

*CRACKING OLD TESTAMENT CODES:
A GUIDE TO INTERPRETING THE LITERARY GENRES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*

A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. T. J. Betts

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for 80312

by

Robert C. Brandhagen

July 17th, 2012

Sandy, D. Brent and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1995. 323 pp. \$29.99.

Introduction

D. Brent Sandy has experience as both a pastor and professor of New Testament studies. His Ph. D. is in the field of Classical Studies at Duke University. Ronald L. Giese has his Ph. D. in Hebrew and Semitic Studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He has taught at the college level in the field of Old Testament.

Summary

We read in the Introduction of *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, "This book exists to help Christians understand their Bibles better, in particular the Old Testament" (2). Further, "This is the first book to be devoted specifically to the literary forms of the Old Testament, with the purpose of providing clear principles of interpretation for Bible readers and for teachers and preachers" (3). Ronald Giese states the purpose of the book: "To take us back to the way genres functioned for the biblical authors and audiences, and to bring these genres up through time for present-day application, is the reason for this volume" (24).

Graeme Goldsworthy agrees with the need to study Bible passages in light of their genres. He writes,

As we come to think now of the practical issues of biblical theology applied to sermon preparation, we need to say a few words about . . . literary genre. . . . It is so much a part of our culture that we move from one genre of communication to another without giving it a moment's thought. There are accepted conventions for scientific prose, for the short story,

for a wedding invitation, or for a real estate advertisement in the newspaper, and we easily distinguish between them. When we come to the Bible, it does not take long for the new reader to grasp that a piece of historical narrative looks and sounds different from a psalm, a prophetic oracle, or a parable. . . . Consider . . . literary genres from the point of view of the literature as the vehicle for the theological truth of biblical revelation. It is less important for the preacher to be able to pin down the definition of genre, or to tabulate all the genres of the Bible, than it is to be aware that literature is used in different ways for different functions. Our aim should be to understand how the truth of God's word is variously communicated and to respond appropriately to the text in our exegesis.¹

Meredith G. Kline wrote on what constitutes genre in an article positing that the Old Testament was the origin of the gospel genre:

A certain amount of ambiguity attends the use of the term "genre" in form-critical studies. Varying combinations of things like structural pattern, setting, content, mood, and intention are regarded by different form critics as constitutive of genre. The problem of definition may be somewhat simplified at least if we restrict the term to whole documents.²

Regarding the authors' statement that preachers must "bring these genres up through time for present-day application" (24), Herschael York agrees:

Genre and the forms within them will usually determine whether application is obvious or more subtle. Some passages from the prophets, for example, are more challenging than others. Often the prophets were preaching directly for an action. *Repent. Stop taking advantage of the poor. Don't worship false gods* (author's emphasis). But if we are preaching from a prophetic passage such as the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:31-37, we often find that the text has no clear imperative. In this case God simply informed Jeremiah that a new covenant was coming. He didn't tell him to *do* anything. That, in fact, is precisely the point of the new covenant, isn't it? So should we really impose an imperative on this text? We answer with an unequivocal "Yes!" First of all, though we are stating the main points as imperatives, we are not "forcing" that on the text. We are simply saying that the text drives us toward application, so we are just putting it up front. We are stating what the implication of the text is.³

Again, regarding application, Fred Craddock adds,

Participation means the listener overcomes the distance, not because the speaker "applied" everything, but because the listener identified with experiences and thoughts related in the message that were analogous to his own. The fundamental presupposition operative here is the general similarity of human experiences.⁴

Cracking Old Testament Codes discusses literary forms as they relate to the Old Testament, as they relate to interpretation, and as they relate to inspiration (chapters one through

three). In chapters four through thirteen the following Old Testament genres are addressed: narrative, history, law, oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment, apocalyptic, lament, praise, proverb, and non-proverbial wisdom. Finally, in chapter fourteen the preaching and teaching aspect of genre study is covered.

