



GENRE: INTERPRETATION, RECOGNITION, CREATION

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Responsible biblical interpretation requires an adequate appreciation of genre. But it is not always easy to teach new students about how to interpret different genres, let alone cultivate in them the appropriate skills necessary for competent genre-recognition. I introduce the topic of genre by showing two different snippets of poetry. The first is a quite serious poem about “not refusing to do the good that I can do”; the second is a humorous piece that recounts a worker’s ode to how to get out of doing much work on the job, especially if the day happens to be Friday. I first encountered these pieces at a previous place of employment where they were posted next to each other, the second above the first. I immediately found the juxtaposition somewhat jarring, especially for a new worker like myself. That is, which poem should I believe and (perhaps) enact? Ought I “not refuse to do the good that I can do” or should I seek to get out of as much work as possible, especially on Fridays?

I show a picture of the two poems *in situ* and pose these questions to the students who subsequently begin to answer by analyzing the presentation of the poems. The first is rather austere, with the lines arranged stichometrically with just a simple black-line border. The second, placed above the first, is larger, with different typefaces, many punctuation marks, and a border that is made up of humorous cartoon figures

who are obviously frustrated workers on the job. These are just a few of the things that the students pick up on to make a determination as to which poem is "serious" and to be enacted by the workers and which is purely humorous. Some of the other factors influencing interpretation include items such as the content and rhythm of the poem, their relative sizes (which is larger?) and positioning (which is on top?), aesthetic consideration (which is most engaging?), as well as the social context in which the pieces were posted (in the kitchenette/break room).

The exercise highlights several things simultaneously: First, even if two compositions are of the same literary genre (poem), this does not mean that they have the same function or that they are susceptible to the same interpretation. Not all genres are created equal, that is, even when they are the selfsame genre. Second, genres can have more than one function and belong to more than one type (at least according to function), even simultaneously. These and other items help students see that readers help to create or construct genre on the basis of what they already know as well as on the basis of preexisting genre-clues. The perduring problem, of course, is that some of the genre-clues used in the exercise are typically absent from the biblical text. For example, there are no cartoons scribbled in the margins of the Bible (at least not in most modern versions, though one might perhaps compare illuminated manuscripts) that indicate when a passage is to be taken more lightly than another. (Even this observation helps students read more carefully, wondering what they might be missing or entertaining other readings than the simple and straightforward one.) Still more problematic is the fact that even when genre-clues are present in a text many Bible readers simply lack the literary or cultural competence to recognize them as such, particularly beginning students who are unfamiliar with "the strange new world of the Bible" (Karl Barth) and the very ancient contexts from which it comes. Hence the need for the study of genres, specifically

ancient ones, in the first place.

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