

THE USE OF GENRE IN BIBLE INTERPRETATION

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INTRODUCTION

One might find two randomly placed scraps of paper, covered with words on one side. One of the scraps begins, "Once upon a time . . ." while the text on the other begins "dearly beloved, we are gathered together. . . ." Many people in our society, upon reading or hearing these beginning words, would recognize two different kinds, or genres, of writing. Presumably the two texts arose in two different settings (or situations in life). The two texts serve different purposes. Analyzing these texts and articulating their settings, their functions, and their various parts is roughly equivalent to genre analysis. What are the setting, purpose, and constituent parts of the full text of those matters which are introduced by these "formulas"? To answer these questions relative to any text is to engage in aspects of genre analysis.

The following pages seek to encourage the reader to apply the steps of genre analysis as part of his procedure in the study of the Holy Scriptures. First, the paper considers some definitions related to genre analysis. Second, the essay surveys some relationships between genre analysis and historical critical methodologies in biblical studies. The third section provides comments on procedures, complexities, and values of genre analysis. Fourth, the paper offers brief observations about selected genres in the Old Testament. The fifth and sixth sections suggest, respectively, possible pitfalls and positive aspects of genre analysis as a procedure in Bible study.

DEFINITIONS

Genre is a French word which means "kind, sort, style."¹ *Gattung* is a German word which approximates the French *Genre*, roughly translatable as "form" or "type." "In German, *Gattung* denotes a group of things which have . . . distinguishing characteristics in common."² *Gattung* has been used to designate longer literary units, for example, Gospel, Epistle, Apocalypse. English often translates *Gattung* as *Genre*. The German word form is sometimes used to designate smaller literary units often thought to have arisen in "oral traditions."

Form criticism, translated from *Formgeschichte* (lit. "history of Form") gained impetus in biblical studies from Hermann Gunkel. His implementation of form criticism (i.e. critical studies of the Bible so as to discern its various literary forms) began by distinguishing prose from poetry. He then subdivided each of these "kinds" of literature into a variety of categories. Each member of a given category shared several of the same features with other category members.

This paper will frequently use the term genre to indicate major kinds of literature, especially in the Old Testament, such as, Narrative, Prophecy, Psalms, and other categories. The term subgenre will designate what appear to be various categories of literature within one of the broader genres. Psalms is an appropriate label for a major genre. There seem to be clear examples of at least two subgenres in biblical psalms literature. Psalms 3 and 89 are illustrations of the subgenre lament psalms. Psalms 8 and 100 are illustrations of the subgenre praise psalms. For variety of expression terms like "category" and "kind" will also appear. It is hoped that the context of the particular term will clarify this writer's intent.

¹Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox P, 1971), 67.

²Ibid., 66.

Genre, as in the title of this paper, means a unit of scripture which has a combination of vocabulary, mood, ordering of its “parts,” and purpose in common with other units of Scripture with similar features. Each unit of scripture so characterized may be said to participate in that genre. This definition does not necessarily conform to published definitions.

FORM CRITICISM AND OTHER HISTORICAL CRITICAL APPROACHES

Form Criticism And Herman Gunkel

In the present hermeneutical milieu genre analysis, in its general practice within biblical studies, is closely related to one of the historical-critical approaches to the Bible called form criticism. Form criticism “may be loosely defined as the analysis of the typical forms by which human existence is expressed linguistically; traditionally this referred particularly to their oral, pre-literary state, such as legends, hymns, curses, laments, etc.”³ Thus, Gunkel (1862-1932) was concerned not only about the various “forms” which seemed always to occur in generally the same way in the Bible, but also in the oral prehistory of the various forms, (e.g., a hymn usually has a call to praise, a cause for praise, and a renewed call to praise. Psalm 117 is a very clear example, while Psalm 8 is a bit more complex, but the common pattern is evident.).

