

## BIBLICAL STUDIES

### DEALING WITH THE GENRE OF GENESIS AND ITS OPENING CHAPTERS

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Some time ago, when I decided to reflect on the genre of Genesis, I stumbled upon something odd. By and large, the scholarly world does not seem to devote much disciplined attention to its genre.<sup>1</sup> There are some exceptions, of course. This lack of attention is odd, because scholars routinely affirm the importance of genre. So what happens when we do pay attention? I think it is revealing.

#### I. *What Is Genre?*

First, let us clear away some underbrush. What do we mean by “genre”? It can have a range of meanings, and that is at least part of the problem. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives as meaning 1 “a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.”<sup>2</sup> I suppose a definition like that one can be a reasonable starting point. But there are ambiguities. Are we supposed to be focusing on style, or on form, or

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<sup>1</sup> There are plenty of scholarly articles on the genre of *smaller pieces* within Genesis, but less discussion of the genre of the *whole* of Genesis. Just as a check, I decided to choose five major commentaries from the historical-critical tradition, and five written by broadly evangelical scholars. The historical-critical commentaries all failed to devote significant attention to the genre of the *whole* of Genesis. They were dominated by concerns for sources and for smaller discourse units (on this tendency, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], reprinted in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, Six Volumes in One*, ed. Moisés Silva [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 311 [herein citations from this work always give the pagination of the 1996 edition]). Among the five evangelical commentaries, three had significant attention to “structure,” focusing on the unique way in which Gen 1 divides itself into sections of genealogical history. But structure does not equate to genre (see discussion later in this article). Only one commentary actually discussed genre in the sense that I use it. And even then, there was no attention to comparing it to other ancient works of the same or similar genre.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre>, accessed March 4, 2016.

on content, or on all three equally, or on any one of the three that we choose? To some extent “style” and “form” may overlap in meaning, but what about content? A focus on content seems different.

Suppose we say that, whenever two pieces of discourse have similar content, they belong to the same genre. That choice does not lead to expected results. For example, Exod 14:15–31 and Exod 15:1–18 are both about the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of Pharaoh’s army in the sea. They both have the same “content,” loosely speaking. But do we normally say on that basis that they belong to the same “genre”? No. The first is prose narrative, while the second is a poetic song. Similarly, Judg 4:12–22 and 5:2–31 both have the same content, namely, the defeat of Sisera and his forces by the Israelites under Barak (and, of course, Jael). But the first is prose narrative, and the second is a poetic song. The Gospel of Matthew and Acts 10:37–41 both have as their content the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But the first is a Gospel and the second is part of a sermon.

Suppose we ask about the genre of Gen 1. The closest match in terms of content is found in Ps 104. Both have as their content God’s acts of creating the world. The first is a prose narrative, while the second is a poetic song. Psalm 8 is also related, because it reflects on creation. Somewhat more distant are other pieces that speak about creation, such as Neh 9:6; Pss 19:1–6; 74:12–17; 95:3–5; 136:1–9; 148; Prov 8:22–31. Of course we can have an illuminating discussion by comparing all these passages. But do we really want to say that Gen 1 belongs to the same *genre* as the other passages? Or do we say that Gen 1 belongs to the same genre as Acts 17:24–26, because both are about God creating the world?

It is certainly useful to compare passages based on overlapping content. But such comparison is a different *kind* of thing than what we do when we look at style and form. In fact, style and form are not perfectly separable from content.<sup>3</sup> In actual acts of communication, they are all woven together. And so it can be useful to add content as an additional secondary guiding factor along with style and form. But to include content as the most prominent principle for guiding classification is just to introduce another kind of classification, radically at variance with normal classification by genre. Thus, for our purposes let us stipulate that the word *genre* involves focus on style and form, as primary aspects, and on content only as a possible supplemental or secondary contributor. I think that, for the most part, that is also what biblical interpreters have had in mind when they talk about genre.

