

THE REAL MEANING OF GENRE Some Thoughts & a Cautionary Tale

There are those writers—especially writers of books telling the rest of us how to read this or that kind of material (i.e., *genre*)¹—and that without knowing the genre of a work we can't “truly” understand or appreciate it, and are in fact prone to misinterpret it. This has become almost a dictum of biblical interpretation, especially in the Psalter, where numerous books on the hermeneutics [interpretation] of the psalms warn that the first step in understanding a psalm is to determine its genre.²

It is common to find an author comparing, e.g., a telephone directory, a novel, and a cookbook and asking which one we would use to order pizza or to bake a cake.

This is not, of course, the first step, which is to *read* the psalm, preferably in Biblical Hebrew, (if you have not yet studied Hebrew) Septuagint Greek, or (if you have yet to study Greek), in some other language of your choice. And then, since determining a text's genre is only possible once we have determined that there exists a genre with which the poem is to be identified, we must read not one psalm but many. Having read through the Psalter, we may begin to notice what appear to be patterns shared by several psalms.

Once we have begun to notice recurrent patterns, we may study them more closely in order to see if we are perhaps merely seeing faces in the clouds, or if the patterns “are there”. If we then decide that Pss 13, 35, 56, and 69 (e.g.) all have the same general outline, we may give that outline a name and call it a genre. The next step is twofold: (1) to determine whether or not any other psalms fit the same pattern; and (2) to determine the newly-identified genre's apparent range or flexibility.

What is the benefit of all this work? There are actually several genuine benefits.

1. We will read the psalms much more closely, paying more careful attention to their content and organization (*what* they say and *how* they say it).
2. We will indeed see recurrent patterns that can be used to organize the psalms into various “types”. It is common to say that genre is determined by *form*, but then to assign some psalms to a “genre” according to their “mood”, without regard for their form.

The difference here is that—to use examples from English literature—all sonnets are sonnets insofar as they consist of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter with one of two (possibly three) rhyme schemes that essentially organize the poem into either three groups of four lines (quatrains) and a final rhymed couplet, or a set of eight lines (the “octet”) and another set of six (the “sestet”). A sonnet's logic also follows one of two patterns: (1) the first twelve lines present a problem, question, or describe situation, which is solved, answered, or “reinterpreted” in the final couplet; or (2) the octet poses the problem, &c., which is answered in the sestet.

Nor do these logical “outlines” necessarily correspond to the rhyme scheme. The “Elizabethan” or “Shakespearean” sonnet, for example, almost always follows the 4+4+4+2 pattern of rhyme, but the logic is often 8+6.

Sonnets (*sonnetto* is Italian for “little song”) are often about love, but sonnets are not the only kind of love poem, which can be (and are) of nearly any kind, except for epic (and even epic poems can have love as their topic, e.g., Chaucer's *Troilus & Cressyde*).

¹“Genre” is just the French word that refers to a “kind” or “type”, but it always sounds so much more impressive to use a word from another language. We could also use Latin *exemplar* or *exemplum*, but that would get mixed up with “example”.

²Since Gunkel applied form criticism to biblical poetry, the opinion has become very nearly ubiquitous among both hermeneuticians and commentators.

The second benefit of noting genres of the psalms is thus that the psalms are not all alike—there are not merely 150 individual and unique “psalms”—but neither is there only one type of material in the Psalter (all psalms are merely psalms). Nor are all love poems merely “love poems”.

3. A third benefit of “typing” the psalms is that it encourages us to compare and contrast psalms that we have assigned to the same “type”, so that we read them in relationship to others of the same kind. Why does one poem of praise (e.g., Ps 150) mainly exhort us to praise YHWH by various means, while more than half of another (e.g., Ps 113) enumerates reasons for praise and worship?

We may object that the point is the same, so what’s the difference? Perhaps not a great deal in the larger scheme of biblical (or any) interpretation. After all, the main thing to realize is that these are *poems*, not theological treatises “reformatted”.³

But it nearly always helps our understanding if we ask why this poem and that are different, even in—especially given—their overall sameness. What was the poet trying to say by saying the “same thing” in a different way? Since the manner is different, the content is different, and therefore the “same thing” is *not* the same. And we should ask how it differs and why (even if we cannot answer these questions).

Is genre helpful? Yes. But it is not the “most important” aspect of interpretation, nor does our proper understanding of a poem’s genre determine the validity of our understanding of it. Its main benefits, as listed above, are the “close examination” which it requires, and our ability to study poems (psalms) in combination, rather than to isolate them.⁴

³I further address this topic in a number of papers and handouts that I hope to make public.

⁴I realize that Gunkel’s original impetus was the reconstruction of various aspects of Israel’s religion by identifying the ceremonies underlying the various forms of the psalms, but that carries far too many assumptions, such as, e.g., that the psalms were used by Israelite worshippers (1 Ch 16, the only clear example of identifiable psalms being used in this way, was a most special occasion, organized by royal decree), and that the content [organization] of the psalm mirrors a religious ceremony. The claim that psalmic genre enables us to determine a poem’s function in the Israelite cult has not been demonstrated, even though it is widely assumed.

GENRE: A CAUTIONARY TALE

He checked in late. The bellhop overhead him muttering to himself, “How can I go on? Where can I get some help?”

As he set down the bags, the bellhop, a pious young man who wanted to be helpful (and perhaps improve his tip) quietly said, “Why don’t you check the Book in the nightstand? It will give you all the help you need.”

The businessman—manager of the branch of a large bank with its headquarters in this city—glanced distractedly at him, gave him a tip, and closed the door.

After showering, he looked for the book that the bellhop had mentioned, but there were four books in the top drawer. A black hardcover with a torch on the front lay on top of a large, oversize paperback covered with black, yellow, and red print. A second paperback, badly frayed, and the smallest of the four, had a lurid cover with a man and woman dressed in old-fashioned clothes (“Civil War?” he hazarded), and locked in a violent clinch. The fourth, a largish volume, was bound in beautifully tooled and gilded leather, with one word—*Grimm*—embossed on the spine.

Not knowing which to use, but vaguely associating size with helpfulness, he picked up the large yellow, black, and white book first and opened it at random. “Good grief! Not names and numbers!” he said as he thrust it back into the drawer. Flipping through the black hardcover, he found a list of statements beginning “twelve thousand from the tribe of ...” (near the end) and “And the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty-nine years” (toward the opening of the book). He didn’t even groan, merely put it back. And the garish paperback was clearly not intended to be helpful.

“Grimm”, he thought to himself. “My life sure is grimm these days, so maybe this is what I need” (spelling was not his forte). Sure enough, when he opened it, he found a story that began “Once upon a time ...”, and went on to describe his situation (more or less), and suggest a way out.

So the next morning, with the book in his briefcase for reference, he went to work early, disconnected all of the intercoms and telephone lines leading out of the conference room, known as “The Oven” because the maintenance crew controlled the thermostat. He then locked his supervisor—called “The Witch” behind her back—inside, and made off with a small fortune, some of which he used to pay off the loan shark, but most of which became his ticket to a small, unnamed South Pacific island, where he lived happily ever after (and from where he sent a truly generous and anonymous tip to the bellhop who had made it all possible).

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Moral: The usefulness of genre in interpretation is vastly overrated.

Written with a smile,
by *Frederic Clarke Putnam*
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