The lines between the various critical methodologies are at times difficult to distinguish. Three methodologies have sometimes been considered as branches of form criticism.⁴ Literary criticism is principally concerned with authorship of a book or blocks of material. Tradition criticism is concerned narrowly with the *preliterary* development of a body of literature or the history of a specific theme or motif. More broadly, tradition criticism seeks to bring together the results of literary criticism (i.e., source criticism) and of form criticism and thus provide a complete history of blocks of text from their oral stages through their compilation into whatever form they now appear.

Redaction criticism is concerned with the final form of a text. The redactor is not an author. He has received an oral and/or written tradition composed or spoken by others. He has revised the material so that it displays a certain emphasis and expresses central themes⁵ and thus promotes his own theological agenda.⁶

Gunkel assumed that, when these forms were taken up into the biblical text by their writers, the forms already had a long history in oral tradition. He gave qualified acceptance to the supposed findings of source criticism and its assumption of the evolutionary development of Israel’s religion. Accordingly, Israel’s religious literature, the Hebrew Old Testament, also experienced an evolutionary development. He also agreed with source criticism’s basic anti-supernatural bias.

Gunkel felt that to understand the meaning of a given form one needed an awareness of how it was used through its oral pre-history. His “hope for a literary history of Israel faded as form criticism became absorbed” in analyzing the surface dimensions of the forms themselves.⁷ Tradition criticism, which arose in the 1930s, did concern itself with an attempt to recover the history of the passing on of various religious traditions in Israel.

Some factors of the biblical material to which Gunkel called attention are worthy of interest to any student of Scripture. His suggestions of broad generic categories, along with some of the more specialized genres that fit within the broader categories, are helpful. In the prose listing below, only romance and historical narrative are useful. His breakdown of genres follows:

³Ibid., 62.

⁴Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 17.

⁵Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Scribner’s, 1969), 57-58.

⁶Tucker, *Form Criticism*, 19.

⁷Soulen, *Handbook*, 63.

PROSE

myth
folk-tales
sagas
romances
legends
historical narratives

POETRY

wisdom
prophetic oracles
secular lyric poetry
hymns
thanksgivings
eschatological Psalms

Gunkel further noted that each of these types of literature arose out of a specific life situation. To the extent that one can recognize the situation in life which brought forth the historical narrative, prophetic oracle, or epistle, to that extent one can better appreciate the intent and content of the genre itself in the given instance. The basis for proposing the life situation must come from data in the scriptures themselves. That is, the data must be found in the instance of the genre or in any of the successive circles of biblical context.

Gunkel also proposed some helpful questions to ask of a piece which the interpreter may consider to be an instance of a given genre: Who is speaking? Who are the listeners? What is the setting? At what effect does the speaker aim his piece?

Form critics in the latter half of the twentieth century acknowledge that the interrelationships of genre, setting, function or intention, and structure are far more complex than their predecessors supposed.⁸ Even though these issues are somewhat complex, it is self evident that a knowledge of these factors as they relate to a target text assists the interpreter in gaining a careful understanding of the passage and enhances his or her ability to articulate an exposition of that text.

GENRE ANALYSIS : PROCEDURES, COMPLEXITIES, VALUES

The Old Testament itself does not define its genres, but its writers were just as familiar with the genres they used as they were with “the rules of Hebrew (and Aramaic) grammar” which they also used, without telling the modern-day Hebrew reader those rules.⁹

Tucker suggests four concerns to address in analyzing the genre of a unit of Scripture. First, analyze the *structure* of the unit. A unit may consist of a few verses or a whole book.¹⁰ If the unit is larger than the approximate size of a Bible “chapter” one may expect more than one genre, and therefore a subunit as part of the target unit. One isolates a unit by looking for opening “formulas” like “Hear this word . . .” (Amos 4:1), or “The word of the Lord came to me . . .” (Ezek 6:1). Changes in genre, content, mood, tone, person, and tense may also show where one unit ends and another begins.¹¹

Second, analyze the *genre*. Is the unit prose or poetry? If one can gather three or four units from various parts of the Bible which are alike, then he may compare these units in terms of size, general content, or order in which the content is arranged. In doing this, one can see which “elements are more or less constant and which are variable”.¹² Is it like any other known unit in respect to these features? If it is a poem, does it have a complaint element in it or is it totally concerned with the power, majesty, and reign of God? If it is prose, is it a story of an historical event which has an “obvious” theological concern like Genesis 3, or is it a story of an historical “event” whose theological concern is more subtle, like the book of Ruth?

