

Genre Criticism (by Roger Hahn and Dennis Bratcher)

- I. Genre Criticism
 - A. Every genre has its own “rules” or procedures,
 - B. The choice of a genre reflects the intention and purpose of the author.
 - C. Knowing how a genre works can prevent misinterpretation.
 - D. Biblical genres are not “perfect” genre types.
- II. General Genre Categories
 - A. Old Testament
 - 1. Narrative
 - 2. Law
 - 3. Wisdom
 - 4. Poetry
 - 5. Prophecy
 - 6. Apocalyptic
 - B. New Testament
 - 1. Narrative
 - 2. Gospel
 - 3. Letters
 - 4. Apocalyptic
- III. Narrative
 - A. Has plot, setting, and characters
 - B. Biblically, narrative ranges from bare chronicles to highly developed stories
 - C. Most narratives (though beyond chronicle) are invitations to share an experience
 - D. The details of setting, character, and plot are critical for grasping the author’s intention
 - E. Narrative Interpretation
 - 1. Identify the points of narrative unity
 - 2. Distinguish the “macro-narrative” from episodes or sub-narratives
 - 3. Focus on points of testing which create conflict and choice
 - 4. Identify the main character (positive or negative)
 - 5. Identify the ways in which God is the “hero”
- IV. Law
 - A. Hebrew word is *Torah* - meaning guidance, direction, or instruction.
 - B. Note that Torah is a set of mixed genre: narrative, legal codes, poetry, etc.
 - C. Modern distinctions of moral law, civil law, and cultic regulations are not observed in the OT
 - D. The relationship of Torah and covenant
 - E. Interpreting Law
 - 1. Do see the OT Torah as God’s Word for his people
 - 2. Do understand OT Torah in the content of covenant
 - 3. Discover God’s love, justice, and holiness revealed in the Torah
 - 4. Seek the theological point of Torah
 - 5. Do not seek literal application of every “law”
- V. Wisdom
 - A. Wisdom describes an approach to life more than simply a genre
 - B. Wisdom literature tends not to emphasize covenant and salvation history motifs

- C. Practical virtue is the goal of Wisdom
- D. The theology of retribution is a central issue
- E. Wisdom theology is creation theology
- F. Interpretation of Wisdom
 1. Note the structure and large context
 2. Be aware of the dialogical nature of wisdom
 3. Distinguish between “speculative” wisdom such as is found in Job and Ecclesiastes and “proverbial” wisdom found in much of Proverbs
 4. Seek the unstated theological assumptions

VI. Proverbs

- A. Proverbs are often parabolic, i.e., figurative, pointing beyond themselves
- B. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
- C. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
- D. Principles for Interpreting Proverbs
 1. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior - just the opposite!
 2. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture may need sensible “translation” so as not to lose their meaning.
 3. Proverbs are not guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for good behavior.
 4. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make their point.
 5. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life, but are not exhaustive in their coverage.

VII. Poetry

- A. Characterized by a brief, two-part sentence whose second part reasserts, strengthens, or otherwise responds to what was said in the first.
- B. Characterized by terseness and compression
- C. Characteristic of much Hebrew writing. Distinguishing poetry and prose is often difficult
- D. Virtually all Wisdom Literature and Psalms are poetry. Much of the prophetic material is poetry. Examples of poetry can be found through the narrative materials.
- E. Literary, rather than literal, devices characterize poetry and thus literary devices are the key to interpreting poetry.
- F. Note carefully the speakers in poetry.

VIII. Prophecy

- A. OT prophecy is rooted in history; it is, in fact, history interpreted theologically.
- B. Note that the Hebrew canon considers Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings as prophetic as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve.
- C. Note that the Hebrew canon does not include Daniel among the prophets.
- D. Interpretation of Prophecy
 1. Avoid the temptation to assume that “prediction” is the primary category by which to interpret biblical prophecy.
 2. Prophets were mediators of the covenant; their primary task was to call God’s people to be faithful to the covenant and live authentically as his people.
 3. Discover the historical context
 4. Note the literary devices at work
 5. Identify the theological issues that are assumed and are explicated
 6. Discover how the prophet supports the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel
 7. Identify what is proclaimed

IX. Gospel

- A. Gospel genre is presently under considerable debate by genre critics
- B. Gospel is a specialized form of narrative
- C. NT Gospels are focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus
- D. NT Gospels preach the gospel through narrative
- E. Interpreting Gospels
 - 1. Distinguish between the setting of the historical Jesus and the gospel writer's setting
 - 2. Note the use of narrative literary devices
 - 3. Keep track of the way the gospel "preaches the gospel," i.e. in what way does the book and passage proclaim the good news of Jesus?

X. Letters

- A. The most common early Christian genre
- B. Are substitutes for the presence of the author (or audience)
- C. Are dialogical in nature
- D. Tend to be very context specific
- E. Tend to be ecclesiological rather than personal
- F. Greco-Roman and NT Letter Form
 - 1. Salutation - Author's name (nominative), Audience (dative), and greeting
 - 2. Thanksgiving/Prayer
 - 3. Body
 - 4. Closing Conventions - Travel plans, blessings, greetings, hints of continuation
 - 5. Date (in most Greco-Roman Letters)
- G. Letter Interpretation
 - 1. Need to discover the historical context
 - 2. Identify the issue(s) that are the subject of dialog
 - 3. Need to "re-create" the audience's participation in the dialog
 - 4. Note the role of letter form/structure
 - 5. Note the use of rhetorical/literary devices
 - 6. Identify the author's purpose

XI. Apocalyptic

- A. The term derives from the Greek word for revelation, *apokalypsis*.
- B. Characterized by reports of revelations mediated by angels disclosing a/the supernatural world.
- C. Focus on eschatology
- D. Characterized by major use of symbolism
- E. Principles of Interpreting Apocalyptic
 - 1. The primary meaning is what the author intended which would have been understandable by the first readers.
 - 2. By virtue of its genre apocalyptic carries the possibility of secondary meaning(s).
 - 3. Do not overuse the "analogy of Scripture" - the meaning must be understandable by the first readers.
 - 4. Become aware of the rich background of ideas
 - 5. Discern which images are constant and which fluctuate in context
 - 6. Follow the author's explanation of images
 - 7. See visions as wholes and do not press all the details allegorically.