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<sup>3</sup> Note Kenneth L. Pike’s insightful discussion of form-meaning composites (Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. [The Hague: Mouton, 1967], 62–63; Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982], 111–17).

### 1. *Genre Belonging to Smaller-sized Pieces*

As a second step in clarification, let us stipulate that we will use *genre* to cover all sizes of discourse, big and small. Some biblical interpreters prefer to use the word *genre* only for whole books of the Bible. They use the word *form* for smaller-sized unified pieces, such as narrative episodes, songs, and individual proverbs. This choice is merely a difference in vocabulary.

### 2. *Genre as Emic*

Next, genre is an emic category,<sup>4</sup> having to do with an insider's perception rather than an outsider's preliminary analysis or a theorist's analysis using universal "types" that are postulated to organize all literature in every culture. Thus, what counts as a single genre depends on the language and the culture and the context.

Nevertheless, there are some universal tendencies. Robert E. Longacre, on the basis of experience with discourses in many languages, sets forth a tentative universal typology that classifies discourses at a high level of generality by two intersecting axes, namely, "succession" and "projection."<sup>5</sup> The first axis, the axis of "succession," classifies discourses according to whether they focus on succession in time or not. Narratives are characterized by succession in time, while expository discourses are not. The second axis, the axis of "projection," classifies discourses according to whether they focus on "projected" time rather than time that has already taken place (realized time). Narrative focuses on realized time, while procedural discourse focuses on "projected" time, by specifying what is to be done. For example, a procedural discourse may describe how to cook a chicken whenever and wherever it is done.

Intersecting the two axes gives us four types of discourse: (1) narrative, with focus on succession but not on projection; (2) expository discourse, without focus on either succession or projection (i.e., no focus on time); (3) procedural discourse, with focus on succession and projection (it is typically dealing with a succession of steps to be undertaken in a projected future or a general time);

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<sup>4</sup> On the contrast between an insider to culture or language and an outsider, see Pike, *Language*, 37–72; Thomas Headland, Kenneth Pike, and Marvin Harris, eds., *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990); Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 150–54.

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Longacre, *An Anatomy of Speech Notions* (Lisse: Peter de Ridder, 1976), 199–201. To appreciate the scope of Longacre's experience, note, for instance, his book on Philippine languages: *Discourse, Paragraph, and Sentence Structure in Selected Philippine Languages, Vol. 1, Discourse and Paragraph Structure* (Santa Ana, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1968). For a list of publications, see "SIL Language & Culture Archives," <http://www.sil.org/resources/search/contributor/longacre-robert-e>, accessed March 23, 2016. From the standpoint of OT studies, it may be worth noting that this same Robert E. Longacre has analyzed OT Hebrew discourse: Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989).

and (4) hortatory discourse, without focus on succession but with focus on projection: “you should do this (in the future).” Longacre further divides narrative according to the location of the events: “It recounts events supposed to have happened somewhere, whether *in the real or in an imaginary world*.”<sup>6</sup> In many languages, each of these categories may be further subdivided into prose and poetry. And there are further divisions beyond that, according to the unique emic expectations of a particular language and culture.<sup>7</sup>

According to this classification, Genesis as a whole is clearly prose narrative, with some embedded pieces that are poetic and sometimes future-oriented (Gen 49). We may also consider the genre of Gen 1. It too is prose narrative, with one short poetic or semi-poetic embedded piece at v. 27. In an obvious way Gen 1 is in a separate category from the poetic songs in Pss 8 and 104.

The principle of emicity also implies that we must be careful to avoid naively carrying genre classifications from one culture to another or from one language to another. In a situation of multiple cultures and multiple languages (such as the ancient Near East), where people from different cultures and languages interact, we may naturally expect a certain degree of borrowing and influencing across cultures. But we cannot take it for granted. Each language has its own genius, and while some features may be borrowed, others will not be. There is likely to be common *content* to some extent because all of the cultures involve human beings and all have agriculture and/or herding at their economic base. But, as we have seen, content is not the major determiner of what most people have in mind when they speak about genre.

