



## On Recognizing Genre in the Bible

By Robert L. Foster, PhD

When we turn to the newspaper to start the day we come with expectations about what we will find. The front page contains the lead story reporting on the biggest news event of the past 24 hours. Further in we find the obituaries, a series of short bios summarizing the life of the deceased and the relationships they leave behind. Most readers actually start with or only read the cartoons, looking for three story panes with the punch line in the last frame.

The reason we have these expectations arises from the fact that in the United States and other cultures we have the **genre** of newspapers. A genre is simply an agreed upon conventional form of communication in a particular culture or group of cultures. Still, convention allows for variation and often variation indicates the purpose of a particular writing or speech. A cartoon taking the form of the obituary would stand out and signal to the reader perhaps the final installment of a cartoon series or even the author's belief in the death of humor.

Each book of the Bible also communicates via the medium of a conventional form agreed upon by various cultures, though these cultures are some distance from our own time. The ability to identify common characteristics of various genres in the Bible allows readers to recognize the type of literature and its typical qualities, as well as to notice when variations in genre occur. Both commonalities and variations facilitate a better understanding of the purpose of the book or section within a book.

The broadest categorical distinction of genre within the Bible is that of stories (**narratives**) and speeches (**discourse**). This simple division often does not hold exactly. Still, we see that Genesis is primarily a narrative with an occasional speech by Abraham or Jacob. The book of Isaiah is primarily a series of speeches with a few narratives sprinkled in the early sections. Narratives create expectations based on common genre features such as plot, character and setting. Discourse often presents the reader with the conventions of argumentation, premises and conclusions, theses and supporting arguments. The New Testament letters fall in this latter category as the Greco-Roman world saw the epistle as a form of speech that would be read aloud when one could not be present to the audience.

The next largest genre classifications relate to particular books. Exodus and Leviticus are often termed books of **Torah** (or, Law) because they contain instructions from God about conducting life before God, with one another, and the stranger in the land. Yet, variations between the two indicate the purpose of the writings. Exodus builds its case for obedience to God upon the narrative, the memory that "God brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2). Leviticus describes obedience based on properly-ordered cultic life, outlined in the first seven

chapters, with its communal regulations and instructions about various offerings presented in the central sanctuary.

Gospels are a major genre of the New Testament. The gospels in the canon of the Christian Bible all contain collected stories and sayings of Jesus often ordered from early in his life and/or ministry to the crucifixion, with a good portion of the gospels focused on the last week of Jesus' life. One interesting variation in the genre is in Mark's gospel, where there is no resurrection appearance of Jesus. This sudden ending seems to conform to a larger purpose of Mark to describe the great difficulty in coming to grips with the life and message of Jesus, even for those who hear an angel report of Jesus' resurrection.

Pride of place in genre studies goes mainly to individual units within larger books. So for example in Genesis, the creation accounts are different from the family stories that follow—much like a cartoon is different from an obituary but still considered part of the newspaper—so too can readers of Genesis look at sections within it and recognize differences within the larger genre of “narrative.”

One major reason for the emphasis on individual units emerges from the rich history of genre studies of the psalms. Lament and praise psalms predominate the book of Psalms but one also finds thanksgiving, penitential, and instructional psalms. These latter some would label Torah psalms and others wisdom psalms. The lament, praise, and thanksgiving psalms often include particular moods, so that just as one expects humor in the newspaper cartoon, one expects a sense of frustration and sadness in lament psalms.

In any case, the rich variety of these types within the 150 psalms has generated a steady flow of studies into the type, character, and meaning of such psalms. And, again, variation from identifiable patterns gives some indication of a particular psalm's emphasis. Lament psalms normally follow a pattern of an invocation followed by a complaint and then an assertion of innocence, after which one normally finds an assertion of confidence, a plea for help, and a statement anticipating thanksgiving for deliverance. The fact that Psalm 88 does not contain the note of confidence nor the anticipated thanksgiving indicates the desperate situation of the author of Psalm 88.

Very few genres apply both to books and to smaller units within books. As we have seen, most books are a mix of genres or have variations within the genre. The genre of apocalyptic, however, applies universally. Apocalyptic literature gains its name from the word apocalypse, which refers to revelation about the **eschatological** future and heavenly realities, often mediated by heavenly beings to a human figure. Most of us are familiar with apocalyptic literature through the Apocalypse, the book of Revelation. Still, other sections in the Bible contain sections written in the genre of apocalypse, including Ezekiel 40- 48, Zechariah 14, and Mark 13. Part of the difficulty of reading apocalyptic literature is that the agreed upon conventions for apocalyptic at the time of their writing likely included using images and language that would conceal the true meaning of a text from threatening outsiders. Thus, to

some modern readers the apocalyptic texts often seem to contain as much that is unclear as is clear.

Genres are a great gift in communication because they facilitate the ability to understand the message of an author, whether that message is the significance of a particularly newsworthy event or the message of a prophetic oracle or book. Learning the regular patterns of a genre also allows readers to pick-up on both clear and subtle differences that indicate the particular concerns of an author. The number of genres and the variety of historical moments in which they emerged make present a challenge to the modern reader. But that challenge is equally met with the gratification of greater insight into the purpose and implications of the biblical text.

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## **Glossary**

**genre:** an agreed upon conventional form of communication in a particular culture or group of cultures.

**narratives:** stories recording a sequence of events involving any number of characters within a particular setting.

**discourse:** a formal discussion of a particular subject recorded in speech or writing in an orderly manner.

**Torah:** instructions given by God to the people of Israel to govern their existence in the land of Israel.

**eschatological:** referring to the end of the world as it presently exists and the anticipation of a new existence in the future.