Reading Glasses: Form Criticism
by Joshua T. James

Introduction to Form Criticism

When I was a high school student, our English teacher assigned weekly reading selections from an anthology. Within this massive textbook were many different types of literature (or genres), including essays, poems, short stories, plays, novellas, and excerpted chapters from novels. Before each piece, the editors of the anthology provided a brief introduction, which included a short biography of the author, their historical and social setting, and interpretive aids to assist the reader.

Like my high school anthology, the Bible is also a compilation of individual literary works. The diverse literature of the Bible represents a wide variety of genres (narrative, history, law, poetry, prophecy, song, letter, etc.) that were originally intended for use within a specific setting to accomplish a specific function. Unfortunately, there are no editorial introductions within the Bible to orient the reader regarding the genre, setting, and function of a specific text.

In addition, most scholars believe that a large portion of biblical literature was spoken, or passed on through oral tradition, long before it was written. In their view, the stories of the Bible are best understood as folk traditions that were originally spoken for many years, by many different people, and in many different settings. The biblical text that we now possess is the culmination of this long developmental process.

By helping the reader recognize the numerous (and not always obvious) types of literature within the Bible, *form criticism* attempts to recover the underlying oral form of the biblical text as well as its original social setting (where it was used) and function (why it was used).

Form Criticism and Genre

The method's originator, Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), proposed that a text's **genre** is indicated by its structural **form** and is bound to a particular social setting and function. As a result, Gunkel attempted to organize the writings of the Bible according to their genre. In this endeavor, Gunkel was highly influenced by the Brothers Grimm, who had collected German folk traditions and classified them into specific categories such as fairy tale, myth, saga, and legend.

For Gunkel and the early form critics, the identification of biblical genres provided important information regarding the early oral form of a text and its original setting and function in ancient Israel. For example, an individual psalm (a designation meaning "praise") can be classified into specific categories, such as hymn (song of praise), lament, or thanksgiving psalm. Because each distinct genre was used in a specific setting for a specific purpose, accurately categorizing a psalm (or any text) helps to reveal this information.

Even in our society, the genres that we use are bound to the situations in which we employ them. You would not begin a research paper, "Once upon a time, there lived a man..." No, this genre (the fairy tale) is used in a different situation and for a different purpose. Writing a research paper has an identifiable structure (MLA or APA format) and a specific social setting (school) and function (a graded assignment).

How Does Form Criticism Work?

In order to apply the form critical method, one must *first* define the boundaries of the biblical text, to study it on its own. This means isolating an individual **literary unit** from its surrounding context. If a passage within a larger narrative begins, "A long time afterward," this is a textual clue that a new unit has begun. Or when a prophet writes, "Thus says the Lord," readers know that they are reading a separate divine speech. Generally, a new scene in a narrative or an individual poem, prophecy, or song constitutes a distinct literary unit.

Second, once a text is separated into its component parts, the form critic identifies the genre of the specific literary unit under consideration based on its form and content.

For example, my wife loves to watch romantic comedies. From *Hope Floats* to *Miss Congeniality* to *The Proposal*, our DVD collection is filled with feel-good love stories (mostly starring Sandra Bullock). With few exceptions, this movie genre is characterized by a recurring form, which can be outlined as follows:

- Boy meets girl
- Boy and girl don't like each other
- Boy and girl are forced to interact
- Boy starts to like girl; Girl starts to like boy
- Boy messes it all up; Girl gets mad
- Boy does something to redeem himself
- Boy and girl end up together and live happily ever after

While the content of these movies certainly suggests this genre identification, a romantic comedy also includes a typical form (outlined above).

Psalm 150 serves as an example from the Bible of the structured form of a genre. A quick reading of this individual literary unit reveals its key emphasis: praising the Lord. Based on its content, Psalm 150 is a "hymn" or a "song of praise."

Aside from its content, however, a hymn provides very clear structural indications of its genre (cf. Psalms 146-49). First, a hymn begins with a command to "praise the Lord" (vs. 1). Second, a hymn typically includes reasons why one should praise the Lord (vs. 2). And third, a hymn concludes with a final command to praise (vs. 6b). Therefore, the content of the psalm (giving praise) and the structure of the psalm (the elements included) indicate its genre.

Third, the identification of the genre leads us to an understanding of the text's original setting, or the situation in which it was used prior to its inclusion in the Bible. In biblical scholarship, the setting of the text is known as its *Sitz im Leben* ("setting in life"). To be clear, form criticism is not attempting to understand the historical setting of the author, but rather, the social situation in which the text was used. For example, because Psalm 150 is a hymn, it is very

probable that it was used in the context of ancient Israel's worship. Consequently, the identification of the genre also indicates how the text was used (its function), which, in this case, is to give praise to Israel's God.

Conclusion

Form criticism is a helpful tool that allows interpreters to gain insights into a text based on what they can learn about its formal characteristics. By analyzing the form and genre of individual texts, form critics are able to offer ideas about its probable social setting and function.

While this method appears daunting for beginners, readers of all levels can identify genres. Form criticism simply emphasizes this task for a particular purpose – to recover the early stages of a biblical text.

Joshua T. James is a Ph.D. student in Old Testament studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, and a high school Bible teacher at Delmarva Christian High School in Georgetown, DE.

Glossary:

Form – The outline, structure, or shape of an individual literary unit.

Genre (of Literature) – A descriptive category characterized by typical literary conventions, including form and content.

Literary Unit – A self-contained piece of literature that may have existed independently prior to its inclusion in a larger narrative or literary collection.

Suggested Reading:

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Sweeney, Marvin A. "Form Criticism." Pages 58-89 in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*. Rev and exp. Edited by Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999.

Tucker, Gene M. *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship. Edited by J. Coert Rylaarsdam. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

For the Teacher:

An examination of form criticism lends itself to many in-class activities:

- To demonstrate the importance of isolating the "literary unit," play a "mashup" (a mix of different songs blended together to form one continuous song). Ask the students to

identify the individual songs. Help them to realize that in order to understand the original meaning of the song, it must be isolated from its context. In the same way, according to form criticism, the biblical text must be broken down into its component parts if we are to understand it properly.

- Due to the emphasis of form criticism on genre analysis (and the common structuring devices that accompany specific genres), movie clips provide a nice entryway into the study of "forms." For example, after playing a movie clip (this could be as short as 30 seconds to 1 minute), ask the students to identify the genre of a movie. Then ask them: (1) how they recognized this genre and (2) to explain the typical plot development or significant features that characterize the genre. Much like modern movies (or stories), the biblical "forms" have recurring plots or features that signify to the reader what the genre is.

- In order to explain how genre is tied to "setting" and "function," break the students into groups and hand out diverse literary forms (perhaps, a weather report, a eulogy, a sports article, a poem, etc.). Ask each group to analyze the text and to make conclusions concerning the situation (or setting) in which the text is most likely used and the function (or intention) of the text.