

ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION

OVERVIEW

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People who have limited experience with reading ancient texts sometimes wonder, “How do I know when I have discovered the right meaning?” Others struggle with how to resolve several apparently divergent interpretations of the same text, thinking, “Only one of these can be right!” Still others are content to say, “Meaning is whatever you want to make of it”; that is, interpretation is a matter of personal opinion. Underlying these statements is something that scholars call **hermeneutics**, the study of the principles and techniques of interpretation. The first step to a rich and reliable interpretation of a biblical text is recognition of the presuppositions that we bring to the process of interpretation. Thus, in this chapter, we will begin to identify some of the presuppositions that impact the outcome of the process of interpretation.

WHY GENRE MATTERS

Suppose you are about to sit down to read a book. Whether you are aware of it or not, you make certain judgments about that book even before you start reading. These presuppositions, in turn, affect how you understand the meaning of the book and the significance you attach to it. For example, if you pick up a grocery-store romance novel, you expect to read about broken hearts, extramarital affairs, and numerous other sexual exploits, but you certainly do not expect to read an enduring literary work of art that later generations will read in their English literature courses. If you go to your local library and find a book on the Vietnam war or the Iraq war, you expect to read about the historical events that led up to the conflict or the political maneuverings that eventually brought it to conclusion.

However, you do not expect to find a travelogue of "must see" places to visit in Saigon or Baghdad. That kind of thing would be totally inappropriate!

When you make interpretational judgments about different types of literature, you are making decisions about the genre of the work. The word **genre** is used in a wide range of studies of literature and fine arts to refer to categories of artistic endeavors that share the same form, content, or artistic technique. For example, in music, most people can distinguish jazz from folk music. Composers and performers of these musical genres know that there are certain rules that govern their work. Sometimes they deviate from these rules in order to create interest or excitement, but when they go too far, they find themselves working in a different genre or possibly even creating a new genre. The same is true for literature. When you decide, "Oh, this is a romance novel," or "That's science fiction," or "These are biographies," you are determining the genre of a work. Sometimes you encounter a piece of literature that isn't quite like a history or a romance novel or some other genre with which you are familiar. The author may have been experimenting with variations of a genre or trying to create a new genre. Either way, you might find yourself struggling with its meaning. That's because knowing the genre of the work is an important first step in understanding how to interpret it.

Genres often contain smaller units of artistic activity that share similarities in form, content, or technique. In literature, these are called **literary forms**. An example of a genre with various literary forms is your local or regional newspaper. Most people can recognize the newspaper genre because, despite differences in political and cultural biases, the rules for newspaper writing and layout are more or less the same throughout the world. However, most people also know that you cannot read every part of the newspaper with the same presuppositions in mind. Instead, without even thinking about it, you shift your reading expectations as you page through the paper or scroll down the on-line edition. You read the front-page stories with one set of expectations, the editorial columns with another set of expectations, and the comic strips with yet another set of expectations. Most of us engage in this process of identifying genres and literary forms quite automatically, but that doesn't mean it is not important. Imagine how absurd it would be to read a comic strip as if it was a front-page story!

Given that most people know how to read newspapers, political satires, graphic novels, and other contemporary genres, how shall we handle ancient writings or literature that comes from a cultural setting that is very different from our own? Suddenly, we discover that we do not know the rules for interpretation. Worse yet, we might think we know how to read a particular text, and instead we find ourselves making serious errors in interpretation because we have not fully appreciated the genre of the literature we are reading or the social, political, and cultural circumstances of the author who created the work. This problem is especially compelling when reading the New Testament because the literature is at once ancient and from a faraway part of the world and, at the same time, considered vital to the faith of contemporary Christian readers throughout the world.

Let's look at a couple of instances where proper understanding of the genre of New Testament books can dramatically impact interpretation. Some people look at the gospels, for example, and are tempted to think of them as histories (in the modern

Genre helps set expectations

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sense of the word) or eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus. However, research into the gospel writers and their original intended audiences shows that the original authors and hearers of the gospels understood the gospels to be faith proclamations for communities committed to belief in Jesus as the Christ. Thus depending on your expectations for the gospel genre, you might be reading the gospels to learn the “facts” about Jesus’ crucifixion, or you might be trying to uncover the early church’s understanding of the meaning and significance of Jesus’ crucifixion, as explained through story. As you can imagine, these differences in expectations about literary genre will produce dramatically different results in terms of interpretation. If you are reading the gospels primarily to collect historical facts about the life of Jesus, you might be missing what some consider the more substantial and edifying message of the gospel—what it means for your life today. You might also be looking in the text for answers to questions that the author never intended to answer.

Similarly, some people read the Book of Revelation and think it will give them a “road map” of the events that must take place before the end of the world. Armed with this road map, they listen to the news and observe world events, carefully looking for confirmation of the world’s end. However, without a proper understanding of the apocalyptic genre, they will miss the intended message of Revelation. Apocalypses employ language and imagery associated with the events of the end time, but the writers of apocalypses saw them as calls to conversion for a particular people in a particular place and time—much like the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Apocalyptic literature also addresses the problem of evil by asserting that God will vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked and by declaring faith in God who is sovereign and just. Therefore, although the Book of Revelation appears to be about the end time, its real concerns are quite contemporary: Why does God allow good people to suffer? What is the proper human response in the face of evil? How will God assert sovereignty over evil in the world?

Because understanding the genre of a document is essential for knowing how to interpret it, we will ask about the genre of each New Testament book as we study it.