### 3. *Genre as Synchronic*

Next, genre is a *synchronic* rather than a diachronic category. It is a mode of classification that belongs to a language and a culture at a particular time. Of course genres can evolve over time. We can talk about the *development* of the genre of the modern novel or the detective story or the blog post. But people happily read detective stories and understand them without any knowledge of the history of the development of the genre. Once in place, a genre is what it is. The history of its development gives various insights to scholars. But in the end it is virtually irrelevant for understanding the way in which common people customarily interpret a genre that they know. They know and recognize the genre without any reference to a multigenerational history behind it. They need not know whether, generations ago, the genre came from something else, or owed its origin to a confluence of several factors.

The historical-critical tradition for a considerable time was oriented primarily to the discovery of *sources*, whether written or oral. The JEDP documentary hypothesis is the classic case. This kind of discussion is essentially diachronic.

<sup>6</sup> Longacre, *Anatomy of Speech Notions*, 199, italics mine.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 202, 205.

According to this kind of thinking, the “J” document is one of the sources behind the Pentateuch. It is to be compared both with the later composition represented by the finished books of the Pentateuch and with earlier sources in either written or oral form. Within this scenario, each individual written or oral production, whether Genesis or postulated sources such as J or oral sources behind it, naturally has its own synchronic genre at the time of its composition. If a later redactor integrates a number of sources in a jumbled fashion or by just sewing together disparate pieces, the resulting composition may show unevenness. Yet as a completed composition it still has its own genre.

A composition may also have some archaizing features, if the composition is deliberately imitating the past or if an editor is too lazy or too obtuse to recognize tension between the present and an earlier genre belonging to an earlier epoch. But because genres tend to change slowly, this problem is not troublesome.

Though each layer of source has its own genre, the historical-critical tradition nevertheless focuses primarily on diachronic study. It compares and contrasts sources at various layers in the time up until the final composition.

In contrast to the predominantly diachronic approach to sources, we find other approaches that are synchronic. The so-called literary approaches of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries characteristically have a synchronic focus. They take each discourse as a whole, and aspire to treat it according to the genre that it represents at the time when it arrived at its finished form.<sup>8</sup>

My additional contribution here is to claim that if we focus on the practical use of verbal communication within a cultural setting, the meaning of a discourse is best sought by attending to what it says, given its context of authorship and circumstances. In this sense, the meaning is essential synchronic. The history of putative sources behind the author and the circumstances is virtually irrelevant. The meaning of a text is found in what it says (in context), not in the history of its origins.

If we believe, as I do, that in the case of the Bible we have divine speech and divine meanings, not merely human meanings in isolation from the divine, the point holds even more strongly. God is creative. He can say new things. So even if there is a background of earlier things that he said or that human beings said, and even if he uses some of the same words as before, the speech is a new speech and must be accorded attention. Because meaning is communicated by a textual expression in *context*, a different context at a later time may lead to a different assessment of meaning. Memory of earlier speeches counts as part of the *synchronic* context, because *memory* of the past is still memory *in the present*. At the same time, the synchronic social *context* for a discourse is still not to be confused with the discourse that God in his creativity actually expresses at a particular point in time and space.

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<sup>8</sup> On the interaction of diachronic and synchronic approaches, see Noel K. Weeks, *Sources and Authors: Assumptions in the Study of Hebrew Bible Narrative* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), ch. 2.

The upshot is that source criticism has very limited value when it comes to actually interpreting the texts that we have.<sup>9</sup> In other words, with respect to the book of Genesis or to a piece within it, such as Gen 1 or Gen 1–4, we must attend to the piece as divine speech. Speculation about the sources, whether a P document for Gen 1 or a J document for Gen 2–3, is a deflection from the right focus when it comes to understanding the meaning of a text.