⁸Ibid.

⁹Tucker, *Form Criticism*, 11.

¹⁰Gerhard von Rad shows how Genesis through Joshua may be seen as a unit susceptible to form-critical analysis, in *The Problem Of The Hexateuch And Other Essays* (London: SCM P, 1984), 1-78.

¹¹Tucker, *Form Criticism*, 13.

¹²Ibid., 14.

Third, analyze the *setting*. Setting involves identifying the probable sociological matrix of a given unit of speech. Much of the Book of Proverbs would be appropriate in a home which has high ideals for its children, or in a school which trains young men for positions of leadership in government or other public arenas. Psalm 95:1 and Amos 4:4 are perhaps “presumed” to be the voice of a priest (or some other worship leader) summoning devotees to worship. In comparing these passages, if the genre is the same, is that genre used in the same way in both texts? What kind of idea or mood might one expect as he reads on? Sometimes he will be surprised at what actually follows.

Fourth, analyze the *intention*. Genres arise out of particular situations to meet specific needs in those situations. In Israel’s case, God instructed them to use certain genres for particular situations, as in the instance of the prescribed Aaronic blessing to be pronounced by the priests when they bless the Israelites (Num 6:24-26).¹³ In considering the intention of a genre in a given text, one should focus both on the general intent of the genre itself and the intent of that particular use of the genre.

Tucker notes that religious speech and literary genres are chosen for the ability of the genre to express the desired theological beliefs. “It is not by accident that the distinctive and prevalent genre for theological expression among Israel’s neighbors was myth . . . while Israel spoke of God by describing what he had done in the life of the nation in historic events.”¹⁴ Thus the Hebrew OT has a large amount of historical narrative.

That there was an oral tradition behind sayings and stories in the Bible is highly probable. Holland¹⁵ suggests that Luke may have drawn on “oral narrative,” but more likely Luke 1:1-3 refers to written narratives. Ανατάξασθαι and διήγουν can both lend support to his sources as being either oral or written. It is likely that much in the Book of Genesis was known by Moses’ Hebrew contemporaries, though obviously not in the authoritative form which God enabled Moses to record.

The likelihood is present for some kind of oral history before the biblical written record with regard to much of what is recorded in both Old and New Testaments. However, that is not an issue which we are to pursue in our efforts at Bible interpretation, except to the extent that there may be hints or clues to that oral stage in the text of Scripture. Our concern is to decipher all we can about what God has caused to be recorded based upon what is in fact recorded.

“The idea of genre” functions on several levels.¹⁶ An entire book can constitute a genre; for example, the gospel of Luke is written in a form or genre called “gospel.” The Gospel of Luke has within it several well marked passages which illustrate the genre of parable. For example, Luke 15 has three parables.

The fact that there are genres within genres suggests that there is a “larger unity” which has employed a variety of “subgenres” to convey its overall message. That larger unity, as in the case of a gospel, may itself constitute an example of a genre. These ‘genres within genres,’ resulting in a variegated unity, point up some of the error in source criticism.

Authors have a message to convey, and they are generally aware of the conventions available to them for communicating their message. These conventions are in fact so many “rules” for employing one or more genres to facilitate the author’s intended message. If the reader is aware of the “rules” which the author has employed, he is thereby aware of the characteristics of the genre(s) which the author has utilized, though he may not know the “name” of the genre. To the degree that the reader is aware of the rules the author has employed, to that degree he will more accurately and fully grasp the author’s intended meaning.¹⁷

¹³Ibid., 21.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵John Holland, “Luke 1-9:20” in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: World Books, 1989), 6.

¹⁶Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 1991), 149.

