New Testament genre criticism for the 1990s

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The twentieth century has given birth to many new critical tools for biblical scholarship. Informed students of the Scriptures must now come to grips with form and reduction criticism, canon criticism, social-scientific analysis, lexical semantics, and a variety of other seemingly daunting methods. One of the newer and more important of these disciplines is genre criticism. A selective sampling of the past ten years’ most significant studies of NT genres may elucidate the ‘state of the art’ and prepare readers for wrestling in the decade ahead with still unsolved questions.

From one point of view, genre criticism is nothing new. Throughout the history of Christianity, most readers have recognized that the NT contains four distinct literary types which cannot be treated identically: the gospels, the Acts, the epistles, and Revelation. But few NT introductions or surveys, hermeneutics texts, or commentaries on individual books self-consciously reflected in any detail on precisely what each of these four types of literature involved. In recent years this has begun to change. Commentaries like those of R. Guelich, R. Fung or J. R. Michaels have included sections on ‘genre’ alongside more conventional topics like authorship, date, or destination.1 Introductory works by H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann, S. Brown, and S. Harris have added discrete treatments of the NT’s diverse kinds of literature.2 Hermeneutics manuals like those of G. Fee and D. Stuart or L. Ryken’s several works organize their entire discussions by treating the different scriptural genres in sequence.3 And in perhaps the two most important and thorough surveys of NT genre criticism, D. Aune places the gospels, Acts, epistles and Revelation squarely within their Jewish and Greco-Roman environment, discussing in detail the extra-biblical writings of the centuries immediately surrounding the rise of Christianity which most closely resemble their canonical counterparts.4

The term ‘genre’ itself is used in a wide variety of ways. For the purposes of this survey, Aune’s definition strikes a good balance between uses which are so narrow as to make almost every piece of literature a unique genre and those which are so broad as to include under the same heading drastically divergent works: ‘a literary genre may be defined as a group of texts that exhibit a coherent and recurring configuration of literary features involving form (including structure and style), content, and function’.5 Thus this survey is not interested in analysing constituent elements or literary ‘forms’ within a larger work (e.g. parables, proverbs, hymns, farewell addresses, etc.) nor in assessing all the various proposals for the outline of a given book, nor even in discussing most of the rhetorical devices and figures of speech which a given author may use, though all of these issues do overlap from time to time with genre analysis. Instead, this study highlights attempts to categorize entire NT books with labels that group them with other extant works from the ancient Mediterranean world.

Genre criticism combines the potential of profound insight with the peril of distorting reductionism. To know that a particular writing conforms to certain literary conventions enables the interpreter to avoid exegetical gaffes and more closely to discern the original intentions of an author. But labels always risk blinding the reader to that writing’s distinctive features—where an author consciously or unconsciously deviates from the expected. In the case of the NT, each of the four major categories of books sufficiently resembles recognizable genres so as to be labelled in ways which aid the would-be exegete, but each also displays unique features which set the biblical works off from anything found outside the canon.

Gospels

Traditionally, most Christians have probably identified the gospels as biographies of Jesus of Nazareth. But even a casual reading makes it clear how poorly the gospels measure up to modern biographical standards (and to many ancient ones). For example, only two say anything about the first thirty years of Jesus’ life, and then they note just a few details about his birth and one incident at age twelve. On the other hand all four devote a disproportionately large amount of attention to his last few weeks and days. And a comparison among parallel accounts of the same events seems to reveal more divergences than one would expect if the evangelists were simply trying to tell things as they really happened. As a result, the vast majority of modern scholars has concluded that the gospels are theological and not biographical. A few have tried to link them with categories more commonly associated with fiction, most notably aretalogy, comedy and tragedy, but most have baulked at identifying them too closely with any known genre. W. Kümmel’s standard introduction well summarizes the consensus which prevailed as recently as the mid-1970s:

Viewed as a literary form, the Gospels are a new creation. They are in no way lives after the manner of Hellenistic biographies, since they lack the sense of internal and external history (as in lives of heroes), of character formation, of temporal sequence, and of the contemporary setting. Neither do the Gospels belong to the genre, memoirs, in which the collected stories and sayings from the lives of great men are simply strung together. Nor do they belong to the genre, miracle stories, in which the great deeds of ancient wonder-workers are glorified in a more or less stylized manner.6

At the end of the ‘seventies two important works challenged this consensus. C. H. Talbert argued for viewing the gospels as Greco-Roman biographies. Talbert was not trying to rehabilitate the case for their historical reliability but to point out parallels with three key elements which he believed the two sets of works shared: a mythical structure, an origin in the
legends of the ‘cult’ or ritual of a religious community devoted to the traditions of its founder, and an optimistic ‘world-affirming’ perspective reacting against the many pessimistic philosophies of the day.” Aune, however, has convincingly demonstrated that Talbert lumped too many disparate texts together and misrepresented the dominant characteristics of both the gospels and Greco-Roman biographies. M. Hengel agreed with Talbert that the gospels could be compared favourably with ancient biography but preferred to link them with that form which supplied a ‘relatively trustworthy historical report’. But Hengel’s study lacked the detailed discussion of comparative literature necessary if his claims were to be corroborated.

