

Sandy, D. Brent, and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., eds. *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. (315 pp.)

Cracking Old Testament Codes (COTC) proved to be as interesting and intriguing as its title. Co-edited by Brent Sandy and Ronald Giese, *COTC* brings together the combined efforts of sixteen evangelical Biblical scholars addressing literary issues related to interpreting the Old Testament. In the opinion of this reviewer, not only do the writers present well organized and clearly articulated material, their contributions are like the proverbial “word fitly spoken” for such a time as this.

Purpose and Intent

Sandy and Giese have a simple objective in writing *COTC* and that is to help believers better understand the Old Testament. (p. 2) What hinders such understanding is the nature of how the Old Testament writers communicated truth. Since the process of written communication utilizes certain literary conventions or structures, the contributors to *COTC* set out to discuss the ones used by the OT writers in order that the average reader might better identify and understand those structures upon encountering them in the OT Scripture.

Although the discussion is presented by competent and conservative scholars, it is not primarily written with academicians in mind. The object clearly is to help preachers, teachers, and laymen advance their skills in interpreting the Old Testament accurately and accordingly, even some of the more technical areas are presented in a practical, user-friendly manner.

Structure and Content

The material in *COTC* falls into two basic categories. The first three chapters set the stage for the discussion by introducing the reader to the concept of literary forms or “genres” in relation to the Old Testament. Ronald L. Giese begins this section with an article entitled, “Literary Forms of the Old Testament,” in which he establishes the reality of such forms in written communication in general. He then establishes and explains the presence of such forms in the Old Testament. He argues that understanding “genre” involves ascertaining the form, content, and function of a particular textual unit. Perhaps most importantly, he sets the stage for the structure to come by arguing for the existence of ten basic genres in the Old Testament rather than the traditional five common in older works on hermeneutics.

The categories of genres necessary to function effectively in the text of the Old Testament are ten. Prose is best seen as three different genres: narrative, history, and law. Prophecy, which typically is a combination of prose and poetry, is best seen as three different genres: oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment, and apocalyptic. Poetry is best divided into psalms of lament and psalms of praise. And wisdom is divided into proverbial and non-proverbial wisdom. (p. 19)

The second article discusses both the value and the dangers of literary forms in the interpretive process. The authors acknowledge certain associations with other forms of criticism but clearly distinguish “genre criticism” as primarily concerned with the final canonical form of the text rather than on prior sources whether oral or written as would be common with source criticism and to some degree form and rhetorical criticism. (pp. 32-33).

John Feinberg’s article concludes this first section by discussing the implications the discussion of literary genre have for a high view of the inspiration of Scripture. He

begins by observing (and seemingly acknowledging) the criticism leveled against Evangelical interpreters in the area of literary forms and the Scripture. He paraphrases the case made by James Barr as validity for this criticism.

Evangelicals tend to interpret the sentences of Scripture as simply descriptive and informative, each with its own separate truth value. As a result, errors in genre identification can lead interpreters to make interpretive errors such as understanding the literary embellishments as scientifically true assertion. (p. 46)

He then cites Jesus' identification of the mustard seed as the smallest seed and asks, "Is Jesus making a point about botany? If so, he is wrong since scientists know of smaller seeds." (p. 46) He goes on to argue that since Jesus was not making a definitive botanical point but rather a theological one, this should be seen as appropriate hyperbole to aid Jesus in making his theological point rather than an evidence against inspiration. (p. 46) While one appreciates Feinberg's concern to resolve the difficulty without surrendering inspiration, his explanation is not the only possible solution, nor is it the best one (in the opinion of this reviewer). Furthermore, in opening this door, he must logically present the reader with the perspective that certain events that traditional evangelicals have always interpreted historically and literally could legitimately be considered as non-historical literary devices intended to communicate some great theological truth without surrendering inerrancy. This openness may be welcomed by those advancing the "new hermeneutic" where literary analysis reigns; however, it bodes ill tidings for those committed to traditional hermeneutics and a high view of Scripture. This reviewer can think of no good reason to surrender the historicity of Genesis 1-11, the miraculous accounts in Jonah, or the account in Daniel 11. Arguments that have traditionally been leveled by the liberal scholar to denounce a high view of inspiration are being brought into the Evangelical camp via the Trojan horse of "genre criticism".