#### 4. *Genre Concerned with Shared Features*

Next, a genre is a unified class, exemplified by multiple discourses that share common features. In this sense, genre and “structure” are not the same. Scholarly discussions of “structure” often focus on the unique structure of a *single* discourse, and undertake to produce a structural outline that is unique to the discourse in question. That which is unique is *not* a feature of genre. Genre is a classification according to what is *common* or shared among a number of discourses. “Prose narrative” and “proverb” are genres. A structured outline that is unique to a single book is not a genre and does not contribute in and of itself to an identification of genre. It becomes relevant, of course, if we discern a *common* structure belonging to a number of distinct discourses.

#### 5. *Genres in Written and Oral Communication*

Next, written communication has a set of genres distinct from (though influenced by) oral communication. Wycliffe Bible Translators has almost certainly had more experience than any other organization in the world with the process of introducing written communication for the first time into cultures that previously were completely oral. Members of Wycliffe analyze a new language, develop an alphabet for the language, and then start a literacy program. They also encourage newly literate native speakers to start recording and composing in written form stories and other pieces of communication in their own language. Within a short period of time, the written forms begin to deviate from the oral forms in subtle ways. There may be many reasons for this tendency, but one at least is that the written form is suitable for communication over gaps in time and space, whereas oral communication is necessarily face-to-face (apart from technology like the telephone, radio, and audio recording devices). The absence of face-to-face contact leads writers to put into written communication signals that make up for the lack. In addition, extended analysis of oral communication by a recipient has to rely completely on memory, while analysis of written communication can use backtracking to check and recheck the wording of any part of the total discourse. This difference also will have its effect in encouraging distinctions between written and oral genres.

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<sup>9</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), ch. 16.

The consequence is that in any culture that already has a history of writing, the written genres differ from oral genres, though the two still show affinities. This principle is likely to be reinforced in cultures where literacy exists but is confined mainly to a scribal class. The scribes may easily take more steps in making innovations in written genres, because they have a subculture of their own with specialized interests and goals.

The upshot of all this is that the book of Genesis and the embedded discourses within it (such as Gen 1) must be considered as exemplifying *written* genres, not to be confused with the oral genres that statistically would have been used more often in a predominantly oral culture. In a sense, this observation makes little difference, because we have no direct examples from the ancient Near East of oral communication—there are no audio recordings. Rather, there are instances of oral speech cited in the written documents. The citations of oral speech may show genre differences from the matrix of written discourse around them. But technically, both are instances of written genres. The scholarly world rightly wants to discuss the social environment, which includes much oral communication. But in the process, it is easy to overlook the principle that written genres may show differences.

#### 6. *Genres with Fuzzy Boundaries*

Next, genres may have fuzzy boundaries. They are not air-tight boxes into which every discourse fits with perfect snugness. Human beings and their acts of communication have flexibility.<sup>10</sup> So any of Longacre's four discourse types and emic subclasses within them remain rough-and-ready classifications that allow room for exploration and stretching out in new directions. It would be convenient for some of the purposes of scholarship if genres were neat boxes with sharp boundaries and rigorous rules for what happens inside each box. But life is more complicated than that.

#### 7. *Genres Embedded within Genres*

The final principle is that genres may be embedded within larger pieces of discourse that have their own genre. This embedding is a common feature in long discourses. So, for example, the Gospels include miracle stories, exorcisms, teaching blocks, and stories of conflict between Jesus and his opponents (sometimes combined with miracles or other incidents). Genesis 1:1–2:3 is embedded as an opening section in the book of Genesis as a whole. Genesis as a whole also includes genealogical records (Gen 5, 10, 11:10–26), and poetic prophecies (9:25–27; 25:23; 49:2–27). In such cases, as literary analysts would emphasize, interpreters must take into account the genres characterizing all the levels of embedding. So, for example, the poetic prophecy concerning Issachar

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<sup>10</sup> Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chs. 19 and 23.

constitutes Gen 49:14–15. It is embedded in a larger structure of prophecies concerning each of the twelve sons of Jacob, found in 49:3–27. This whole prophecy is in turn embedded in a last speech of Jacob, 49:1b–27. That in turn is embedded in the narrative episode in which Jacob gives the speech, namely 49:1–33. And that in turn is embedded in the narrative of the last days of Jacob in 48:1–49:33, and that in turn in the narrative of the time after Jacob and his family arrived in Egypt, 47:1–50:26, which is the final portion of the section on “the generations of Jacob,” 37:2–50:26. This section is embedded as one subdivision within the book of Genesis as a whole.

