

Presentation on “Genre”: Expanded Notes (Dr. Todd Beall, Forcey Bible Church, Jan 18, 2025)
[these notes are greatly expanded from what was given during the 45-minute presentation]

Definition of genre:

The word genre comes originally from the Latin *genus* meaning “race” or “kind” and more directly from the French *genre* which means “kind” or “sort.” It is used especially in art, music, and literature to indicate a category of composition with similarities in form, style, and/or subject matter. So, with reference to the Bible, **a biblical genre is very simply a category or kind of writing used in the Bible that is characterized by a similar form, style, and/or subject.** As we will see in a moment, it is often essential to understand the basic genre of a biblical book or passage in order to interpret it properly. And that is what the organizers of this workshop wanted me to discuss. And that’s what I will do. We will talk about the benefits of this kind of analysis. But I must state at the outset that this is not such an easy question: in fact, the second paragraph of the wikipedia article on genre leads off with this sentence: “Within the discipline of literary analysis, the existence and subjectivity of genres are a matter of some debate. This is reflected in academic discussion of Biblical genres. However, isolating the broad genres of the Bible and discerning which books/passages belong to which genre is not a matter of complete agreement.” And that is a huge understatement! You see, there is no set agreement on the number of genres that are clearly identifiable in Scripture. And just like the way you might organize—oh, let’s say your books (assuming you have physical books), some people organize them very specifically, others would have a broader organization scheme with fewer categories. And once we start thinking in terms of subgenres, the number of specific genre types can skyrocket. Finally, since some of the earliest pioneers in genre studies relating to the Bible were German scholars (Gunkel, for example) who denied the inerrancy of Scripture, we who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture would reject many of the alleged genres they claim to see (such as “myth,” “fairy tale,” “fable,” and “legend,” just to name a few) which affirm that Scripture is not true. So I am also going to speak of the pitfalls of some genre analysis, not simply the benefits.

Now I’m going to say something that is rather controversial, especially for a supposed academic scholar with Ph.D. behind his name, But that hasn’t stopped me before, and it’s not going to stop me now! And here it is. I think that the recognition of various genres or types of literature in the Bible is largely intuitive: even if we can’t name the particular genre, we recognize its characteristics. And the less intuitive a genre category is to the ordinary Bible-believing Christian, the less it really matters to the interpretation of the text. Put another way, a general identification of genre is usually quite helpful, but the more specific and detailed one gets, the more disagreement there is in terms of classification. Identification of genres should be used to try to help to interpret what is written, but in no sense should a biblical writing be put into a straitjacket with various rules that it cannot violate! That’s sadly how it sometimes is used today. When I went to seminary 50 years ago, I actually never remember hearing about genres. And in my nearly 50 years of seminary teaching, I rarely mention the term. So when Pastor Mike Maslin asked me to give an overview of basic genre types, I had no notes to fall back on! So what did I do? Well, the first thing I did was to scan my digital library to see if I could get some helpful resources. And now here is where you are not allowed to laugh! I first began buying digital books on the Logos platform in 1998, and that has accelerated since my physical book library is way too large, and I’m trying to reduce the number of books by giving many away and selling some. So I have a huge amount of books on Logos. And I was shocked to find this week that the term genre occurs in 7,586 of those resources (many of them liberal in theology), and the term “genre” occurred a whopping 109,097 times! Now I spent quite a while looking at the most frequent of these references until I simply gave up. So to say that genre is a favorite buzzword among biblical scholars is to state the obvious. But almost none of these resources was any help in the basics.

The best book I’ve found for an introductory look at genres from a conservative standpoint is what I’ve indicated in your notes: Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*. Actually the whole book is excellent for today’s seminar topic, and I’d highly recommend it. Sandy and Giese’s book, *Cracking Old Testament Codes* is good as well, specifically dealing with genres. My list of basic genres is similar to Zuck’s, with a few tweaks. I’m going to go over all of these in a hurry, and then zero in on what I think are the most important for interpretive purposes.

A brief survey of genres in the Bible

OT genres:

Historical narrative (or narrative, but I prefer to add the word “historical” to clarify my understanding of the genre). Zuck defines a biblical narrative as “a story told for the purpose of conveying a message through people and their problems and situations. Biblical narratives are selective and illustrative. The biblical narratives are not intended to be full biographies giving every detail of individuals’ lives; the writers carefully selected the material they included (obviously doing so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) to accomplish certain purposes.” We see that especially in the historical books such as Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, but it is present to a large degree in the Pentateuch, especially Genesis and Exodus. Zuck lists six subgenres of narrative: tragedy, epic, romance, heroic, satire, and polemic, but in my thinking these are pretty easy to recognize without having to come up with a separate name for each one. Narratives are written in prose, with a characteristic marker being the prevalence of the *waw*-consecutive imperfect form to denote sequence of events.