A final caveat about inerrancy cautions theologians and exegetes not to mistake a case of bad hermeneutics . . . for a theological defection (rejection of biblical inerrancy). . . . Several examples illustrate the point. Consider the Book of Jonah, Genesis 1-11, and Daniel 11. If someone does not believe God created the world in six literal twenty-four hour days, we should not assume that person has rejected inerrancy. Likewise, if someone says Daniel 11 is a carefully written history after the fact, we should not assume that person has rejected inerrancy. If an interpreter believes Jonah is completely historical, but denies that there ever was a fish, or if someone says Genesis 1-11 is accurate history and careful science, but then says it is wrong because everyone knows evolution is correct, then they have denied the inerrancy of those texts. But suppose some really do not think the genre of either of these passages has anything to do with history or accurate science. However, whatever the passages do mean, they are true. In that case, we might disagree with these interpreter' hermeneutics (beginning with disagreement over genre identification), but we surely would be wrong in accusing them of denying inerrancy. (p. 64)

While this may sound kind and charitable, it in essence gives away too much ground by laying too much weight on a somewhat subjective identification of genre. How would one approach someone who in the name of genre interpretation denied the historicity of the resurrection of Christ? If one can use the genre of Daniel 11 to claim it is carefully written history after the fact, on what grounds can we challenge the orthodoxy of those who similarly deny the predictive aspect of many other prophetic passages, some of which contain theological truths regarding Messiah? In fairness, it should be clearly stated that Feinberg himself holds to a high view of inspiration and would personally hold to the historicity of all the passages mentioned above. However, the material he presents in this chapter contain seeds that, for his readers, may potentially undermine the inspiration of Scripture as it has been traditionally understood.

The second section of COTC consists of ten chapters each addressing one of the ten primary genres of Old Testament literature. Although a detailed evaluation of each chapter is beyond the scope of this review, in general the chapters provide helpful information and instruction that most readers will find usable.

The chapters on narrative and history are helpful and provide a good basic overview of the interpretative issues related to these genres. Richard Averbeck has an outstanding chapter on interpreting the “Law” that provides much needed help to many preachers unfamiliar with handling the legal sections of the Pentateuch. Tremper Longman’s chapter on interpreting the “Lament” genre is also helpful, and contains many practical instructions that urge preachers to avoid neglecting this area in their preaching.

The presence of lament throughout the Bible encourages us to express our dark emotions—anger, fear, shame, contempt, jealousy—before God. However, we must open ourselves to God in this way only in the context of our confidence that he is able to help us. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in the unenviable position of the Israelites in the wilderness. They complained—or more accurately—grumbled against the Lord to Moses and Aaron (Num. 20:1-13) with the result that God punished them. An honest turning to God in times of disappointment and grief—even in anger and confusion—turns sadness into singing (see Ps. 126:6). With a recognition of what God has done and can do, the opposite poles in the world of emotions are reversed. Joy replaces lament. (p. 213)

The chapters dealing with the wisdom genres (praise, proverb, and non-proverbial wisdom) are well written and reflect the recent hermeneutical advances related to these genres. Hildebrandt’s chapter on the Proverb genre is a good example. He lists no less than eleven different classes of proverbs (p. 240) and provides fuller information on this genre than is found in some works devoted entirely to Wisdom literature. Hill’s chapter on Non-Proverbial Wisdom treats an area left untouched by many others and provides much help to the interpreter by giving both general interpretative principles and specific examples of how they are applied.

CTOC ends with a final chapter urging the reader to take the material he has read and use it in his sermon preparation. He addresses four common misconception related to literary genres in the Old Testament and reminds the pastor that perhaps our Western individualism has perhaps led us to function in way God never intended regarding His

Word. While his ideas may need some tempering, they are thought provoking and should be carefully considered by modern American Evangelicalism.

[H]aving the luxury of your own copy of the Bible and having the ability to read it by yourself is a fairly recent phenomenon. It may well be that God's intention for the majority of his people was that their reading and discussing of the Bible were to occur when his people assembled. This seems to be what Paul instructed Timothy to do as a part of the assembly (see 1 Tim. 4:13). . . .[The] assumption is that believers should be totally adequate in their individual state to read and interpret the Bible unaided. Of course, this is negated because God has given teachers and pastor-teachers to the church to aid God's people in this area (see 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). Why would God have given such gifted individuals to the Body of Christ if they were not genuinely needed? (p. 290)

Evaluation and Conclusions

In a time where much is being said about "literary genres," COTC cuts through the fog and charts a clear and safe course for the preacher who desires to properly interpret the different literary aspects of the Old Testament without abandoning a commitment to traditional historical-grammatical hermeneutics.

In addition to the strengths and weaknesses already discussed above, the book has several additional strengths that commend it to the reader. The writers clearly have taken time to think about the needs of their audience. Every preacher reading the book will find himself marking sections that will end up as material for future sermons. Each chapter has a section where the interpretative principles are clearly laid out. The writers have provided at least one practical example showing how their material works in the real world of sermon preparation. Finally, the list of recommended books and resources at the end of each chapter give the more serious reader a good starting point for further study.

COTC offers much light in an area of great darkness, and once read, will be read repeatedly by pastors looking for help in preaching from the Old Testament.