In view of the more or less continuous historical line represented by the books of the Pentateuch, we may also ask whether Genesis is to be treated as embedded in the larger unity of the Pentateuch—separated into a distinct “book” mainly because there are practical limits to the physical size of a single book. Or do we go even further out, and see Genesis as embedded in the continuous story that extends not only through the Pentateuch but through Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings?

## II. *Treating Genesis according to Its Genre*

Now many biblical scholars and literary scholars tell us to treat a document according to its genre. So we need to discuss, “What is the genre of Genesis?” It is prose narrative in ancient Hebrew. People may debate the fine-tuning of ancient historiographic practices. But such debates can easily become speculative, in the absence of extant ancient Israelite discussions on the subject of historiography. So it is safer to start with basics.

What are the basics in the case of Genesis? The most obvious thing about the genre of Genesis is that it is prose narrative (with some embedded poetry of various kinds, as we have observed). Genesis is not only prose narrative, but a giant-sized instance, in comparison to almost any of the documents that we have recovered in other languages of the ancient Near East.<sup>11</sup> In terms of contents (which, remember, are not our primary focus), it covers generations of descendants. It contains many distinct individual episodes, held together primarily by the promises of God, perceived obstacles to the promises, and the thread of genealogical connection through the line of descendants of Adam through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

What is the nearest match to Genesis in terms of genre—not, mind you, in terms of content, which would lead us to 1 Chron 1:1–2:4? The nearest matches are other instances of prose narratives in ancient Hebrew, particularly the ones that carry on an extended, connected story through many individual

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<sup>11</sup> Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 312, citing J. B. Porter, “Old Testament Historiography,” in *Tradition and Interpretation: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. G. W. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 130–31; see also Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 13.

episodes. The closest matches in this respect might be Numbers, 1–2 Samuel, and Ezra–Nehemiah. But all of these books cover time periods much shorter than the time spanned by Genesis. There are quite a few other narrative books, but they too show special features. For example, Exodus has a large section on the tabernacle. Leviticus has a large amount of material that is procedural or hortatory. Deuteronomy is hortatory (within a narrative framework). Joshua has a large section about dividing the land into tribal portions. Judges has the repeated cycle of deliverance and bondage summarized in Judg 2:16–19. Ruth is a smaller book, and involves only a few main characters and a limited amount of time. Jonah is similar, and to some extent also Esther. First Chronicles has an elaborate genealogical record in chs. 1–9. First and Second Kings and Second Chronicles have unique features belonging to the regularities in the way they treat the reign of individual kings. The second half of Daniel is dominated by visionary experiences and communications. Yet all these are still recognizably prose narratives. Job has an outer framework of narrative, but inside this framework we find almost nothing except speeches.

As a prose narrative, Genesis shows some general similarities with these other narrative books. But it is also distinct in its form, because of the way it is organized into a genealogical history. It has distinct sections that begin (with slight variations), “These are the generations of ...” As far as I can see, there is nothing quite like this anywhere else among the extant literature in biblical Hebrew or in the extant documents we have recovered from elsewhere in the ancient Near East. And here, I propose, is one reason why there is less discussion of the genre of Genesis than there might otherwise be. The reason is that there is, in one sense, nothing much to discuss. Genesis is unlike any other document. The lesson I draw is that we must, accordingly, to a large extent treat it on its own terms and not be enamored by appeals to formal parallels.

Though Genesis is unique in the details of its internal structure, it *does* still belong to the broad genre composed of prose narratives in ancient Hebrew. The closest parallels, as we observed, are to be found in other narrative books in the OT canon.

