

Hints for Reading the book of Genesis

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In the book of Genesis, Moses uses two kinds of structures to help the reader understand his text. One of those is a sequence of kinds of literature: narrative, poetry, and epilogue. This pattern dominates the early chapters of Genesis (1-11), but afterwards is less apparent, only appearing in huge blocks of text (Gen 12-50; Exodus 1-15; etc.). It functions to aid the reader in interpretation, limiting the range of meaning a particular passage may have. It does this by using the kinds of literature in a very particular way. We have already talked about how the literature, particularly narrative, is used for repetition, contemporization, and foreshadowing (anticipation), and now, we are able to see the powerful impact the poetic sections of Genesis and the Pentateuch. So what should the reader pay attention to?

In narratives, the reader should be particular aware of repetition, contemporization, and foreshadowing. In Genesis, narratives are usually stories that recount the past, but are recounted in such a way to speak about the future. We have to bear in mind that Moses was a prophet, and by writing the Pentateuch for us, we can consider him a *writing* prophet. We should think of him as taking the words and works of God and sowing them together to form a larger work for the future generations of Israel.

Poetry functions in a different way than narrative. Fokkelman has commented that “the short poems in Genesis...create moments of reflection. . . .They summarize what is relevant; they condense the chief idea and lift it above the incidental.”¹ They almost act as pauses in the narrative, reflecting back on what has just happened in the narrative plot line, and pulling out what was important either to the narrator or to the main character in a given section of the text. Sailhamer, who was the first to notice this pattern, has commented this about the poetry:

The strategy consists simply of the attachment of a number of small poetic texts to the conclusion of each block of narration. In attaching these poems to the narratives, they are cast as the final ‘discourse’ or ‘last words’ of the central characters of the narrative. The content of the poem expresses the character’s own reflection on the events recounted in the narrative. By means of the poems, the central characters are allowed to make programmatic statements about key events in the narratives. The poems...thematize what the author intends the reader to draw from the narratives. By means of these poems, the reader’s own assessment of the narratives is closely monitored by the author and limited to a narrow range of meaning.”²

These poetic sections, then, have a huge hermeneutical role in deriving the meaning of a given section of the text. Sailhamer has also noticed that outside Genesis 1-11, within the larger compositional patterns in the text, the poetic sections help to show us that the Messiah was the major figure in Moses prophetic vision of the future. The poetic sections focus on the last days and the coming King who will crush the head of God’s enemies (Gen. 3), bring blessing to the nations (Gen. 12), and would rise up out of the tribe of Judah, rule over an everlasting kingdom, whom all the nations will serve, and whom the sons of Israel will bow down (Gen. 49). Such visions of the prophetic future were not scattered around the Old Testament as little fragments to be found here and there, but were strategically arranged, often found in the narrative, poetry, and epilogue pattern.

The epilogues are the final portion of this pattern. Again, Sailhamer notes that “each poem is followed by an appropriate epilogue. The role of the epilogue is to return the narrative to the *status quo in medias res*.”³ The epilogues, then, are the bridge between the narratives. In the epilogues you will find a whole wealth of information. Often the epilogues are where you will find the opinion of the author about the narrative.

In summary, a good way to think about the pattern (narrative, poetry, epilogue) is that the author will say it historically in the narrative, meditate on it in the poetry, and then give a lesson about it in the epilogue.

¹ J. P. Fokkelman, “Genesis”, in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, DATE), 44.

² John Sailhamer, “A Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch”, 108.

³ *Ibid.*, 108.