

DOES GENRE DETERMINE MEANING?

Introduction

From the beginnings of the development of the critical methodology, as it was being applied to the study of the Bible, understanding the Bible as literature has become more important and more central to hermeneutics. As Jeffrey Weima remarks, “The past few decades have witnessed a paradigm shift taking place in biblical studies. The old perspective that viewed Scripture as primarily a historical or theological document has been replaced by a new conviction that the Bible is literature and as such ought to be interpreted from a literary perspective.”¹ It is notoriously difficult to identify what constitutes literature. After a lengthy consideration of several attempts at developing a definition of “literature,” one theorist concluded,

A piece of writing may start off life as history or philosophy and then come to be ranked as literature; or it may start off as literature and then come to be valued for its archaeological significance. Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them. . . . In this sense, one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing. . . . Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist.²

As difficult as it may be to define literature, there is one thing upon which all theorists agree and that is that literature comes in various shapes and kinds. Not all that is identified as literature is of the same character. The different kinds of literature are identified as *genres*. The term ‘genre’ comes to us through the French originally from Latin and means “kind” or “class.” Margaret Davies defines genre as, “A kind of literature or literary species; for example, tragedy, comedy, novel, biography, romance, history, essay or letter. Each genre makes use of a particular style in its treatment of specific subjects and motifs within a structure whose unity gives meaning to its part.”³ Definitions like the one given by Davies’ definition are fairly common in the literature.

¹Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Literary Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 150.

²Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7-9.

³Margaret Davies, “Genre,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 265.

Questions of genre have become standard practice in most contemporary commentaries. For example, James A. Montgomery produced his critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Daniel in 1927, and his introduction includes no considerations of the possible classifications of genre in the book of Daniel.⁴ By contrast, Stephen R. Miller's commentary on Daniel,⁵ published in 1994, has an entire section of his introduction, titled "Type of Literature," devoted to the discussion of genre classification for the book of Daniel.

Considerations of genre as part of the introductory matter of recent commentaries has become virtually required because most commentators hold that genre is important for interpretation. A recent text on hermeneutics puts it this way: "Biblical authors used different literary conventions in order to accomplish different purposes. . . . Each literary form, therefore, reveals literary function. Determining what the author is trying to say involves our recognition of the genre employed—a literary decision which facilitates authorial intent as well as a reader's comprehension. Hence, before we can discover the meaning of what was written, we need to understand how it was written."⁶ Grant Osborne states this view in a manner that is quite typical: "As I will argue in appendix two and in the section on special hermeneutics below, the genre or type of literature in which a passage is found provides the 'rules of the language game' (Wittgenstein), that is, the hermeneutical principles by which one understands it. Obviously, we do not interpret fiction the same way as we understand poetry. Nor will a person look for the same scheme in biblical wisdom as in the prophetic portions."⁷ These are not isolated examples of this conviction. Leland Ryken asserts, "Each genre has its distinctive features and its own 'rules' or principles of operation. As readers, we need to approach passages in the Bible with the right expectations. Our awareness of genre programs our encounter with a biblical text, telling us what to look for and how to interpret what we see."⁸ As we have said, this view is pervasive and almost universally accepted as a critical feature of a good hermeneutic.

Genre and Meaning

The notion that genre "gives meaning," as Davies puts it, is almost a universally accepted idea about the relationship of genre to semantics. But a serious omission in the accepted notion

⁴James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927). Montgomery does have a discussion about Daniel as apocalyptic writing, but his discussion is primarily on the theological rather than the literary level.

⁵Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994).

⁶Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 264.

⁷Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 9.