### 1. *Claims to Real Events*

So far, we have not put in the foreground one other major distinction that Robert Longacre introduces when discussing narrative: the distinction between recounting events “in the real world and in an imaginary world.”<sup>12</sup> This is the distinction, if you will, between nonfiction and fiction. Though the terms *nonfiction* and *fiction* are modern English terms, the reality is culturally more extensive. At a principal level, this distinction is culturally universal, because all human cultures have creativity, and one aspect of the creativity is the ability to make up stories.

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<sup>12</sup> Longacre, *Anatomy of Speech Notions*, 199.

We need to be clear about our terminology at this point. Among biblical scholars, the word *fiction* is sometimes used to describe literary artistry. This use seems to me to be unfortunate in its potential to confuse. For our purposes, let us use *fiction* as a descriptive label for nonfactual narrative, or, in Longacre's terms, a narrative that claims to recount events "in an imaginary world."<sup>13</sup> Given the potential for lying and deceit, we need also to distinguish between an author's claims and the truth of the matter. A human author may want to claim that some event happened in the real world when it did not. *Fiction* and *nonfiction*, as labels for genres, are more suited to describing the *claims* made by an author by means of his discourse. That is, a nonfictional narrative is a narrative that *claims* to be about the real world, whether or not the author is lying. In other contexts, of course, people may use the same terms to evaluate the *truth* of an author's claims.

We must not oversimplify by assuming that there can be no mixture of fiction and nonfiction, or a discourse that temporarily pretends to be nonfiction but is later revealed to be fiction. Nor do the broad categories of fiction and nonfiction settle the question of the detailed choices people make in different kinds of nonfictional narrative and different *kinds* of fictional narrative.<sup>14</sup>

We can see instances of fictional narrative in the Bible, such as Jotham's parable (Judg 9:8–14) and Jesus' parables. We can also see occasions where the effectiveness of a parable depends partly on temporarily concealing the fact that it is fictional. We have Nathan's parable to David in 2 Sam 12:1b–4, and the parable by the woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam 14:5b–7. In 1 Kgs 20:39b–40a we have a made-up story from "a certain man of the sons of the prophets" (v. 35). Ahab the king of Israel renders a judgment based on the assumption that the man is telling a nonfictional story. Then the man reveals that it is actually a parable about Ahab himself (vv. 41–42).

We also have cases of out-and-out deceit, where a story offers itself in the genre of nonfiction, but where some of the events described did not actually happen. For example, in 1 Kgs 13:18, the old prophet in Bethel deceived the man of God from Judah using a short made-up story about what he had heard from "an angel."

These instances confirm that people in ancient Israel knew the difference between reality and make-believe. The instances also confirm that sometimes it makes a big difference in human responses. In 1 Kgs 13:19, the man of God from Judah clearly would not have stayed for a meal if he had not believed that the old prophet was telling the truth. And the narrative itself gives a blunt evaluation: "But he lied to him" (v. 18). In the cases involving Nathan, the woman from Tekoa, and one of the sons of the prophets, the plan from the beginning was that at a crucial point the fictional nature of the story would be revealed. In all three cases, the communication as a whole depends for its effectiveness

<sup>13</sup> See also Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 319–22.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*; and Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, chs. 4, 5, and 10.

on a principal distinction between fiction and nonfiction. This distinction is recognized and familiar not only to Nathan, the woman, and the son of the prophets, but to the people whom they address. In other words, the distinction is emic to Israelite culture of the time.

We can also see that fictional prose can use more than one style. Jotham's parable not only sets the story in an imaginary world where trees talk, but addresses pointedly the treachery of Abimelech. A number of converging features let Jotham's audience know that his story is fiction. On the other hand, according to their plans, the parables uttered by Nathan, by the woman of Tekoa, and by the son of the prophets have realistic settings within the time and culture of the addressees, because they are deliberately intended to sound like nonfiction. These examples also show that ancient people understood the possibility of deception when the narrative setting was realistic. A story teller could deceive, either temporarily, as a parabolic stratagem, or permanently, if he lied about the events.