¹⁷Bill Arp, “Authorial Intent”pretation” in this journal.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SELECTED GENRES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Narrative

The analysis of narrative literature in terms of its genre can become complex. It is difficult to apply aspects of form criticism observations to narrative without bringing aspects of rhetorical criticism into focus. Also, narrative criticism has attracted much attention in the past twenty years. Narrative criticism is in part a supposed refinement of a combination of form and rhetorical criticism applied to narrative literature. One result has been to find narrative “everywhere.” While the technique may help one to “see” something that is really present, which was previously overlooked, it can also encourage one to “see” what really is not in the text. The procedure of narrative criticism is both complex and complicated.

Kaiser suggests some basic features to note when studying biblical narrative¹⁸. He identifies scene, plot, point of view, characterization, and setting as common components of a story. A survey of features of these components follows.

Scene

A scene in a narrative is comparable to a frame in a movie.¹⁹ The scene emphasizes deeds and words by the various characters. If a group is involved, the group functions as a character in a scene. There are usually two or more characters per scene.

In a biblical narrative, God is often one of the characters. When God is not directly mentioned, His presence is implied by the point of view which the narrator or prophet assumes. The interpreter should identify the scenes and propose a summary statement for each of the scenes. The statement should focus on the words/deeds of the main characters exactly as presented by the narrator. One may assume that the author expresses directly or indirectly God’s point of view on the “issues” in the narrative.

Plot

A narrator is expressing a story. All stories have plots. Each plot has a beginning, middle, and end.²⁰ The movement of the plot conforms to the sequences from beginning to end. Narratives begin in comparative serenity, then move into conflict and climax.

The hero (often God) facilitates resolution after which the story returns to serenity. Genesis 22 has often been used as an example. That narrative begins with God’s quiet request to sacrifice Isaac. The climax of the narrative has the Angel of the Lord instructing Abraham to not slay Isaac. The end of the narrative has Abraham and Isaac returning to the two young men (Gen 22:5, 19).

Plots can be complex. Isaac’s blessing on Jacob (Gen 27) has two flashpoints. Isaac almost discovered Jacob’s deceit when the father recognized the voice of Jacob, but the hands of Esau (v. 22). Immediately after Jacob’s departure from Isaac, Esau returned (v. 30), only to learn that his birthright was gone (v. 36). The pace of a plot may change. Short sentences and omission of detail speed up a story. Repetition and direct speech “slow down” a story.

¹⁸Walter C. Kaiser, “Narrative,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes, A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville: Broadman, 1995), 69-88, especially 70-75.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 72.

Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective from which the narrator tells the story. Point of view can function on four planes.²¹

Spatial

The narrator locates himself with a particular character in the story. The narrator is with Abraham rather than Lot (Gen 13:1, 18). The narrator moves with Abraham's servant when the latter takes his journey from Canaan to Abraham's former home in his search for a wife for Isaac.

Temporal

The narrator may tell the story from within. Nehemiah's first person style enables the reader to be present as the story unfolds. John tells his story of Jesus from a post-resurrection perspective. He is reporting past events which point to Christ's glory (John 1:14; 2:11).²²

Psychological

Does the narrator note the thoughts or emotions of any of the characters? Luke notes the thought of Simeon (Luke 2:25).²³

Ideological

What evaluation or analysis does the author volunteer? Does he do so directly or indirectly? Kaiser asserts, "If the writer is God's chosen instrument for revealing the narrative . . . one must carefully note that the [narrator's] point of view . . . is the one that God would take."²⁴ The reader must give credence to this point of view.

Characterization

Hebrew narrative is frugal in its description of characters; hence, attention to details which do appear is important.²⁵ Kaiser mentions that "Esau's ruddiness . . . Rachel's beauty and King Eglon's obesity" are rare sorts of description in OT narrative, but each relates to the plot in the story of which it is a part.

Characters often play contrasting roles in the story. Ruth and Orpah, as well as Saul and David, are examples. A character may be "round," i.e., a major character, or "flat," a minor character. Some characters are simply "agents" in the story in that they help the story to develop. The unnamed sailors in the Jonah story are examples.²⁶

Pratt speaks of "the presentation of characters." God is a central character in many narratives (Gen 3:9-24). Occasionally God's presence is less obvious (2 Sam 20:1-26), while in the book of Esther he is present only by "implication." One must remember that to the OT narrator God is always presupposed. Sometimes characters are supernatural, as with Satan in the Job prologue and the angels with Abraham in relation to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18-19). Human beings are, of course, the mainstay of biblical narrative.²⁷ Bible characters are presented with honesty. Their strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices often occur close to each other contextually.