Critical Evaluation

The author asks regarding readers of the Bible in our day, "Do they realize that to understand the Bible correctly, they cannot treat every portion of Scripture the same, as if all were created equal?" (1, 2). I agree and I disagree. I agree that we "cannot treat every portion of Scripture the same" in the matter of interpretation. If one passage is poetry and another is apocalyptic and another is history, then we treat them differently. But then I disagree: in the matter of submission to and reverence for each of the three texts, we can and must treat them the same. If an archaeologist discovered three manuscripts, each dating from 300 B. C., and one was from Psalms, one from Daniel, and one from Leviticus, both he himself during the excavation, and later admirers in the museum would treat each of the three manuscripts with the same reverence. So, I agree with the author that we cannot treat all Scripture the same in terms of interpretation, but we can and must in terms of reverence.

But then the author continues, ". . . as if all (Scriptures) were created equal." What does *that* mean?! With apologies to the *Declaration of Independence*, the author's meaning is not self-evident! Why furrow the brows of your readers unnecessarily? I am sure the author believes in the inspiration of Scriptures (Second Timothy 3:16). Perhaps it would have been better to say, "as if all were created for the same purpose" or at least to clearly explain the way that he did say it. But left stated as it is I wonder, if not all Scriptures were created equal, then in such a caste system who gets to decide which Scriptures are more valuable, and on what basis?

Ronald Giese writes, "Rather than wait to discover how forms like prophecy, apocalyptic, and proverbs work, many Christians move right on to interpretation and application. Since such a move gives priority to the readers' opinions over a contextual meaning of Scripture, unhealthy results can usually be expected" (14). Walter Kaiser agrees: "In the rush to make legitimate applications and personal utilization of these texts, preachers, teachers, and general readers of the Bible hastily assume the *meaning* of a passage has been understood (or worse still, that determining the meaning of the story is a waste of time) and move on to make an inappropriate *application*. . ." (86).

In the chapter on "History" (chapter five) Eugene Merrill writes, "Most of the stories in the Old Testament will have meaning at least for some readers some of the time, but not necessarily for all readers all the time. Readers who demand something applicable to their lives on the particular day they happen to be reading a historical narrative are likely to find some meaning that the story never intended" (106). Of course we should not "demand something applicable." But we can certainly *expect* something applicable while not going *too far*, beyond what the author intended. At the same time I believe it is true that the Author of Scripture does not want the reader to go *not far enough*. I do not think that the author—divine or human—intends that his writings, regardless of the genre, have meaning merely "for some readers some of the time, but not necessarily for all readers all the time." I believe God intends that what He has breathed into all the Scriptures will have meaning every time they are read.

To continue the argument, when Merrill says, "Most of the stories in the Old Testament will have meaning at least for some readers some of the time, but not necessarily for all readers all the time," what does he mean by meaning? We see above that he means

"something applicable." As I read that I think of neo-orthodox theology. But, clearly, Merrill is *not* saying what neo-orthodoxy says, namely, the Bible is God's word if and when it speaks to *me*. He *is* saying that there may not always be something applicable in every text. As I read that I think of our culture's popular, postmodern, reader-response interpretation.

We know that every text has one meaning, and one or more significations. Every text means something. And every text, in its context, applies to life. We may conclude the matter with Walter Kaiser: "Whenever we are at a loss as to what we should preach on a passage (or apply?), we will never go wrong if we focus on God, his actions, and his requirements."⁵ Every passage in its context should have something to say about one of those three areas. In that way it should have meaning for all believers, all the time.

Conclusion

The authors set out to help the readers understand the Old Testament better by helping them to interpret the Scriptures according to their various genres, with a view to application. They have accomplished their goal by providing an entire book dedicated solely to that very task. Ten genres are covered in ten separate chapters, with at least twenty pages per chapter. That quantity, coupled with the quality of the authors—top scholars in their respective areas—makes *Cracking Old Testament Codes* a valuable reference book for any passage one might study from the older testament.

¹Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 135.

²<http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/the-old-testament-origins-of-the-gospel-genre/>. This website was accessed on June 29, 2012. The website gave the following bibliographical information about the footnoted material: Cf. R. Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered," *Interpretation* 27, 4 (1973), 435-468.

³Herschael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2003), 141.

⁴Richard Lischer, *The Company of the Preachers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 403.

⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 57. Kaiser was quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2006), 4.