Law. Commandments for the Israelites largely found in Exodus through Deuteronomy. Written in prose.

Poetry. This is a huge category which we will discuss in more detail in a moment. In my thinking, the most important genre distinction we can make is the distinction between poetry and prose. In our English Bibles, we call the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon the Poetical Books, but what many Christians amazingly don’t realize (it’s amazing to me, anyway) is that nearly all the Prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, most of the Minor Prophets) are written largely in poetry as well. So that’s well over half of the entire Old Testament. We’ll come back to this genre in a moment.

Wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is practical teaching given by wise men. A more formal definition is that wisdom literature is literature that embodies “the reasoned search for specific ways to ensure personal well-being in everyday life [and] to make sense of extreme adversity and vexing anomalies” (taken from James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3). Crenshaw notes correctly that “the goal of all wisdom was the formation of character” (Ibid.). Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, parts of Psalms, and (often) Song of Solomon are classified as OT wisdom literature. Basically all of wisdom literature is poetic.

Prophecy. Writings by prophets who 1) called the nation of Israel to obedience to God’s Word, rebuking the sins of the people; 2) warned of imminent danger to the nation as a result of their apostasy (like a watchman on the city walls seeing the threatening advance of the enemy—see Ezek 3:17); and 3) predicted future events (involving Israel and the Gentiles) concerning judgment, salvation, the Messiah, and His kingdom. Subgenres include salvation oracles, woe oracles, and prophetic lawsuits. Most prophecy is written in poetry, but there are large sections of prose as well.

NT genres:

Gospel—similar in some places to historical narrative or biography, but their own type, containing “both doctrine and narrative, presented to set forth information on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ teachings in parables and in direct discourse are interspersed with the records of His miracles and encounters with individuals.” (Zuck) They are “collections of [stories] TSB events], far more packed with action than is customary in narrative. The overriding purpose of the Gospel [stories] is to explain and praise the Person and work of Jesus ... through His actions, through His words, and through the responses of other people to Him.” [Zuck citing Ryken].

Notable subgenres include Jesus’ discourses (extended speeches) and His parables. Parables are stories taken from everyday life used to convey a spiritual meaning. Unlike allegories, in which every detail of the story has a spiritual significance, with parables there is generally one salient point: the details of the story are not necessarily significant.

Historical narrative—Acts (a sequel to Luke with similar characteristics in many respects). The speeches in Acts are a significant subgenre.

Epistle—letters from apostles to specific churches or individuals to provide theological and practical teaching and correct problems that may have arisen.

Apocalyptic—Greek term for “revelation” (see Rev 1:1)—a subset of prophecy recording visions of the prophet often including angels, focusing on end time predictions, using highly symbolic language. In the OT, portions of Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel contain much apocalyptic.

Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

The key ingredients of OT poetry are parallelism (repetition), imagery (use of figurative language), and conciseness.

A. Parallelism

There is much repetition in Hebrew poetry. Repetition both adds to the beauty of poetic expression and heightens the importance of what is discussed. It also aids the reader (listener) in remembering what was said. (Simple choruses sung in churches today accomplish the same purpose)

Repetition of similar or contrasting thoughts over two or more lines is called parallelism. Parallelism, rather than rhyme or meter, is the most unique characteristic of Hebrew poetry. There are three basic types:

1. Synonymous parallelism. The idea expressed in the first line is repeated in the second with equivalent but different words.

Ps 19:1: The heavens declare the glory of God
And the firmament shows His handiwork.

Prov 16:18: Pride *goes* before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before a fall.

2. Antithetical parallelism. A parallelism of thought in which the second line is given as a contrast to the first. This technique is especially common in Proverbs (esp. chaps. 10-15, 28-29).

Ps 1:6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous
But the way of the ungodly will perish.

Prov 10:1 A wise son makes a glad father,
But a foolish son is the grief of his mother.

Prov 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife,
But love covers a multitude of sins.

3. Synthetic parallelism. The thought of the first line is extended by the second.

Ps 1:2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord
And in His law doth he meditate day and night.

Prov 10:18 Whoever hides hatred has lying lips,
And whoever spreads slander is a fool.

Note too the presence of chiasm. Chiasm (from the Greek letter *chi* which looks like our “X”): the inversion of two or more clauses in a literary unit.

The lines would read: a b
b' a'

The unit may be two parallel lines, as in the examples below, or a much larger structural section.

Isa 11:4b And He shall smite the earth With the rod of His mouth
And with the breath of his lips Shall he slay the wicked

Prov 7:21 She led him astray with her many persuasions
With her flattering lips she seduced him. (lit. trans.)

Note that many English versions often obscure the original chiasm (as, for example, in Prov 7:21).