²¹Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 87.

²²Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 156.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Kaiser, "Narrative," 74.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 129. Pratt notes basic factors which one should observe when interpreting what the Bible says or implies about characters in a story.

²⁷Ibid., 132.

Prophetic Speech

Old Testament prophecy, i.e., speech and writing by the prophets in the OT, is a separate genre from other major categories of literature (e.g., narrative, law, psalms, wisdom). The shape of a prophet's communication could take any one of a number of forms. Some examples are symbolic names (Isa 7:3), a song (Isa 5:1-7), a symbolic act (Hos 1:3; Isa 20:1-6), a funeral elegy (Isa 14:4-21; Ezek 19), or along with other forms, an allegory (Ezek 16 and 23).

Another prominent type of prophetic literature is prophetic narrative. Such narratives may be autobiography, such as reports of visions (Amos 7:1-9; Jer 13:1-11) and accounts of symbolic acts (Hos 1:3; Isa 20:1-6). Prophetic narrative includes, second, partial biographies (Jer 26-28 Jer 36-45) and, third, stories about a prophet (1 Sam 3:1-18; 1 Kgs 11:29ff.).

Yet another category of prophetic literature is prophetic sayings. These break down into oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation.²⁸

Judgment oracles may be addressed to individuals (1 Kgs 21: 18-19, Isa 22:15-25), or to nations (Amos 4:1-2; Mic 2:1-4; 3:1, 2, 4). These judgment speeches generally include a few or more of the following "parts": (1) an introduction: "Hear!" or "Woe!", (2) accusation of specific sin or sins, (3) development of the accusation, (4) messenger formula (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11), 13, (5) announcement of God's intervention, as "days are coming upon you" (Amos 4:2), (6) results of the intervention, as "Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins" (Mic 3:12).

Westermann distinguishes among "oracles of salvation." He suggests an oracle of salvation proper (as in Isa 41:8-13, 14-16; 44:1-5) and "a proclamation of salvation" (Isa 41:17-20; 49:7-12.)

Apocalyptic

Debate continues as to whether apocalyptic is a separate genre.²⁹ This paper considers that to be the case. To define Apocalyptic one must distinguish between *concepts* characteristic of Apocalyptic and *literary features* that tend to mark such literature.³⁰ The social and historical matrix (i.e., the *occasion*) out of which Apocalyptic materials come is a necessary factor in the definition. Is apocalyptic a literary designation or a "religious current"? The answer is to some degree, 'It is both.'

Apocalyptic, as a genre, is notoriously difficult to define. Hanson proposes a starting point:

A group of writings concerned with the renewal of faith and the reordering of life on the basis of a vision of a prototypical heavenly order revealed to a religious community through a seer. The author tends to relativize the significance of existing realities by depicting how they are about to be superseded by God's universal reign in an eschatological event that can neither be hastened nor thwarted by human efforts, but which will unfold, true to an eternal plan, as the result of divine action.³¹

Hanson indicates the need to address three levels of concern in order to arrive at a definition of Apocalyptic literature:

²⁸Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox P, 1991), 13-18.

²⁹Willem VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 411. See his remarks on the tension between prophecy and apocalyptic, especially the last paragraph, 411.

³⁰Paul Hanson, "Apocalyptic Literature" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Chico, CA: Scholars P, 1985), 465-488, especially 466.

³¹Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 27.