⁸Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 16.

becomes apparent once one introduces a simple question. How does one come to discover in which genre a particular piece of writing should be classified? In other words, How does genre classification work? In order to classify a particular piece of literature as having been produced according to the principles of a particular genre, the interpreter must read the text and attempt to discern the patterns that would indicate conformity to the characteristics of a particular genre. For example, if the text reads like a story having characters, a plot, a setting, conflict, etc., then one might broadly classify it as narrative, or perhaps more narrowly as a novel. If the text contains expressions that conform to identifiable figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, etc., being structured in short lines composed of two brief and complementary parts that seem to have some reciprocal relation, one might classify the material as Hebrew poetry. But, what is the interpreter doing when he reads a text in order to discover its patterns? Is he engaging in interpretation at this stage? It certainly cannot be the case that the interpreter is interpreting the text by employing a certain type of genre classification, for that is the very thing that is being sought. An interpreter cannot know the genre of a text before he knows how the text is structured or before he finds the characteristics in the text that suggests its genre. And an interpreter cannot discover how a text is structured until he reads the text, grasps the meanings of the words and sentences, and thereby uncovers the structure of the piece. In other words, the genre must be discerned and discovered in the text as one reads it.

But if, as many commentators and theorists assert, meaning is genre-dependent, then this seems to imply that in order to interpret the text the interpreter must first identify the genre. In fact, this is precisely what most hermeneutic theorists assert. Sidney Greidanus declares, “The recognition of different forms (‘forms’ used here in a general, non-technical sense) of biblical literature is important for hermeneutics because it provides the initial clue to the meaning of a passage. Grant Osborne states that ‘genre plays a positive role as a hermeneutical device for determining the *sensus literalis* or intended meaning of the text. Genre is more than a means of classifying literary types; it is an epistemological tool for unlocking meaning in individual texts.’”⁹ But, how can an interpreter attempt to classify a piece of writing into its appropriate genre unless he is able to read and understand what the text is saying prior to deciding its genre? Osborne himself admits as much when he says, “Each writer couches his message in a certain genre in order to give the reader sufficient rules by which to decode that message. These hints guide the reader (or hearer) and provide clues for interpretation.”¹⁰ But the “hints” to which Osborne refers are the words and sentences of the text. An interpreter must discover the hints and discern the clues as he reads (or hears) by understanding the meanings of the words and sentences in order to discover the genre. A certain level of interpretation and understanding must accompany the reading (hearing) for the interpreter correctly and successfully to identify the hints and clues and accurately associate them with the appropriate genre. But then the reading (hearing) and understanding of the meaning of the text comes logically and necessarily before the identification of the genre. In other words, some level of meaning cannot

⁹Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 16-17.

¹⁰Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 9.

be genre-dependent. Some level of meaning must be communicable and understandable in order to make genre identification possible.

What kind of interpretation occurs when an interpreter is reading a text in order to discover its genre? John Hayes and Carl Holladay may have indicated the answer to this question:

The required effort and means necessary for the exegesis and interpretation of texts thus vary greatly, depending upon the nature of the texts and their relationship to normal communication. Some texts merely need to be read to be understood. Others require very detailed analysis. Some use normal, everyday language, grammar, and sentence structure. Others use a very specialized vocabulary, involved grammatical and sentence structure and distinctive forms of expression. Some texts employ symbolic and metaphoric language. Others seek to employ language and words so as to limit severely the range of meaning and the potential to persuade. Others seek to merely inform. Some texts are produced to entertain. Others seek to produce some particular response and actions.¹¹

The key statement in the above quote is, “and their relationship to normal communication.” In other words, according to Hayes and Holladay, some communications are normal and “merely need to be read to be understood.” But what is a “normal” text? How can someone identify a “normal” text as distinct from those texts that, according to Hayes and Holladay, “require very detailed analysis”? As they go on to say, “Some [texts] use normal, every day language, grammar, and sentence structure.” In other words, some texts can be approached according to the normal-grammatical-historical interpretive methodology. That is to say, the kind of interpretation that occurs as the interpreter is reading a text prior to genre identification and in order to discover its genre is the normal-grammatical-historical interpretation. And an interpreter must have a rudimentary understanding of the meaning of the text in order to discover its genre. That being the case, it follows that genre does not determine meaning.