[Beall’s dictum: the bigger the alleged chiastic structure, the less likely its existence! Scholars love to try to uncover these huge chiastic structures, but in my opinion they are often not convincing]

James Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry*) has offered a helpful counterbalance to the above discussion of parallelism. One of the problems he sees with speaking of “synonymous” parallelism is that the two clauses then may be viewed as identical, but that is rarely the case. The second clause (B), since it comes afterwards, is usually emphatic in some way. Kugel states: “B, by being connected to A—carrying it further, echoing it, defining it, restating it, contrasting with it, *it does not matter which*—has an emphatic, ‘seconding’ character, and it is this, more than any aesthetic of symmetry or paralleling, which is at the heart of biblical parallelism” (p. 51). Put succinctly, the essence of parallelism is: A, and what’s more, B.

B. Imagery

Images occur also in prose, but are much more prevalent in poetry. Images help to make poetry more compact, since they can convey a great deal of information in a short space (“a picture is worth a thousand words”). Images are mental pictures that explain some aspect of human experience. While

they are not as precise as literal descriptions, they are vivid, memorable, and convey a tone far better than their literal counterparts. Images speak to the emotion as well as the mind. Consider the image in Ps 23:1: “the Lord is my shepherd.”

Types of images include:

1. Simile. A comparison using like or as.
Ps 42:1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, O God
2. Metaphor. An implied comparison.
Ps 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want
Metaphors are more vivid than similes; once again, they require more thought and reflection to process. Both require the reader to transfer information from one area to a different area.
3. Personification. Assigning a personality to an inanimate object.
In Proverbs, there are two rather lengthy personifications: one of wisdom (8:1-9:12) and one of folly (9:13-17), both personified as women.
4. Hyperbole. An exaggerated statement used to convey truth in a memorable fashion. We meet hyperbole often in the emotive language of the Psalms.
Ps 42:3 My tears have been my food day and night
Ps 22:16 For dogs have surrounded me;
The congregation of the wicked has enclosed me.
They pierced my hands and my feet.
Note that sometimes, however, what may have been hyperbole for the psalmist becomes literal truth in its ultimate fulfilment (Christ).
5. Metonymy: the use of one word for another (tongue = speech; hand = action or power)
Prov 6:16-17 There are six things which the LORD hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood...
6. Synecdoche: use of the part to represent the whole (grey hair = an old person)
Prov 16:31 A gray head is a crown of glory;
It is found in the way of righteousness
7. Merism: (a subset of synecdoche) use of two opposite concepts to represent the whole (night and day = all the time; earth and heaven = the whole cosmos; body and soul=the whole person)
Ps 91:5-6 You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness,
Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday.
Ps 103:11-12 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

C. Conciseness

Hebrew poetry is concise. Much is expressed in few words. This is achieved through 1) eliminating many conjunctions, prepositions, and other particles; and 2) use of imagery. For example, Psalm 23:1 is only four words in Hebrew: “the Lord,” “my shepherd,” “not,” “I shall lack.” There is no conjunction expressing a relationship between the first clause (“the Lord [is] my shepherd”) and the second (“I shall not lack”). Most probably, a causal relationship is in view: “Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not lack.”

Conciseness of expression makes a more dramatic impact than its wordier prose equivalent. It also, however, causes one to think more about what is said. The relationship between words must be determined, and this causes the reader (listener) to stop and ponder. In addition, it means that sometimes the meaning will be ambiguous (since items are left out of the sentence). For this reason, it is important to check several translations of a particular portion of Hebrew poetry (and even better to check the original Hebrew!).

D. Other poetic devices (all involve repetition in some sense)

1. Alliteration. Use of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words and syllables.

- Isa 8:15b וְנָפְלוּ וְנִשְׁבְּרוּ וְנִקְשְׁוּ וְנִלְכְּדוּ (4 nuns)
 wenaphelu wenishbaru wenoqeshu wenilkadu
 They will fall and be broken and be snared and be captured.
2. Assonance. Use of the same or similar vowel sounds.
 Isa 6:5 אֹיִלִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי כִי אִישׁ טִמְאַ־שִׁפְתַּיִם אָנֹכִי
 oi li ki nidmethi ki ish teme shephathayim anoki
 Woe is me! For I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips.
3. Paronomasia. A play upon the sound and meaning of words (a pun).
 Isa 5:7b וַיִּקְוֶה לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהִנֵּה מִשְׁפַּח לְצַדִּיקָהּ וְהִנֵּה צַעֲקָה
 wayeqaw lemishpat wehineh mishpah letsedaqah wehineh tseaqah
 And he looked for justice, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.
4. Alphabetic acrostic. Poem in which the same Hebrew letter is repeated at the beginning of stanzas/verse in the order of the Hebrew alphabet.
 Lam 1-4; Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov 31:10-31.
 Note that alliteration, assonance, and paronomasia are usually not able to be translated effectively into English.
5. *Inclusio*. Repetition of an opening word or phrase at the end of a passage. This device serves to bind the poem/stanza together. Examples: Ps 8:1, 9; Ps 106:1, 48 (“Praise the Lord”); Ps 69:1, 35 (“Save me, O God...for God will save Zion)