Level 1: The need to define Apocalyptic as a literary genre

Aspects of the literary genre of apocalyptic include dreams and visions by God's spokesmen who are aided by angelic interpreters, dramatic symbols, and divine activity described in striking images. Further, there is a large use of figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, hyperbole, personification, pun, repetition, and parallelism. Collins has identified twenty-eight characteristics which he says help identify a piece of literature as apocalyptic genre. He clarifies that no single passage will display all these characteristics.³²

Biblical passages which have some characteristics of apocalyptic include Daniel 7-12; Ezekiel 38-39³³; Joel 2:28-3:21; Zech 1-6, 12-14, Matthew 24, and much of the ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΨΙΣ, the Book of Revelation. Jude 14-15 quotes from the extra biblical apocalyptic book, 1 Enoch, portions of which were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁴

Sandy and Abegg caution interpreters of apocalyptic (and, indirectly, interpreters of all biblical genres), "Contrary to the practice of some interpreters, the meaning of a text hinges on what it meant when it was written (not on what it may at first glance seem to mean today). Until we become students of the biblical world and the mind set of that era, we will err in our understanding of what the writer intends to reveal. This does not revoke . . . the Bible's relevance for today. It simply indicates that the present significance of a text grows out of what it meant originally."³⁵

A major function of apocalyptic literature is to bring "a message of hope in the face of perverse evil" to a suffering community.³⁶

*Level 2: The need to focus on eschatology
as a constituent aspect of apocalyptic*

Eschatological literature awaits future resolution of the conflicting elements within the present world and cosmic orders. This resolution will come about by a decisive act of God which will transpire in several phases until the completion of the "act."³⁷

This perception of the future becomes progressively more precise in the "progressing" revelation that is the Bible. Clearly, this is a theological perspective to which God's spokesmen summoned the believing community in both testaments.

³²D. Brent Sandy and Martin G. Abegg, "Apocalyptic" in *Cracking Old Testament Codes, A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1995), 177-196, especially 181.

³³Ibid., 190ff. and William Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 312.

³⁴Sandy and Abegg, "Apocalyptic," 184.

³⁵Ibid., 187.

³⁶Ibid., 194; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 311.

³⁷Hanson, "Apocalyptic Literature," 468.

Level 3: The need to distinguish between prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology

Both “prophetic eschatology” and “apocalyptic eschatology” work with a vision of divine activity as “the key to the meaning and direction of human history.” Both see reality as moving “toward a divinely ordained goal.”³⁸ Prophetic eschatology speaks of earthly realities and human agents, whereas apocalyptic eschatology presents scenarios that are increasingly oriented to cosmic concerns and the functioning of divine agents. Yet, biblical apocalyptic never does become completely detached from earthly realities.³⁹

Hanson feels that “Apocalyptic” as a concept must be viewed from a “socioreligious” perspective which in turn incorporates sociological and “sociopolitical” concerns.⁴⁰ From this perspective, “Apocalypse” is a literary genre; “Apocalypticism” is a socioreligious movement; “Apocalyptic eschatology” is an eschatological perspective.⁴¹

Some comparisons between apocalyptic and prophetic speech may be charted⁴²

APOCALYPTIC	PROPHECY
Present wickedness is beyond hope, the earth must suffer total destruction	Laments sinfulness on earth, urges repentance
The readers themselves are displeased with wickedness, desire divine intervention	The prophet reveals God’s displeasure with the sin and wickedness of His people
Appeals to the faithful few to remain faithful, in the face of great odds	Prophecy calls God’s people to repent
Announces direct divine intervention, through striking supernatural means	Announces that God is going to judge sin and offer deliverance, often through human agency
Uses graphic images, visions, and symbols, sometimes including dimensions described as “Mystery”, cf., Rev 17:5, “mystery Babylon”	Announces its message as direct speech from God, as a “Thus says the LORD”
Announces final solutions; the situation is too advanced for solution that comes in stages.	Predicts both near and distant aspects of God’s judgment or salvation, 1 Kgs 13:1-5; 2 Sam 7: 12-16.

Again Sandy and Abegg make some observations which touch our work with other biblical genres, but make a fitting conclusion to these notes on apocalyptic:

³⁸Ibid., 469.

³⁹John J Collins, *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, Forms Of Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

⁴⁰Hanson, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 470.

⁴¹VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 410. This is VanGemeren’s assessment of Hanson.

⁴²An adaptation of Sandy and Abegg, “Apocalyptic,” 178-79.