Genre and Form

We might say the genre of a piece of literature is the form that it takes. As Gilson puts it, form “might also be described as that arrangement which makes the parts of a whole out of a plurality of elements and thereby structures the latter into a distinct object.”¹² But perceiving the form involves an apprehension of the elements that constitute the plurality in their unity as this distinct object. The text is not perceived first followed by the examination of the words and sentences. The text as a unity is perceived in terms of the plurality of elements that constitute it as a unity of these

¹¹John Hayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 7; quoted in W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 2d ed. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 69-70.

¹²Etienne Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, trans. Salvator Attansio (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966; reprint, Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 4 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

very elements. Putting these notions in terms of genre, the genre is roughly equivalent to the form of the piece of literature. The words and sentences, the grammar and syntax, the figures of speech, colloquialisms, idioms, and the various literary devices are the plurality of elements that are arranged in such a manner so as to constitute this distinct literary object. As Gilson points out, the author “finds his material ready-made in the language, whose words, structural forms and essential rules he accepts.”¹³ The author works within the parameters of his language and the conventions of his culture. Although an artist may stretch the boundaries, he cannot work completely outside the confines of his language and culture else he runs the risk of not communicating at all.

In order to discover the genre, it is necessary first to apprehend the elements in their arrangements. But, we are not dealing here with simple objects. Grammar and syntax, words and their meanings, are themselves complex entities that require perception in their unities. Thankfully, much of this is virtually intuitive for a reader of his native language. However, when considering a piece of poetry, for example, persons not trained in the nature of poetry may not be able to perceive the literary devices that are used by the poet to construct this distinct literary piece, and in some instances a literary piece may not even be recognizable as poetry even to the trained eye. This is one reason for the controversy over what seems to be a literary unit in Gen. 2:23:

זֹאת הַפֶּעַם עֵצִים מֵעֲצָמֵי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקָטְתָהּ זֹאת
 “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman,
 Because she was taken out of Man.”

Is this the first piece of poetry in the Hebrew Bible? Some say, yes, others say, no. One reason for this disagreement may be that the elements, the poetic devices, that were used in this ancient culture have not been transmitted so completely as to make it possible in every instance conclusively to identify the form of every literary unit that might be a piece of poetry. Nevertheless, those involved in the debate have identified the plurality of elements and even understood the meanings of the words, the grammar, and the syntax.

Understanding the genre, that is the form of the literary piece, is necessary for understanding the literary unit as a piece of literature. As Gilson says, “Strictly speaking, form is proper to each art, and its discernment in the very process of perceiving it is what is called ‘understanding’ a work of art.”¹⁴ But, understanding the literary piece as a piece of literature, or a work of art, is not the same as apprehending the multiplicity of elements that constitute it. In literature, these elements must be apprehended in their own right as the elements they are. There is a hermeneutical circle in the relationship of genre to the elements that are arranged into this particular form. But, this is not a vicious circle. Understanding the form is not a necessary part of understanding all of the elements as elements. In the case above, it is not necessary to understand the form, whether or not this arrangement constitutes a poetic structure, in order to apprehend the various parts. A reader of the language can understand the individual words, and the syntactical arrangement makes it possible for the reader to understand the sentences and their straightforward meaning. This is accomplished by

¹³Ibid., 212.

¹⁴Ibid., 4.

means of the grammatical-historical approach, that is, understanding the words and clauses in their normal, grammatical, historical meaning. However, whether this is a poem is predicated on understanding what constitutes poetic structure in this culture and whether these particular words and clauses are arranged in such a manner so as to discover whether this particular arrangement reflects the basic characteristics of poetry. Again Gilson points out, “A critic has a hard job to determine whether a work lacks form or whether he fails to perceive it.”¹⁵ This may be precisely the problem in this instance. Those involved in the debate are arguing about whether this material indeed has the form of Hebrew poetry or not, and the problem arises from the lack of available information from the culture about poetry, which complicates the capacity to see its form. In other words, because we possess no genre criticism from the ancient Hebrews, we may not possess sufficient information to make the determination about the form/genre. Of course another problem is that, as we have noted above, genres are not straight jackets that require authors slavishly to follow a set of rules in order to produce Hebrew poetry. As Gilson says, “The artist is free; no one is authorized to prescribe rules for him, nor impose upon him limits.”¹⁶ No two poems in the Hebrew Bible are exactly alike. Nevertheless, we can discern some general characteristics that distinguish poetry from narrative.