Subgenres in Psalms

Note that modern study of the subgenres in Psalms goes back to the German OT critical scholar Hermann Gunkel (1902) who denied the historicity of most of the OT. So in my view his subgenres are not helpful. In fact, the categorization of the Psalms goes back at least as far as Luther, who divided them into five categories: prophecies about Christ; doctrinal psalms; psalms of comfort; prayer psalms; and psalms of thanksgiving. I have no problem with attempting to categorize the Psalms in a way similar to Gunkel's, *as long as* his anti-inerrancy biases are not also followed, and there is not an over-reliance upon the *form* rather than the *content* of a psalm. Leupold rightly cautions that “it is frequently being overlooked that the pattern or type involved is not so much a matter of traditional form as it is a purely natural procedure that is bound to be followed whether the types involved are clearly in the mind of the writer or not.” He gives the example of how one would naturally write a poem in the “lament” form without really consciously thinking about it, and rightly concludes that “the rigidity of pattern has been stressed too much” (*Exposition of the Psalms*, p. 11).

My own attempt at categorizing the Psalms:

1. Praise

Thanksgiving (or declarative praise). Thanksgiving to the Lord for what He has specifically done (deliverance in a certain circumstance).

National (65 66:1-12 67 68 75 107 124)

Individual (18m 30 34 40:1-10 66:13-20 92 116 118 138)

Hymn (or descriptive praise). Praise to the Lord for who He is and for His general works

General (24 33 36m 95 100 103 105 111 113 114 117 135 136 145 146 147 149 150)

Creation (8 19:1-6 29 104 148)

Royal (2 18m 20 21 45 72 89 101 110 132 144) Specific praise for the King (many are Messianic)

Theocratic (47 93 96 97 98 99) Praise for God's rule—all are Messianic

Zion (48 76 84 87 122 134?) Praise celebrating Zion (Jerusalem)

2. Petition (or lament) Asking the Lord for help or lamenting a certain situation. Even here, many petition/lament psalms contain strong statements of trust in the Lord

National (44 60 74 79 80 85 90 94 106 123 126 129? 137m)

Individual

General (3 5 9 10 12 13 14 17 25 26 27:7-14 28 31 36m 39 41 42 43 52 53 54 55 56 57 61 64 70 71 77 86 88 108 120 140 141 142 143)

- Imprecatory** (7 35 58 59 69m 83 109 137m 139) Psalms that ask the Lord to deal with the psalmist's enemies
- Passion** (22 40:11-17 69m) Psalms expressing the suffering of the psalmist (all are Messianic)
- Penitential** (6 32 38 51 102 130) Psalms expressing sorrow and repentance for sin
3. **Trust** Psalms affirming trust in the Lord, often despite hardship or difficulties.
- Individual** (4 11 16 23 27:1-6 46 62 63 91 121 131)
- Community** (115, 125)
4. **Instruction** (didactic)
- Wisdom** (1 15 36m 37 49 73 112 127 128 133) Psalms with themes similar to the book of Proverbs, reflecting practical teaching designed to encourage godly character
- Torah** (19:7-14 119) Psalms celebrating the Law
- Prophetic** (50 78? 81 82) Psalms which speak with a prophet's voice, admonishing the people to obey the words of the Lord
5. **Other types** (spanning several categories)
- Messianic** (2 8 16 22 40 41 45 47 69 72 93 96 97 98 99 110 118 132) Psalms which speak of the Messiah in some way
- There are three different categories of Messianic psalms.
- Directly or strictly Messianic. A psalm which looks directly to the Messiah (and thus does not have a "near" fulfillment). Examples: Psalm 47, 93, 96-99 (i.e., all the "theocratic" psalms); 2, 110 (royal psalms).
 - Typically or ultimately Messianic. A psalm where there is a partial fulfillment (for example, in David), but the ultimate fulfillment can only be in the Messiah. Examples: Psalm 16, 22 (possibly), 40, 41, and 69 (all the "passion" psalms)
 - Analogically Messianic. A psalm where the primary subject does not appear to be Messianic, but the NT reveals that the extended meaning is Messianic. Examples: Psalm 8 (a psalm of descriptive praise), 69 (imprecatory)
- Acrostic** (9 10 25 34 37 111 112 119 145) see above for discussion of acrostics (m=mixed type)