Consider, for example, 2 Sam 1:6–10. The Amalekite tells David an account according to which he killed Saul. In terms of genre, the account has the marks of nonfiction. It includes a dialog between two nonfictional characters, namely, the Amalekite and King Saul. It has a realistic setting, and realistic events within the setting. It occurs in answer to David's question about facts in the real world. It coheres with the fact, which David will later be able to confirm from other sources, that Saul has died in the battle. But it does not easily cohere with 1 Sam 31:4–5. It looks as though, in 2 Sam 1:7–9, the Amalekite invented a dialog between two nonfictional persons, himself and King Saul. He lied, in hopes of ingratiating himself with David. According to our terminology, the narrative from the Amalekite belongs to the genre of nonfictional narrative. It needs to, precisely in order to accomplish its deception. It *claims* to refer to events "in the real world." But in some of its parts it does not—it is deceiving.

This incident illustrates a broader principle. If a story teller wants to deceive, he has to pay attention to making his story plausible. It has to sound like nonfiction. In terms of *genre*, it has to be a nonfictional narrative. So it has to cohere within itself and with the situation. If, on the other hand, a story teller is speaking in good faith, he should give some signal when he is giving out fiction, or when he is giving out a combination (as with a fictional story set in a realistic cultural setting of the time, or a made-up dialog between identifiably nonfictional persons).

Now let us apply this emic distinction between fiction and nonfiction to the books of narrative prose. What may we conclude? The books of 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles both mention earlier records, "books" about events in the period of the monarchy. The mention of earlier written records underlines the fact that, at face value, 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles are asking readers to regard the narratives as describing real events in the past, not fiction. The events are such as could be recorded by observers and record keepers at the time. The records in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles are selective and have theological and

literary interests. But that does not destroy the fact that they are claiming to refer to events in the real world, and that they expect the hearers to regard the events as happening in the real world rather than an imaginary world.

Genesis belongs to the same broad genre of narrative prose as does 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. Since there is no literary signal to tell us that it is fiction, and since, indeed, it belongs to a continuous temporal development leading from creation to the exile, we conclude that it is nonfiction.<sup>15</sup>

And so it was treated, by both Jewish and Christian audiences, almost uniformly until the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period changed things. But not because they discovered something new about genre. Rather, they became skeptical of claims to religious authority made by various church figures. And that skepticism then extended to the Bible itself. Along with such skepticism came changes in worldview, which made the Bible's claims have less sociological plausibility among intellectuals. The genres of biblical literature remain what they have always been. The difference is that some modern critics do not accept the claims made through the genre about events in the past.

It is possible, of course, to refine our sense of what ancient Hebrew non-fictional prose narratives are doing, and to grow in our ability not to impose artificial expectations drawn from our own modern culture. That is all to the good. Such adjustments are quite different, however, from a large-scale attempt to avoid dealing with the commonalities between Genesis and other narratives in the OT, and the fact that some of these narratives present themselves as nonfiction.

## 2. *Joint Function of Historical, Theological, and Literary Aspects*

It is useful at this juncture to say a bit about the intersection of historical, theological, and literary concerns.<sup>16</sup> One temptation in modern critical analysis of texts is to separate the three kinds of concern. If a text promotes a certain theology, those elements promoting the theology must not be historical. Or if the text shows literary artistry, that shows that it is artistic and therefore to that degree *not* historical. That kind of reasoning takes place because of a certain

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<sup>15</sup> Some scholars within the historical-critical tradition have endeavored to reply to this reasoning by appealing to categories like “legend.” A genre label like “legend” may supposedly characterize some earlier sources behind Genesis. At an early point, a scholar may suppose, those who passed on “legends” may not have cared particularly about whether they were fiction or nonfiction or mixed. This approach relies on speculative reconstruction of sources, and in so doing neglects the issue of synchronic genre of Genesis. Moreover, most of these same scholars would say that Genesis as a finished whole belongs to a later period. But if that were so, it would only strengthen the argument that it belongs to the same genre of nonfiction prose narrative as 1–2 Samuel or 1–2 Kings. The modern scholar may choose to judge that the claims by Genesis about events in the world are false. But that is different from claiming that Genesis presents itself emically on its own terms as something other than a nonfictional genre. In fact, it does not. It is nonfiction.