If it is possible to demonstrate that this particular literary piece does exhibit some of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry, then it becomes necessary to reconsider the words and clauses in terms of the function of poetry in this culture. In this effort one may discover that certain words are not being used in their strictly normal-lexical-grammatical manner, but are being used in a poetic or figurative manner. Nevertheless, the poetic or figurative function of words is predicated on their normal-lexical-grammatical use. Genre classification enhances our understanding of meaning, or it may qualify our initial understanding of meaning, but genre does not determine meaning.

The following chart sets out the relationship between genre and the material that forms the literary work:

Table #1: Genre and Material

Genre	Words and Sentences
The Whole	The Parts
Enhances Meaning	Determines Meaning
Form of the Text	Material of the Text
Arises from the Text	Constitutes the Text
Secondary Consideration	Primary Consideration

¹⁵Ibid.

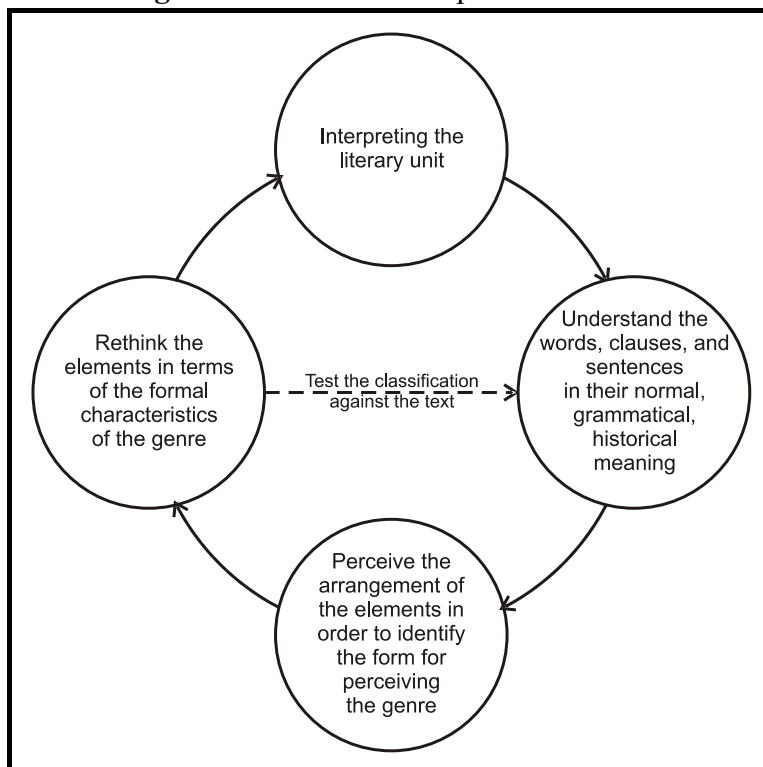
¹⁶Ibid., 6.

Genre and the Hermeneutic Spiral

As we mentioned above, what seems to be the case here is yet another instance of the hermeneutical spiral (see **Figure 1**). In order to identify the genre, one must read and understand the text to some degree. Understanding the text allows the reader to discover the hints that guide him into the discovery of the genre in which the writer has couched his communication. Once the reader has made a preliminary classification of genre, he must then apply the “rules” of that genre to the text in order to discover whether or not that particular classification bears out in the text. If it does not, then the interpreter will need to search for other hints more accurately to identify the genre. When this process has successfully arrived at the identification of the appropriate genre, the characteristics of that genre will help the reader to interpret the text more completely by discovering aspects of word play, or repetition, or parallelism, or figure of speech, or even aspects of significance. Alastair Fowler puts it this way: “What signals, it asks, were originally sent? What vocabulary selections were originally made? What local meanings were originally conveyed? What rhymes and other rhetorical patterns and structures? What conventions? What innovations or variation?”¹⁷ For example, Ex. 23:19 declares, “You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother.”¹⁸ When this statement is seen in its context, the hints of the context and the particular statement might lead the interpreter to identify this as legal code. This classification does not alter the straightforward meaning of the statement, but it does alert the reader to its significance and to its application in its historical context.