A Few Guidelines for Interpretation of Poetry and Wisdom Literature

- Understand the various poetic devices already mentioned. Learn to recognize various figures of speech. Make abundant use of commentaries that point out these poetic features and their significance (for example, Bruce Waltke on Proverbs or Allan Ross on Psalms are masterpieces in bringing out the significance of the poetry.
Note too that (though this occurs rarely) sometimes both the figurative and literal understandings may be true. A perfect example of this is David's cry in Psalm 22: "Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong *bulls* of Bashan have encircled Me.¹³ They gape at Me *with* their mouths, *Like* a raging and roaring lion.¹⁴ I am poured out like water, And all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me.¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.¹⁶ For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet;" David is using hyperbole, talking about the animals metaphorically tearing him apart, but in the fullest sense Jesus experienced this literal suffering on the cross as His hands and feet were pierced through.
- Make sure that you are not trying to get *more* out of simple synonymous parallelism than the author intended, because of a belief that the second line *must* mean something different from the first. Recognize and understand the poetic beauty (for the Hebrews) of parallelism and repetition. There may be slight nuances of meaning intended, but often there is not. For instance, the antithetical parallelism we see in Prov 10:1 ("A wise son makes a glad father, But a foolish son is the grief of his mother. ") doesn't mean that only the father is glad when the son exhibits wisdom, or only the mother is grieved with the actions of a foolish son—it is a merism, where the father and the mother are used to represent the parents as a whole.
- Where possible, interpret a verse by its context. This usually helps, though in Proverbs there is often not much context. In such a case, interpret the verse by means of other verses in the book with a similar phrase (use a concordance for such study).
- Use several different translations of the passage. Recognize that sometimes the Hebrew is quite

cryptic, and since there is often little context to help, the meaning may be uncertain (a classic case is Prov 22:6, which can be taken in two quite different ways). Consult various English versions before making dogmatic assertions as to the meaning of a particular verse (NASB, NKJV, ESV, HCSB, NIV are recommended).

5. For Proverbs, a topical approach to the book is very helpful. A book such as *Wisdom for Today's Issues* by Stephen Voorwinde arranges all the verses in Proverbs in topical order ("abominations," "adultery," "alcohol," "anger," etc.). It provides a great way to study this practical book.
6. Understand that in wisdom literature, there are many *general truths* given. They are not intended as absolutes. For instance, Prov 10:27 says that there will be long life for the righteous and a short life for the wicked; 10:3 says the righteous will not go hungry; and Prov 22:6 says that if a parent trains up a child in his way, he will not depart from it when he is old. Yet, there are known exceptions to all these general principles.

A Few Guidelines for Interpretation of Prophecy and Apocalyptic Literature

1. Recognize that interpretation of prophecy requires hard work and careful study. Ramm's statement is excellent: "To arrange the passages in a prophetic harmony would involve a prodigious memory, years of exacting work, a masterful knowledge of biblical languages, an exhaustive reading of prophetic literature, a keen exegetical sense, a thorough knowledge of the histories of many peoples, and a knowledge of all relevant archaeological materials" (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 245).
2. Give one interpretation to each passage (the interpretation may involve an immediate and an ultimate fulfillment). In all Scripture study, be careful to distinguish between interpretation (what does the text say?) and application (how can I apply the text in my current situation?) There may be many applications of Scripture, but one interpretation.
3. Understand the language of prophecy (see above under poetry). In particular, while recognizing clear metaphors and figures of speech (for instance, Christ's statement "I am the door" is certainly a figure of speech), we should avoid "spiritualizing." For example, when the OT text speaks about Israel, we should not immediately substitute the Church in its place. Also, use typology sparingly. It is safest to speak of something as a type only when the NT calls it a type, such as Christ as our Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7). Otherwise, one can get carried away into various "spiritualizing" interpretations that can become highly subjective. Third, recognize symbolic acts as a significant means of God's communication. And finally, understand the use of the prophetic perfect, i.e., where a future event is spoken of in the past tense, because in God's eyes the event is complete.
4. Understand the historical and cultural context. We must understand the history of many nations-- otherwise, how do we know if the prophecy was fulfilled, or is yet future?
5. Be aware of the immediate scriptural context. This will often solve many problems.
6. In difficult passages, compare Scripture with Scripture, ensuring that the interpretation of the passage is in harmony with the rest of Scripture. This principle is called the analogy of faith.
7. Recognize the principle of progressive revelation. Later revelation often discloses elements omitted or unclear in earlier revelation. For example, the church is a mystery not revealed in the OT. Doctrines such as the antichrist and the millennium only become clear in the final book of the Bible.
8. Recognize the perspective of prophecy: "Two or more future events, widely separated in time, may be seen by the prophet in a single profile or side by side" (Paul Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 91). There are numerous scriptural examples of this principle:
 - a. Advents of Christ. The first advent is not always distinguished clearly from the second. In Luke 4, Christ applies the first part of Isa 61:1-2 to the first advent, but does not read v. 2b, which refers to His second advent.
 - b. Judgments. Immediate judgment is often used as a basis for future judgments. For example, Isa 13-23 speaks largely of individual nations, but chaps. 24-27 speaks of the judgment of the world in the end times.
9. Because of its heavy use of symbolism, apocalyptic literature presents its own challenges. Often the symbolism is explained by a heavenly being (much as Jesus explained many of his parables to the disciples), so make use of that. Often there are parallel passages which help in the interpretation, as well as myriads of OT allusions [Swete notes 278 verses out of 404 in the book that refer to the OT (over 2/3!): Isaiah the most (46), followed by Daniel (31), Ezekiel (29), and Psalms (27)] that need to

be considered. Understand that apocalyptic literature describes real events that will take place in the future, and that may not be able to be described easily.