Apocalyptic deserves notice as remarkably good literature. If a literary text makes something come alive through narrative, rather than stating it by proposition; and engages readers in something to be experienced and lived, rather than to be analyzed; and uses images to impact the brain's right hemisphere, rather than to transmit data into the left hemisphere; then apocalyptic is intensely literary. Like music, apocalyptic appeals to emotions. It is powerfully affective communication. Like the imaginary stories of children's literature, apocalyptic creates compelling images that shape values, which in turn impact behavior. Like poetry, apocalyptic is aesthetically crafted. Like visual media, apocalyptic graphically portrays scenes of high drama.⁴³

POSSIBLE PITFALLS IN GENRE ANALYSIS IN BIBLE INTERPRETATION

One may correctly infer from earlier paragraphs that genre analysis carries some complexities with it. However, by reading selected sections from some of the bibliographical entries at the conclusion of this paper, the inquirer will become aware of a working definition of *genre*. More importantly, he will become aware of several of the specific genres that occur in Scripture. The complexities will become less foreboding.

A second pitfall is evident in Eissfeldt's table of "Contents."⁴⁴ He lists under major genres, Narratives. He breaks that down into two subgenres, (a) Poetic Narratives and (b) Historical Narratives. He proceeds to break "Poetic Narratives" down again into what a "purist" might call *sub-subgenres*. This third level includes "Myths, fairy-tales, sagas, and legends."

Myths for Eissfeldt were short stories that involved gods, whether or not there were human characters. Fairy-tales were similar in that these short stories, though perhaps including gods, were primarily concerned with characters of lower ranks and with matters of this world. Sagas were set in this world but focused on "the unusualness and significance of single phenomena in space and time".⁴⁵ The phenomenon may have been a leader, a mountain, an animal or other object. The phenomenon always had some remarkable characteristic. Legends were similar to Sagas, but the former involved men, places, or occasions which had *religious* significance.

Koch tries to blunt the concern that these terms suggest something non-historical.⁴⁶ He claims that the purpose of these genres was not to record history, though, in fact, there are historical features in them. The purpose of these genres is to encourage the reader to identify with the vicissitudes and victories of the human characters.⁴⁷ Inasmuch as the terms *legend*, *myth*, and *saga* have a fluid meaning among biblical scholars who use those terms, it seems best for conservatives to avoid their use as designating blocks or pericopies of biblical material.⁴⁸ The term *narrative* is a more neutral term and, at the popular level, more easily understood.

⁴³Ibid., 177.

⁴⁴Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P.R. Akroyd (New York: Harper, 1965), vii ff.

⁴⁵Ibid., 34.

⁴⁶Koch, *Growth of Biblical Tradition*, 148-156.

⁴⁷Ibid., 156.

⁴⁸Kevin Vanhooser has noted this problem in, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature" in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds. *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 75. Vanhooser observes, "The genres that prove most worrisome to Evangelicals include legend, myth, midrash, and saga-genres that appear prima facie to vitiate Scripture's truthfulness. But even to read the Bible as history (as many biblical critics do) does not guarantee its truthfulness, for many liberal critics conclude that the Bible presents false history. One's reading of Scripture, then, ought not to harbor prejudices against some literary genres out of a concern for what the truth 'must' be. This is the only way to avoid criticisms such as John Barton's that claim that Fundamentalists are seldom students of the humanities and mainly read nonfiction and that consequently they do not know how to read the Bible."

In a biblical account, Jotham, without announcing that he is about to tell a fable proceeds to tell one about trees and a vine (Judges 9). The whole construction of this story makes it quite clear that it is not historical fact. On the other hand Romans 5 views Genesis 3 as tragic history. While ancient Israel's neighbors doubtless had their legends or sagas, neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament use legend or saga. The line between the historical and non-historical is usually clear in the biblical writings.

On the assumption of the clarity of Scripture the Bible does not use literary strategies merely for the intended literary effect of a given genre. The Bible is indeed a work of literature, but it is more than literature. More importantly, it is an historical work also – but a work which expresses a special kind of history. The Bible is theologized history and literature whose overarching intent is to express a theological perspective. God uses history and literature to reveal whatever it is that He intends to reveal about Himself and His work.