A particular interpreter may be alerted to a genre type before reading a given text. This alert may come because the interpreter has been taught to expect a certain kind of genre in certain places in the biblical text. For example, an interpreter may have been taught to expect historical narrative

Figure 1: Genre and Interpretation Circle



¹⁷Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 256.

¹⁸ לֹא־תִבְשֹׁל גֹּדִי בַחֲלֵב אִמּוֹ (Ex. 23:19).

in historical books. But, poetry occurs in these books as well, so although an interpreter may expect to find historical narrative, he must still read the text in such a way as to allow the features of the text to indicate its genre. Ideally the interpreter should not impose upon the text certain genre expectations. Genre expectations should grow out of the text itself. Of course that reinforces the notion that genre does not determine meaning.

Fowler and others appear to argue against the notion that the identification of genre depends upon a preliminary level of interpretation. Arguing against the notion of a hermeneutical spiral in the discovery of genre, Fowler quotes Ralph Cohen; “‘statements about identification of generic features operate on a quite different level from those about poetic functions.’ For ‘concepts of forms . . . can be arrived at by comparison of classification systems and are not dependent upon interpretation within a work.’”¹⁹ But Fowler and Cohen are not arguing about the interpretation of a particular piece of literature and the role that genre plays. Rather, they are arguing on the level of genre criticism and the construction or reconstruction of genre classifications on the abstract level. As Fowler notes, “Genres have an institutional existence that transcends (or lack) the privacy and fine shades of meaning of the individual work.”²⁰ In terms of genre construction, this may be true. But even genre construction begins with the interpretation of the individual works, at least to the level of understanding the words and phrases so as to discern the patterns and nuances that serve to identify the characteristics of a given genre. Also, Fowler makes a distinction between criticism and reading. He says, “Once the construction corresponds as far as possible to the intended original, criticism moves on to the phase of interpretation. This is the heart of criticism, as distinct from reading.”²¹ What seems at first to be an objection to the notion that one must obtain a rudimentary understanding of a text before genre classification turns out to be an objection to too closely binding genre construction in genre criticism to the interpretation of specific works, and here interpretation means going beyond simply reading the text.

So, again, what is the interpreter doing as he reads a text in order to discover its genre? Is he not reading and interpreting the text prior to any genre classifications? As Tremper Longman puts it, “One must have a theory of genre before asking about the genre of a particular text. At the same time, one must work with particular texts and see the similarities between them before formulating a theory of Genre.”²² In other words, in order to discover the genre of a particular text, one must already have developed a genre theory. But a genre theory comes from studying and comparing individual texts, and this is done prior to and apart from genre classification. If this is so, then it must be the case that there is some meaning communicated to the interpreter apart from whether the interpreter has recognized any given genre classification. But, if genre determines meaning, then this

¹⁹Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 260.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 261.

²¹*Ibid.*, 263.

²²Tremper Longman, III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987), 3.

scenario is impossible. The interpreter must know the genre before he knows the text. But this is tantamount to imposing genre expectations upon the text.

- First: Read and understand the text in its normal-grammatical-historical signification
- Second: Discover any patterns that may indicate genre type
- Third: Relate discovered patterns to accepted genre classifications
- Fourth: Test selected genre classification against text
- Fifth: Use proven genre classification as grid through which to read the text to enhance one's understanding of the text.

