GENRE ANALYSIS

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A MORE MEANINGFUL EXEGETICAL PROCESS

The following study is indebted to the work of Tremper Longman, Fictional Akkadian Autobiography.

Genre Defined

Genre, a French term can be translated "kind," "sort," or "style." It denotes a type or species of literature or literary form.

Genre is based upon the theory that universals exist whether in the mind (Conceptualist) or objectively in reality (Realist).
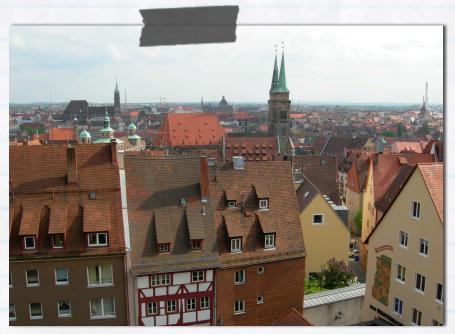
On this basis genre, E.W. Bruss defines genre as a literary category that actually "exists" in the sense that it can be experienced as something that constrains or directs the acts of reading and writing, or at the least provides readers and writers with an interpretation of their actions. (See Longman, p. 7).

Genre relates to literary works that share similar characteristics. It takes into consideration both small and larger literary units.

Genre Theory

NON FLUID THEORIES: Literary forms are perceived as discrete entities, pure and fixed, and recognized at only one level of generality or abstraction. This theory of genre is prescriptive.

FLUID THEORIES: Genre exists at all levels of generality or abstraction level. Genre is defined on the basis of a series of similar traits found in texts. Thus the makeup and nature of a particular genre depends on the viewpoint taken by the researcher.

This theory of genre is descriptive and synchronic.

Genre and Authorial Intent

Genre analysis profitably yields an understanding of the author's intention in a given literary composition. For example, genre triggers the reader's reading expectations and reader's reading strategy.

According to Longman (p. 7), a text that bears no similarities (structure, content, etc.) with anything previously written (or spoken) cannot be understood by a reader. The reader in fact approaches a text with certain expectations that arise at the beginning of the reading process and are grounded in previous reading experience. When a reader begins reading, a conscious or unconscious genre identification is made that brings along with it certain expectations concerning the whole of the text."

Longman continues, "Furthermore, not only is genre recognizable in the expectations of the reader, but it also directs the author in the composition of the text. It coerces the writer so that the composition can be grasped and communicated to the reader."

According to Kevin Vanhooser in his work, Is There a Meaning in This Text?, p. 346, "Generic markers at the beginning of a work are particularly important in guiding the reader into the particular rule-governed communicative activity represented by the text."

In summary, genre enables the reader to better understand what the text is claiming (promise, warning, encouragement) and how successfully it achieves the claims.

How do you analyze the genre of a literary text?

Inductively Study the Text

In recent years I have come to believe that the principles of inductive Bible study underlie all exegetical processes. Linguistic, literary, and theological methodologies are ultimately dependent on the principles of the inductive method as articulated by Robert Traina. All interpretative methods involve the art and skill of observing the text, interpreting the text, applying the text, and correlating the text.

Genre analysis begins with a careful, close read of the text to observe its parts and to observe how all the parts relate to each other. Look at the parts of the text in light of the whole and the whole in light of the parts.

In this initial step the reader is observing how the literary class (narrative, poetry, etc.) of the text interacts with the individual parts of the text.

Examine the Inner and Outer form of the Text

A fluid approach to genre analysis accepts similarities between texts on manny levels and the inter-relationships between these similarities. For example, a text can be classified on the basis of mood, grammar, vocabulary, setting, motifs, themes, historical associations, etc.

The various levels of similarity between texts can be organized under the headings of outer and inner form.

The **outer** form is the structure and the meter of the text.

The **inner** form includes the text's non-formal aspects such as mood, setting, function, narrative voice, content.

Classify the Text

Texts are classified on the basis of similar literary characteristics. In this process Longman raises the question, "How many traits must be shared by texts in order to classify them as belonging to the same type?" In other words "is the number of genres finite or infinite?"

Longman responds that since genre exists at all levels of generality it is possible to speak of genre broad in scope. This would include many texts having few traits in common. On the other hand we can speak of genre narrow in scope, which includes as few as two texts that are similar in many ways.

What do we call or how do we classify the various genres discovered in the analysis of the text? Since a culture free genre system does not exist, cultures will utilize certain genres and neglect others. Cultural de-terminates in literary classification are dealt with by means of etic and emic approaches to literature.

Emic Classifications: This is a native generic designation and classification of literature. The emic approach gives the researcher insight into the native consciousness of the text along with its relationship to other texts of a similar kind.

Etic Classifications: Texts are classified according to a non-native grid or classification scheme. This approach is beneficial since ancient scribes were not concerned with a precise, self-conscious generic classification of their literature.

An Illustration

My dissertation on the book of Joshua was an attempt to apply the theory of genre analysis as articulated by Tremper Longman to the first section of the book, chapters 1-11.

In this process I identified the genre of Joshua 1-11 as covenant military history with a flight motif.

My first step was to relate Joshua to the Old Testament literary documents that are covenantal. I did this by demonstrating that Joshua has the grammar, vocabulary, and themes of other covenant documents both within and without the canon of Scripture.

My second step involved classifying Joshua as military literature. Again I looked the literary characteristics Joshua shares with military documents in the ancient Near East.

Finally, I looked at a more narrow selection of texts that engage the flight/flee motif. I started this comparison by looking at how flight/flee is connected with the promises and curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy. As I read comparative ancient Near Eastern military accounts I discovered a similar structure based upon the flight/flee motif.

So what? This generic classification of Joshua provides the reader with a better understanding of the individual episodes of the account.

Second, this generic classification has implications for dating the time of the writing of Joshua. This canonical book is similar in style to other non-canonical books of the 14th/15th century.