Potential pitfalls in genre study

1. Inventing so-called biblical genres in which inerrancy is denied

- the example of Gunkel (see above and section on form criticism—see the Appendix below)
- the example of Robert Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*—published in 1982) and his resultant expulsion from the *Evangelical Theological Society* in 1983. The ETS has a specific doctrinal statement that must be agreed upon by its members: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”

Gundry (an ETS member) stated that Matthew was written in the genre of Jewish midrash: a Jewish exegetical method that involves deeply interpreting biblical texts by adding commentary, stories, and applications beyond the literal meaning. According to Gundry, much of what was written in Matthew wasn’t true, but because of the genre, it wasn’t meant to be taken as true. In Dec 1983 the ETS membership voted overwhelmingly to remove Gundry from membership. Today, however (40+ years later), **many** ETS member have similar views regarding the historicity of much of the OT (Tremper Longman, Peter Enns, etc.)

As a result of the controversy over these issues in the late 1970's, leading evangelical scholars and pastors developed position statements in a series of conferences held in Chicago, IL

- see The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)

Article 18: “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatical-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.”

Chicago statement on biblical hermeneutics (1982)

Article 13 “We affirm that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study. We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.”

Article 14: “We affirm that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact. We deny that any event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated.”

Article 22: “We affirm that Genesis 1-11 is factual, as is the rest of the book. We deny that the teachings of Genesis 1-11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.”

I’m personally thankful for those who developed Article 22, as this is a watershed issue in our day. Sadly, however, today (over 40 years later) many within the ETS membership would not affirm this statement. (note that full ETS members must have an earned doctorate, so we are not talking about evangelicals as a whole or evangelical pastors—we are talking about evangelical college and seminary professors and authors).

2. The strange (and enlightening) case of the genre of Genesis 1

It used to be that for the most part, only non-evangelical scholars (those not affirming that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God) denied the historicity of Genesis 1–11, ascribing the genre of “myth” to these chapters. Evangelicals rightly rejected such an approach and such a non-Biblical genre classification. But more and more, seeking to harmonize the current scientific consensus (creation via evolution, not direct creation by God), they have become quite creative in arguing against a literal understanding of these chapters.

I have written rather extensively on this topic. In my view, most helpful for the discussion of genre is my chapter entitled “Contemporary hermeneutical Approaches to Genesis 1–11,” in *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth* (eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane Ury; Master Books, 2008). And a small commercial: you can get the entire book on kindle for \$5.99

[https://www.amazon.com/Coming-Grips-Genesis-Terry-Mortenson-ebook/dp/B00FR0SW3U?ref_=a_st_author_mpb]. I provide a brief excerpt below (but without most of the footnotes—if you want to see all the footnotes, email me or buy the book!)

[Excerpt from my chapter in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*]

