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Idestrom, Rebecca G. S. Review of D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. *Hebrew Studies* 37 (1996): 145–147.

**CRACKING OLD TESTAMENT CODES.** D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., eds. Pp. 323. Nashville: Broadman, 1995. Paper.

This is an excellent introduction and guide to interpreting the literary genres of the Old Testament. Not only does it address the need for such a work (it claims to be the first book to be devoted specifically to the literary forms of the Hebrew Scriptures), but it also does this in a very helpful and practical fashion. It is the intention and goal of the authors of this collection of fourteen essays to demonstrate how essential genre criticism is for interpreting the biblical text and to give practical guidelines and principles for the interpretive task. "Though this book is written by scholars, it is not written for scholars" (p. 2). Instead, the work is intended for a wider audience, to be an introduction and guide to pastors, students, and people in general. Consequently, the essays are written in a more popular, clear and simple style, for the most part avoiding or clarifying technical language (a glossary is provided) and giving many practical illustrations from the Bible and contemporary life.

All the contributors to this volume are evangelical biblical scholars, and consequently the subject is approached from an evangelical Christian perspective. At the same time, the authors are not "narrow" in their approach, but fully interact with the mainstream of critical scholarship. Since it is written from this perspective, issues such as biblical authority, inspiration,

inerrancy and truth are raised, and the importance of correct interpretation is stressed. However, the book is very useful and worthwhile for anyone interested in understanding the genres of the Old Testament, no matter what religious persuasion they may or may not have.

The book begins with three introductory essays about literary forms and their importance for interpretation, followed by ten essays elaborating on each type of genre, and then concluding with a final essay on how genre criticism can facilitate preaching and teaching. Generally, each essay on a specific genre is structured in the following way: first, defining the genre, demonstrating its function and how it can be identified, showing where it is found in the Bible and then comparing it with parallel literature in the Ancient Near East. This is followed by a list of guidelines of how to interpret the genre correctly, and then a demonstration of their application by an extended example from a biblical text. In conclusion, a list of recommended reading on the topic is given.

The basic argument of the book is that understanding genre is essential for correct interpretation of the Bible. The authors emphasize that we use different genres every day in our communication with one another. "Everyone engages in genre criticism or classification, at some level. Audiences simply cannot help but classify communication" (p. 24). For example, when reading a newspaper, we distinguish between a news report, an advertisement or a comic strip. Since the Bible is written in many different genres, we must attempt to identify and understand them in order to interpret and apply the text appropriately. In the interpretive process, the exegete must be sensitive to three levels of written context: the immediate context of the word/verse, the middle level of context which is the literary form and finally the distant context of the whole biblical canon. It is argued that this middle level of context, the literary genre of a given passage, is often ignored, and yet it needs to be given the most attention for proper interpretation.

The three marks of genre are identified as form (structure), content, and function (intentionality). Then, instead of dividing the genres of the Old Testament into the usual five categories of narrative, law, psalm, wisdom and prophecy, the authors "fine-tune" these classifications further by identifying ten literary forms in the Old Testament. Biblical prose is divided into three genres, narrative, history and law. Prophecy is subdivided into oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment and apocalyptic. Poetry is subdivided into lament, praise, proverb, and non-proverbial wisdom.

The authors demonstrate well how understanding the genre of a given text can be liberating and help avoid grave misinterpretations. For example, one must understand the genre of Genesis 1–11 before one makes claims about how these texts should be interpreted in light of scientific evidence. One must ask how these texts were intended to be understood given their literary genre. Another example given is whether the book of Jonah is intended to be understood as history or not. A clue to answering this question can be found in identifying the genre of Jonah. In a self-critical mode, one author points out that evangelicals have tended to overlook genre, with the negative result of reading the text as simply descriptive and informative, losing its rich diversity. I found it refreshing to find evangelical scholarship so open to possible conclusions other than the traditional conservative position. In fact, one author warns against condemning or labeling someone if their understanding of the literary genre leads them to different conclusions (p. 64–65): “What appears as *obvious* to us may not be so obvious to others” (p. 65). These examples demonstrate how broad-minded evangelical scholarship has become in recent years.

The concluding chapter gives some interesting suggestions on how awareness of genre can aid preaching and teaching. It is suggested that the genre of the biblical text should shape and impact the *form* that the sermon takes. Instead of having a three point sermon, maybe the preacher should narrate the story if he is dealing with a narrative, or emphasize the climactic points of the lyrics of a psalm or preach topically from proverbs. Finally, the question of how to determine what is a legitimate or illegitimate application of a text is discussed. The author says that there can be only one answer: “The author’s intention as expressed through the chosen genre...is what establishes the boundary for legitimate applications” (p. 293). This answer seems to be a little simplistic, because it can be argued that it is not that easy to get the biblical author’s intended meaning. I believe that we should attempt to get the text’s meaning and hope that this textual meaning is a fair approximation of the author/editor’s intention.

I recommend this book as an excellent textbook and tool in the classroom. It is up-to-date with the most recent scholarship, it gives good illustrations, and it has a helpful annotated bibliography. This book is a must for anyone interested in the literary genres of the Old Testament.

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