One might wonder how genre enhances meaning without determining meaning. An example might be the story of Jonathan and in armor bearer as told in 1 Samuel 14. Anyone can read the story and understand the events as they are recounted. However, knowing that this account may be generically identified as historical narrative, the interpreter may begin to look for those characteristics that are commonly associated with such a story. The interpreter may discover that Jonathan serves as a literary foil to Saul, his father and the protagonist in this portion of the text. Jonathan's faith in God as the One who fights for His people accentuates Saul's lack of faith, evidenced by the useless oath that he had imposed on the necks of his warriors. Saul's actions serve to illustrate his belief that victory rested in his own ability as a military commander, not trusting in God as did his own son Jonathan.

Although genre did not determine the meaning of the words and sentences in the story, the genre enhanced the meaning of the story as a whole by highlighting the author's use of the foil to communicate to the reader the flawed character of Saul and the faithfulness of God to fight for His people. The interpreter enters the genre-hermeneutic spiral by virtue of the normal-grammatical-historical understanding of the words and sentences of the text. The text provides the clues to indicate genre. Genre considerations are then applied to the text, and additional insight from the genre enhances the interpreter's understanding of the text's meaning.

Genre and Justifying Interpretations

All of this seems clear enough. Why then is it even an issue? Because some interpreters use genre to make the text mean what they want it to mean. Ernest Lucas gives an example of this in his recent commentary on Daniel:

Genre recognition, then, is an important step in the understanding of a text. For most readers it is an intuitive step. Sometimes the intuition may be wrong. That is why a conscious, and careful, classification of a text to its genre is valuable. 'Genre criticism', as this is often called, is not classification for its own sake, concerned simply to pigeon-hole a text. Its aim is to clarify a text by indicating what are the right and wrong expectations that the reader might have of it. There is a particular likelihood that intuition may lead readers astray when they read

something from a culture different from their own. Some genres are quite culture-specific, but may, to the unwary reader, seem to fit a genre from their own, different, culture. Other genres may occur in several cultures, but, even so, may differ somewhat in each culture.²³

In his discussion of genre considerations with regard to the book of Daniel, Lucas asserts, “A factor I have not yet mentioned, but which some consider very important in genre classification, is the social setting, or social function, of a text. The problem with this is that the argument can get dangerously circular. The social setting has to be deduced from the text, and is then read back into it.”²⁴ But, are not genre considerations in danger of the same kind of circularity? Genre determinations are made by reading the text, and then, when the genre is identified, these considerations are then “read back” into the text. To avoid this circularity, Lucas advises, “It seems better to let the social setting or function (as far as it can be discerned) be seen as part of the content, without giving it special emphasis.”²⁵ But should the same not be done with reference to genre? Genre is supposed to be the grid through which proper interpretation is done. As Lucas points out, “We might expect, then, that any helpful genre classification of the stories in Dan. 1 – 6 (i.e. one that clarifies the meaning) will rest on characteristics of both form and content.”²⁶ Yet it was apart from any prior commitments to a specific genre classification that the interpreter understood the text in his effort to identify the patterns that might indicate genre classification. If interpretation apart from genre considerations is sufficient to identify the genre in the initial stages, why is genre then considered the grid through which interpretation must be done? Apparently, interpretation prior to genre commitment was sufficient successfully to identify the genre, why is it not sufficient to understand meaning apart from giving genre any “special considerations”?

Lucas goes on to lament the fact that, “finding answers to the questions about genres relating to the stories in Daniel has proved difficult for two different kinds of reasons.”²⁷ The two reasons Lucas sites are the problem of the definition of genre and the “shortage of other similar texts from the same cultural setting as the stories in Daniel, with which to compare them.”²⁸ The reasons for this difficulty are not important to this discussion. What is important is the fact of the difficulty of classification and the debate over genre classifications in Daniel. Yet these difficulties and this debate concerning genre classification did not forestall Lucas’ production of his commentary or the claims to have understood the meanings of much of the book of Daniel.

²³Ernest Lucas, *Daniel*, vol. 20, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002), 23.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 24.

Also, genre classification prior to the initial interpretation of a text can become the license to make the book say what the interpreter prefers. Stephen Miller's discussion of genre in Daniel presents this picture very clearly.