Many would argue that Genesis 1 should be viewed non-literally because it is a separate genre from the rest of the book. This argument is at once seemingly more sophisticated (what layman would dispute this claim, not being as aware of various genres, etc.?) and more elusive, since in fact a separate genre for Genesis 1 is difficult to demonstrate. Indeed, among those who view Genesis 1 as a separate genre, there is little unanimity as to its precise classification. Some see Genesis 1 as poetic. Wenham calls it a “hymn.” [footnote: Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 10. But Wenham points out that Genesis 1 differs from the ANE creation stories, which are poetic: “Gen 1 is not typical Hebrew poetry.” He ends up calling it “elevated prose, not pure poetry,” since “most of the material is prose” (Ibid.)] If Genesis 1 was poetic, then one would expect to observe many figurative expressions in the text. But even Waltke rejects the classification of Genesis 1 as a poem or a hymn: “Is it a hymn? Hardly, for the poetic mode, the linguistic conventions, and doxological tone of known ancient Near Eastern hymns are notably absent in Genesis 1.” Gunkel, who viewed the genre of Genesis as “legend,” states that apart from Genesis 49, “all that the book contains is prose in form.” It is not written using Hebrew parallelism, but rather the normal prose structure. The contrast between it and a genuinely poetic passage that celebrates God’s creation, such as Psalm 104, is striking. Psalm 104 is a poetic description of the creation; Genesis 1 is not. The inescapable conclusion is that Genesis 1 is narrative prose. Even Westermann agrees that Genesis 1:1-2:4 “is a narrative.” Collins calls it “exalted prose narrative,” acknowledging that it is not poetry, and that “we are dealing with prose narrative,” yet trying still to maintain the possibility of a non-literal hermeneutic. Though acknowledging that Genesis 1 is narrative, Waltke then concludes that the genre is “a literary-artistic representation of the creation”—which, in fact, is not a genre type at all. [footnote: Waltke, “Literary Genre,” 9. Waltke has adopted this phrase from Henri Blocher. It is fascinating that in an article entitled “The Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One,” Waltke ultimately refuses to choose a normal genre category, and finds the need to make up a phrase that describes the content, not really the genre, of Genesis 1.] The best that Stek can do is to call it *sui generis* (its own genre), which emphasizes the uniqueness of Genesis 1. Surely we would agree with Stek that in theme Genesis 1 is unique; but it is hardly unique in form. Indeed, Genesis 1 is presented in a normal narrative form. The standard form in Hebrew for consecutive, sequential narrative prose is the *waw* consecutive imperfect. Genesis 1 contains 50 *waw* consecutive imperfect forms in its 31 verses, an average of 1.6 per verse. This represents more *waw* consecutive forms than all but 3 of the first 20 chapters in Genesis. By contrast, in the poetic section of Genesis 49:1b-27 (Jacob’s blessing of his sons), there are only a total of eight *waw* consecutive forms, or 0.30 per verse. [footnote: Todd S. Beall, William A. Banks, and Colin Smith, *Old Testament Parsing Guide* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 1-15, 46.] To put it another way, Genesis 1 has five times more narrative sequential markers than a comparably long poetic section. There seems to be no doubt that the author of Genesis 1 intended that the narrative be understood as normal sequential action. The genre is clearly narrative, not poetry. [footnote: So also Hasel, “‘Days’ of Creation,” 20: “the creation account of Genesis 1 is a historical prose-record.” Likewise Kaiser states, “Basically, there are two broad categories for arranging the material: poetry or prose. The decision is easy: Genesis 1-11 is prose and not poetry. The use of the *waw* consecutive with the verb to describe sequential acts, the frequent use of the direct object sign and the so-called relative pronoun, the stress on definitions, and the spreading out of these events in a sequential order indicates that we are in prose and not in poetry. Say what *we* will, the author plainly intends to be doing the same thing in these chapters that he is doing in chapters 12-50.” Kaiser, “Literary Form of Genesis 1-11,” 59-60.]

I have had the opportunity to debate a number of evangelical scholars on this very topic in recent years (7 debates from 2010–2018—debated Tremper Longman, John Walton, Hugh Ross, Dick Averbeck, Jack Collins, Walt Kaiser, Bruce Waltke, John Oswalt, Victor Hamilton, Craig Blaising, and Ligon Duncan, to name some), and I have given presentations at the national ETS annual meetings (from 2006–2018) related to this topic. One of the most memorable was a two-day conference held in the fall of 2011 where I debated 4 other participants, all of whom held a non-literal

view of Genesis 1. In the aftermath, a book was produced (Daryl Charles, ed., *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* [Hendrickson, 2013]) containing essays summarizing our various viewpoints plus responses by each participant. On the subject of genre, one participant (Tremper Longman) labels Genesis 1–11 as “theological history,” but never defines this genre anywhere, nor does he give any more examples of it, other than to say that “all of Genesis may be so described.” But if such is the case, how then should Genesis 1–11 be treated any differently in our hermeneutics than the rest of the book of Genesis? I continually pressed the issue of consistency in my responses to each of these participants: do we treat the genealogies in Genesis 1–11 as non-historical, but the genealogies of Genesis 12–50 as historical? Such an approach does not make hermeneutical sense.

In his chapter, Longman does **not** discuss Genesis 1 in any detail, but he **does** discuss ten other OT passages that deal with creation. His argument is that the details are contradictory, and thus none should be taken literally. But here is the problem with that argument: **all** of the other passages dealing with creation that Longman presents are **poetry!** In fact, the **only** non-poetic discussion of creation is the account given in Genesis 1–2, whose genre is historical narrative. See my above discussion concerning how one should interpret poetry. For example, Psalm 104 is a beautiful poetic description of creation, but it is in poetry, not prose. It was never intended to be a detailed historical account of the order of creation—only Genesis gives us that. It’s a perfect example of why understanding the different genres used is so important.

As a postscript, two of the participants in this conference no longer hold to an historical Adam—in my thinking, a direct result of the faulty hermeneutical approaches taken, beginning with Genesis 1. For further discussion, see *Reading Genesis 1–2* (but be prepared for lots of heavy reading, trying to understand what these scholars are trying to say!). One scholar (John Walton) even basically makes the statement in his essay that the only way to properly understand Genesis 1 is to have experts in Ancient Near Eastern Literature explain it to us—otherwise, one can’t hope to understand it properly! By the way, he holds the genre of Genesis 1–2 to be “cosmology.”