<sup>16</sup> See also Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 309, 315, 318, 327, 329.

conception of history as “bare” history, one event after another in isolation from theology and literary artistry. It is understandable that such an approach should grow up in the ideological context of the Enlightenment. But it tends to falsify the emic structure of ancient genres, which did not make this separation. For example, if you believe, as many of the Jews of the Second Temple period believed, that God rules history according to his comprehensive plan, history itself has intrinsically built into it the theology of God’s purposes in the events. It also has built into it the artistry of God’s crafting, because he is the final origin for beauty, adornment, and symmetry.

In effect, the purpose of many ancient texts in the Bible is to give us all three.<sup>17</sup> We will be doubtful about that claim if we are also doubtful about the worldview and the view of God that are therein presupposed.

### 3. *The Genre of Genesis 1*

Having dealt with the genre of the book of Genesis as a whole, we may ask briefly about the genre of Gen 1. Literarily, the proper unit of text is Gen 1:1–2:3, because Gen 2:4 begins a distinct new section of genealogical history.<sup>18</sup>

To what genre does Gen 1:1–2:3 belong? Like Genesis as a whole, it is prose narrative. Since it is embedded in the book of Genesis, it will, like the book as a whole, offer us a nonfiction account, an account of what it claims to be real events.

It is useful here to look at another principle about genre and about embedding of one discourse into a larger discourse context. As a general rule, the “control” of meaning moves primarily from the top down rather than from the bottom up. The meaning of an embedded piece can be radically altered, depending on the larger context in which it is embedded.<sup>19</sup> For example, individual speeches within narrative episodes in Genesis make sense only because of who makes them and in what context. The affirmation “There is no God” in Ps 14:1 has a distinct meaning because it is embedded in the context, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” This principle of top-down control confirms the idea that Gen 1:1–2:3 fits comfortably into the whole book of Genesis. It is one piece telling us about events in time and space. It does so, of course, with a theological purpose in mind, and with reinforcing elements of literary artistry. But we have already talked about that.

What we must be careful about, in dealing with Gen 1:1–2:3, is running away from attention to genre into speculative reasonings about content. It is

<sup>17</sup> Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup> For an argument that the proper point of division is at the end of 2:3, not midway through 2:4, see C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 40–42.

<sup>19</sup> Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 312, citing Robert Bergen, “Text as a Guide to Authorial Intention: An Introduction to Discourse Criticism,” *JETS* 30 (1987): 330.

easy in comparative study of ancient Near Eastern texts to treat content as if it were more or less a free-floating piece in the general environment of the ancient Near East. Content apart from genre of the embedding text can have multiple meanings. And that indeed is what has happened with people who pay attention primarily to parallels in content when they interpret Gen 1. It is only what one would expect, because the embedding context of Genesis, as designed by the author, has been shoved aside. Moreover, scholars often are interested in comparing Gen 1 not with the closest parallels in content, namely Pss 8 and 104, but with various accounts of development of cosmic structure (“cosmogonies”) in the ancient Near East. Even in terms of content, these are more remote, because they are polytheistic—they involve the interaction of multiple gods. But in terms of genre they are even further away. They are poetry, not prose.

I do not mean to say that the ancient Near Eastern documents throw no light on the cultural surroundings of ancient Israel. Of course they do. They present fascinating detailed contrasts and similarities with Gen 1 and with other pieces of Genesis, such as the flood story. But it is easy not to see straight. Both genre and content link Gen 1 more directly with other parts of the OT canon.