a distinct genre of literature; however the prophetic books are tremendously varied in form, and draw on a variety of genres such as oracle, poetry and narrative, depending on what the prophet is trying to communicate, often combining several literary styles in just a few verses. To illustrate this we will look briefly at some specific examples from the book of Amos.

## **Amos**

Amos is very creative and flexible in its style, whilst also drawing on standard forms. One standard form or genre is the Judgement Oracle, and an example of this is found in Amos 3:9-11. A Judgement Oracle is in the form of a message

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<sup>9</sup> David Wilkinson, *Message of Creation*, (IVP, 2002), p276.

<sup>10</sup> W.Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation, An Integrated Approach*, p83.

from God, arranged in a standard format - a statement of circumstances, and the judgment which follows as a consequence.<sup>11</sup> In Amos 3:9-11 we see this standard format, prefaced by an introduction calling for witnesses. Judgement Oracles seem in general to proclaim something which is no longer avoidable, and this would have been clear to the original hearers familiar with this genre.

Another standard genre form is the Warning. Examples of this occur in Amos 5:4-6 and also in 5:14-15. Amos warns of judgment, but then exhorts the reader to “seek the Lord and live”, and provides motivation prefaced by the word “or”. Similarly, in 5:14-15 Amos exhorts the reader to “seek good, not evil”, and again provides motivation prefaced by the word “perhaps”.<sup>12</sup> Warnings seem to offer a possibility of God relenting from his judgment of the people.

A common feature of prophetic literature is known as the Messenger Formula. This is a way of distinguishing the prophet’s (messenger’s) own words from those of the message itself, usually from the Lord. Examples abound in Amos, but a typical example is found in Amos 3:1 – ‘Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel’ – followed by the message itself.

Amos, in common with other prophets, often sought to make his point by deliberately using a genre form in an unusual way or in a different setting. An example of this is Amos’ speech in Amos 4:4-5, which follows the pattern of a law or priestly instruction. However, the setting in Amos is rather different from that of a priest in the temple instructing worshippers. Amos is not a priest, and his words

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Bulkeley, Genre: Kinds of Literature, *Bible Study notes and Biblical Commentaries*, <<http://bible.gen.nz/amos/literary/genre.htm>> p3 [accessed 4 Jan 2008]

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p6

are condemning the established worship system with its trappings. Furthermore, in a typical example of the priestly instruction genre, the reason for the instructions would be 'based on the nature and acts of God', whereas in this example the reason 'concerns the desires of the human listener'.<sup>13</sup> The irony of the words would not have been lost to hearers of Amos' day, but to the modern reader these subtleties are not readily apparent.

The genre of Amos 5:13 is probably that of a proverb. Under normal circumstances (e.g. in the book of Proverbs), the surface meaning of a proverb would be its intended meaning. However, it can be seen from the context of the proverb that Amos has deformed the meaning in a sarcastic way, and has turned it into 'an ironic attack on the nature of life in Jeroboam's Israel'.<sup>14</sup>

One of the common genre forms in the Psalms is the Hymn, the function of which is basically 'to praise God because he *is* God'.<sup>15</sup> In Amos 4:13 there is a quotation of a part of a Hymn, which Amos borrows and uses for a different purpose. Amos 4:12 follows on from a series of warnings, and concludes "So prepare to meet your God!" This has the effect of turning the extract from the hymn into a description of the God who is about to punish. The verses immediately following the hymn (Amos 5:1-3) are a lament, again setting the hymn in a different context to that normally found in the Psalms.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Bulkeley, Genre: Kinds of Literature, *Bible Study notes and Biblical Commentaries*, <<http://bible.gen.nz/amos/literary/genre.htm>> p9

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p9

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Bratcher, Patterns for Life: Structure, Genre and Theology in Psalms, <<http://www.crivoice.org/psalmgenre.html>> [accessed 4 Jan 2008]

<sup>16</sup> Tim Bulkeley, Genre: Kinds of Literature, *Bible Study notes and Biblical Commentaries*, <<http://bible.gen.nz/amos/literary/genre.htm>> p9

As we have seen above, the compiler of the book of Amos has drawn upon a wide variety of literary styles or genres in order to communicate the prophet's message in a way which would have meaning to contemporary hearers. The frequent switching between genres within a book such as Amos can cause difficulties for modern students and requires more effort to understand.

In conclusion, genre is part of the process of communication between the author and the reader; it provides part of the 'framework' for communication by giving literary convention. An author's choice of genre, and sometimes departure from the normal conventions of a genre, help us as readers to discern what the original intentions of the author were. The modern reader needs to exercise care when trying to bridge the cultural gap which exists between the present day and the Hebrew world of the Bible; an appreciation of genre can provide vital clues to aid interpretation.

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