Conclusion

Sadly, for lack of time, I was not able to present in detail the potential pitfalls of genre analysis. I had hoped to present **some** of what I have surveyed in the last few pages to the group, but there simply wasn’t time in my 45-minute session. But it reinforces my main point. Yes, genre analysis can be very helpful, especially the distinction between prose genres (historical narrative, law, gospel, epistles) and poetic genres (poetry, wisdom literature, and much of prophecy). But when one tries **to invent** a genre in order to explain away what appears to be the historical truth of a passage (whether in Genesis or in the Gospels), be forewarned: don’t let an academic scholar with many degrees behind his or her name lead you to doubt the truth of God’s inerrant Word!

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Appendix on Form Criticism

1. Definition. An analysis of the OT based on a study of the history of its prewritten literary forms. It was pioneered by Gunkel around 1900 for the OT. Form criticism was a reaction to pure literary criticism: Scripture was not merely the literary product of various sources, but it reflected the oral traditions of the people in their life-settings (German, *Sitz-im-Leben*—defined by Soulen as “that sociological setting within the life of Israel or the early Church in which particular rhetorical forms [legends, sayings, liturgical formulae, psalms, prophecies, parables, etc.] first took shape” [*Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, p. 178]). As Tucker states, form criticism “attempts to recover the full, living history of OT literature, especially to gain insight into its oral stage of development, and to place all the stages of development into their settings in the life of Israel” (*Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, p. 9).
2. Method. There are **four steps** in form criticism.
 - a. **Analyze the structure of a passage to define the form-critical unit.** The unit may be indicated by a change in subject matter or introductory *formulas* such as “Thus says the Lord,” “Hear this word” (call to attention), etc.
 - b. **Describe the genre or form (in the original context).** Below are a list of some of the possible forms.
 - 1) Narrative (tells a story)
 - a) Myth. Stories of the gods (example: in Gen 3:1-5, the mythical theme of the evil demon in the form of a snake hostile to both God and man; in Gen 6:1-4, the marriage of the sons of God with the daughters of men; in Isa 11:6-10, the myth of paradise.
 - b) Folk tale. Fairy tales or fables. Fairy tales assume ideas of magical causation (Jonah, Elijah, Moses' magical rod). Fables personify animals or plants in order to teach a lesson (thistle of Lebanon [2 Kgs 14:9], Jotham's fable [Judg 9:8-15]).
 - c) Saga. Deals with the exploits of men. A saga originates orally and depends upon a mixture of tradition and imagination. A saga often reports the “incredible.” It is not history. Sagas are characterized by action and simplicity.
 - d) History. Originates as written literature, deals with public events (example: David's path to the throne in 2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kgs 1-2).
 - e) Legend. Similar to saga, but more “spiritual.” Tries to glorify holy men (Elisha in 2 Kgs 2-7).
 - f) Novelette. A short fictitious story with a plot and a point (Ex.—Joseph story in Genesis 37, 39-47, 50).
 - 2) Poetic
 - a) Oracular wisdom
 - b) Oracular saying
 - c) Lyric
 - i) Secular (dirge, love song, royal song, etc.)
 - ii) Spiritual (hymn, thanksgiving, etc.)
 - 3) Prophetic
 - a) Accounts (reports of prophets' activities)
 - b) Prayers (ex.-Jeremiah 12)
 - c) Speeches
 - i) Messenger formulas (“Thus says the Lord”)
 - ii) *Rib* or lawsuit (often including a call to attn.)
 - iii) Woe oracles (Isaiah 5, 10, 28, 29)
 - iv) Judgment oracles
 - v) Salvation oracles
 and so on . . .

[For more information on the form critical categories used in OT study, see Gene Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*]
 - c. **Determine the *Sitz-im-Leben* (life setting) which gave rise to the genre.**
 - d. **Determine the intention of the genre in its ancient setting** (not the same as the intention of the redactor!).
3. Problems with form criticism
 - a. Form criticism presupposes that OT literature had a long and complicated oral pre-history (Tucker, p. 6).
 - b. Form criticism tends to divide the text into minute units on the basis of form rather than looking at the text as a whole.
 - c. The classification of genres is biased (antisupernatural).
 - d. Determining the original life setting is purely subjective (usually a non-Israelite origin is assumed), as is determining the intention of the genre.
 - e. Since the origin of form criticism is inextricably linked to antisupernaturalist presuppositions, I prefer personally to steer clear of extracting these terms from their liberal roots and redefining them in an evangelical context. I believe that much confusion can result, since behind these terms lies quite a bit of theological baggage that the one who uses the terms may unwittingly carry along.