According to those who espouse the Maccabean thesis, the Book of Daniel consists of romance, legend, myth, midrash, court tale, vision, quasi prophecy, apocalyptic, and other types of material. The stories of chaps. 1-6 are more precisely designated "court tales," or "court legends," and chaps. 7-12 are apocalyptic. Lacocque considers the book to be primarily a combination of midrash (the earlier legends) and apocalyptic. Lacocque's assessment is as follows: chaps. 1-6 are midrash, chaps. 8-12 are apocalyptic, and chap. 7 is a transitional section that contains both midrash and apocalyptic. Of course, those who hold that the accounts in Daniel are historical would not classify them as midrash and would differ with Lacocque concerning the nature of the apocalyptic material.²⁹

What Miller seems to have identified is the tendency to employ genre classification as an extension of one's prior theological commitment. Because critical scholars do not believe in the historicity of Daniel, they classify it as legend, or myth, or midrash. For example, John Goldingay does not accept the historical accuracy of much of Daniel's text. He says, "It is not merely that features such as the portrait of Nebuchadnezzar, the Median empire located between the Babylonian and the Persian, and the existence of Darius the Mede differ from what we otherwise know of the period and suggest that the stories may be attempts at history that failed."³⁰ But the fact that Daniel has presented false historical information as if it were accurate history does not in any way diminish the value of Daniel's book. The fact that stories in the book of Daniel are "unhistorical," according to Goldingay, is that "they manifest the positive features of romance and legend, genres that make use of fictional features as well as historical ones in order to achieve their aim of telling an edifying story."³¹ Although conservative scholars would question the edifying value of a book that contains historical errors while presenting itself as historical fact, Goldingay chides all those who would engage in such criticism: "To imply that they are at fault if they contain unhistorical features is to judge them on alien criteria . . ."³² And, just in case anyone would attempt to discover whether these stories are in fact accurate history, Goldingay warns, "to defend them by seeking to establish that at such points they are factual after all is to collude with such a false starting point."³³

²⁹Miller, *Daniel*, 45.

³⁰John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, vol. 30, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1989), 321.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

So, by the magic of genre classification, we have become content with the falsehoods in Daniel's stories (or the stories or teaching of any other biblical book for that matter), and we have vilified those who would attempt to absolve Daniel of these charges by doing their historical homework. In other words, genre classification can be employed to excuse and authorize any kind of treatment of the biblical text. If you don't want to believe that Matthew's gospel is completely accurate, then simply classify it as midrash. If you don't accept the Genesis account as actually describing how God created the heavens and the earth, then simply classify it as poetry and chalk it up to symbolism.

But there is a problem, at least according to the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel of John. Jesus is reputed to have said to Nicodemus, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (Jn. 3:12).³⁴ In other words, if we cannot trust the Bible when it tells us about the things on earth that we can verify by our independent investigations, then how can we trust it when it tells us about heavenly things, things that we do not have the capacity to verify? If Daniel's book contains inaccurate history that Daniel is presenting as if it were true, then how can we know whether the spiritual lessons it teaches are not equally inaccurate? If we cannot trust Daniel with reference to history, how can we be edified with there is the possibility that any other lesson it teaches may be equally untrustworthy?

One Final Consideration

We must dispel one final notion. The function of genre in relation to meaning is not at all clarified by appealing to Wittgenstein's notion of language games. In fact, the whole concept of meaning is undermined by playing Wittgenstein's game. This is not the place to attempt an exposition and critique of Wittgenstein's notions, but we must say enough to show that his concept of language games is not helpful, but is rather destructive, of meaning. Wittgenstein illustrates his notion of language games by reference to actual games. When one considers all the games that one knows, one realizes that there is no one common characteristic that can be identified as the essence of all games: "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games.' I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?"³⁵ But Wittgenstein does not want us to think about it: "don't think, but look! [*denk nicht, sondern schau!*]"³⁶ What he means by this is, don't start with the supposition that because all these activities are designated "games" that they must have something in common. Rather, set aside this assumption and just look at the games themselves. Wittgenstein believes that if you look at all the games you will inevitably conclude that instead of a single characterizing essence or nature, you will "see a complicated

³⁴εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε, πῶς ἐὰν εἶπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύετε; (Jn. 3:12).

³⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66. "Betrachte z.B. einmal die Vorgänge, die wir 'Spiele' nennen. Ich meine Brettspiele, Kartenspiele, Ballspiele, Kampfspiele, u.s.w. . Was ist allen diesen gemeinsam?"

³⁶Ibid.

network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.”³⁷

In terms of language, this means that there is no single essence or nature that encompasses all language use. Consequently, language games are incommensurable. It follows from this that language games cannot be like genres since genres can be compared and contrasted. A language game is not like a type the way E. D. Hirsch characterizes it.³⁸ Hirsch characterizes the role of genre in interpretation as illustrated in the case of communication: “The role of genre concepts in interpretation is most easily grasped when the process of interpretation is going badly or when it has to undergo revision: ‘Oh! you’ve been talking about a book all the time. I thought it was about a restaurant,’ or ‘I thought I understood you, but now I’m not so sure.’”³⁹ But these characterizations do not fit the notion of language games. In fact, the first example is not a case of meaning but of reference, in the Fregean sense. To say “I thought you were talking about a restaurant,” is not to be confused about meaning, but about the referent of a communication. But, according to Wittgenstein’s characterization of language games, if the speaker and the hearer were playing two language games, then communication would not have occurred on any level, and the hearer would not be able to move from his own language game to the game being played by the speaker since there is no nature or essence that could make such a transition possible. Also, if the hearer is merely confused about the referent, then this indicates that some communication has occurred even though the two are employing different genres. It is the single essence or nature of language that makes the transition from one genre to another possible.

Hirsch goes on to say, “Such experiences, in which a misunderstanding is recognized during the process of interpretation, illuminate an extremely important aspect of speech that usually remains hidden. They show that, quite aside from the speaker’s choice of words, and, even more remarkably, quite aside from the context in which the utterance occurs, the details of meaning that an interpreter understands are powerfully determined and constituted by his meaning expectations. And these expectations arise from the interpreter’s conception of the type of meaning that is being expressed.”⁴⁰ But this characterization does not take into account that for there to be misunderstanding, there must be some level of understanding. Unless there is some level of understanding, misunderstanding could never be identified. Hirsch’s own examples indicate this fact.

Again, this is not the place to enter into a critique of Hirsch’s proposals. Rather, it is hoped that these brief comments will serve to alert us to the fact that Wittgenstein’s concept of language games is ultimately destructive of the very possibility of meaning. Genre classification is possible because of the universal essence or nature of all language. And in every communication, some level

³⁷Ibid. “Wir sehen ein kompliziertes Netz von Ähnlichkeiten, die einander übergreifen und kreuzen. Ähnlichkeiten im Großen und Kleinen.”

³⁸E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1967), 70f.

³⁹Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰Ibid., 72.

of understanding must take place in order to make genre identification possible. This identification can be made only by means of the normal-historical-grammatical method of interpretation.

Conclusion

Genre does not determine meaning, and meaning is not genre-dependent. The very fact that the genre classifications of so many portions of the biblical text are debated and disputed, and yet this does not hinder in the least our understanding of those passages, tells us that meaning is not genre-dependent. Of course that depends upon what you mean by the word ‘meaning.’ If the word ‘meaning’ is used to talk about the meanings of the words and sentences in their context, then this meaning is not genre-dependent. It is this very meaning that must be understood in order to discover in which genre a given text might be classified.

However, if by ‘meaning’ is meant the lesson that a text is attempting to convey or significance of a text, how the parts interplay to tell the overall story, then genre identification is often quite indispensable—often but not always. As is the case in biblical studies, genre classification for a particular text is frequently disputed, but this does not necessarily make understanding the meaning impossible. Genre often enhances our understanding of the meaning of a passage. It does not determine its meaning.

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