A third pitfall concerns a subjectivity in determining the genre of a given passage of Scripture. Among interpreters who seek to be sensitive to contributive aspects of genre analysis, one may assign a given passage to prophetic speech while another may regard the same text as apocalyptic. The line between these is cloudy.

In a similar fashion, one observes that equally competent men may disagree on the lexical significance of a given word or the syntactical relationship which a clause sustains to its immediate context. We do not therefore abandon lexical and syntactical analyses of biblical texts. Neither should the Bible student neglect genre analysis simply because students of genre disagree about details of how genre works in the Scriptures. All interpreters are growing in their understanding of the units (words, grammar, clauses, and various genres) which make up large portions, whether of pericopae or whole books in the Bible.

POSITIVE ASPECTS IN GENRE ANALYSIS IN BIBLE INTERPRETATION

The nature of the Scriptures as literature requires a genre sensitive approach. A serious surface reading of any three to four consecutive pages of the English Bible will usually show that the text breaks itself down into distinguishable units—and if one looks closely, there will also be subunits. Many times the reader will notice differences in these units. These differences are often “genre” differences. The differences are often describable if not “nameable.”

Genesis 1 and 3 are both narratives, i.e., stories. They both report happenings in the earliest history of the world. Genesis one is somewhat repetitive, obviously ordered, and composed simply of reporting words and actions until verse 26. There is no dialogue in the chapter. Genesis 3 is more storylike. The plot is transparent. There is dialogue.

A comparison of Genesis one and Psalm one indicates that the latter is not narrative. It is not explicitly hortatory. Psalm one sets forth two ways, with some exposition, in a straightforward indicative manner. Psalm one appears to be an instance of wisdom genre.

The foregoing discussion suggests that, when one reads the Bible, to some extent he “automatically” identifies with the atmosphere which the text's genre indicates. In genre interpretation, a “common sense” awareness of what one is reading carries him a good distance toward a viable interpretation of the text.

A second benefit from genre analysis is closely related to the previous statement. Alertness to the parts of a given genre and how the author of the text set out those parts helps the reader identify the tone and mood of a passage.

Psalm 22 illustrates two dramatic moods. Verses 1-22 show many marks common to complaint or lament psalms. These often begin with an introductory cry of complaint. The “complaint proper” will then state the Psalmist's consternation about the inaction of God, his own feelings, whether physical or psychological, and the taunting abuse which his enemies pour upon him. The “complainant” re-affirms his confidence in God in spite of the fact that God seems unaware of his plight. He will make a specific request which often incorporates such ideas as “Hear!” “Save!” or “Deliver!” Near the end of the prayer of complaint the psalmist promises to praise God, often as an implicit motivation for God to respond. Psalm 22:1-22 employs most of these features. The mood has been arrestingly tragic up to this point.

With the promise to praise God at verse 22, the prayer continues through verse 31 as what many have called a Song of Individual Thanksgiving. Such a song, as it occurs in the Bible, implies that the worshipper takes a thanksgiving offering to the temple, there to offer the same to God. He thereby thanks God for answering the petition which he had made in the midst of his prayer (or psalm) of complaint. The mood change, and the changed atmosphere is dramatic and obvious. Both public and private reading of the Psalm should be done so as to allow those who listen

(as well as the reader) to “join in” with the moods and atmospheres of the Psalm. Genre analysis can draw the reader into the text in ways that he otherwise may not experience.

Genre analysis also helps the reader to grasp the author’s intent. Reeves states, “Determining what the author is trying to say involves our recognition of the genre employed – a literary decision which facilitates authorial intent as well as a reader’s comprehension. Hence before we can discover the meaning of *what* was written, we need to understand *how* it was written (*italics mine.*)”⁴⁹

⁴⁹Rodney Reeves, “Reading the Genres of Scripture” in *A Comprehensive Intro to Interpreting Scripture* ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), 263-274, especially 264.