Another major work on the gospels as biographies appeared in the early ’eighties with P. Shuler’s attempt to identify Matthew as encomium or laudatory biography. Yet this gospel, like the other three, seems not to centre primarily around praise for Christ but to narrate God’s saving acts in history which he accomplished through the person of Jesus. Thus two recent reviewers of the literature on the genre of the gospels have again concluded that despite these protestations the evangelists’ works must continue not to be equated with any single, fixed extra-biblical literary category. R. Guelich’s definition of a gospel thus clearly eliminates the possibility of any ancient works besides Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John being included: ‘Formally, a gospel is a narrative account concerning the public life and teaching of a significant person that is composed of discrete [sic] traditional units placed in the context of the Scriptures. … Materially, the genre consists of the message that God was at work in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, effecting his promises found in the Scriptures.’

Two quite different proposals have broken fresh ground in the ’eighties. R. Gundry took the evangelical world by storm with his commentary on Matthew in which he identified the first gospel with Jewish ‘midrash’. On the one hand he wished to continue to affirm distinctively North American forms of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy; on the other he argued that Matthew regularly narrated episodes which did not actually occur as described but which were legendary embellishments of Matthew’s sources, Mark and Q. Matthew, Gundry believed, was rewriting his authoritative traditions just as Jewish intertestamental and rabbinic literature often expanded and contemporized OT narratives. Reaction against Gundry among conservatives was quite severe, often for the wrong reasons, most notably the belief that his vie: was incompatible with inerrancy. But for his case to stand, all of the following dubious propositions would have to hold: Matthew’s community would have known the story as Mark and Q told it well enough to distinguish fact from fiction; both of these sources would have had to have developed quasi-canonical status; and first-century Jews would have had to feel as free to embellish contemporaneous history as they did ancient history.

W. Kelber ignited equally vigorous debate in less conservative circles with his analysis of gospel as parable. He believed that Mark broke drastically with tradition when he produced the first written gospel. For Kelber, textuality and orality are largely antithetical, and Mark’s severe portrait of the disciples reflects his rejection of their authority in the era which he writes: ‘For a language that asserts itself by distanciation from the received mode of communication, parable is the ultimate metaphor.” Thus Mark intends all of the gospel to be interpreted parabolically as both revealing and concealing meaning. Now to be sure the gospels, and especially Mark, contain more metaphor and ambiguity than many readers have recognized. But it is not clear that the entire genre can be labelled parabolic. J. Williams and E. Malbon have shown that it is better to speak of the gospels as hybrid forms of which parabolic narrative (as a broader category than parables, per se) is one constituent element. More seriously, Kelber has greatly overestimated the disjunction between oral and written texts by basing his hypothesis on an increasingly outdated theory of the development of literacy.

Luke 1:1-4 probably provides the most important clues to the gospel genre. In this preface, Luke uses language which is most closely paralleled in the prefaces of other Greco-Roman histories (as distinct from biographies or other types of prose) and he compares his work with certain predecessors who have apparently employed approximately the same type of ‘narrative’. T. Callan finds the closest parallels in the histories of Herodotus, Tacitus, Arrian, Dio Cassius, Sallust, and Josephus. In a very broad sense, it remains appropriate to speak of the gospels as biographies as well, once it is recognized that the ancients did not draw a distinct line between history and biography, and so long as one does not try to define the kind of biography too narrowly. But the important observation to be drawn from either of these generic identifications is that the evangelists wrote with historical intentions. It will not do to try to excuse the gospel writers’ allegedly poor efforts at recording events as they happened by assuming that they were composing an altogether different genre of literature. There are no other histories quite like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; Kümmel’s consensus reflected sober insights. But the distinctives are not so great as to force us to invent an entirely unique genre just for the gospels.

At the same time, ancient historical standards of precision in narration and selection and arrangement of material were much less rigid and more fluid than modern ones. Almost no histories were compiled as mere chronicles; most had clearly discernible ideological purposes. Thus, when compared against their contemporaries, the four evangelists acquit themselves well. Apparent contradictions between parallel accounts or with extra-biblical history all have plausible resolutions. Despite widespread protests to the contrary, one may legitimately speak of the ‘historical reliability of the gospels’, but in so doing one is not denying that theological motives were equally if not more important in the narration of those teachings and events of Jesus’ life which have been preserved.

Numerous implications for interpreters follow. Once allowance is made for paraphrase, abbreviation, explanation, omission, rearrangement and a variety of similar editorial techniques, one may remain confident that the gospels give trustworthy accounts of who Jesus was and what he did. The burden of proof rests securely in the lap of the scholar who would deny authenticity at any point. On the other hand they did, and it is that aspect of the text on which readers should concentrate. One may not assume that successive passages reflect any kind of chronological order unless indications of time are explicitly mentioned. Luke’s central
section, for example (Lk. 9:51 – 18:34), is probably not a ‘travel narrative’ of Jesus’ journeying through Perea as has often been assumed, but a topically organized collection of Jesus’ teachings ‘under the shadow of the cross’. Similarly, while apparent contradictions between gospels can successfully be harmonized, it is the unique presentation of each individual gospel which remains canonical. Most students of the gospels probably need to spend more time discerning the distinctive message of each evangelist and less time constructing a harmony of the four. The average reader probably knows that the parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, like the stories of Mary and Martha and the ten lepers, all occur in the gospels, but few remember that all are found only in Luke. Even less do they realize that all fit into one of Luke’s most cherished and distinctive emphases – Jesus’ compassion for the outcasts of society.

The gospels may thus be identified as theological histories of selected events surrounding the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Though each of the four has its distinctives, and John is more noticeably different from the synoptics, each is more like the other three than unlike them. And the four canonical gospels are certainly more like each other than like any other histories or so-called gospels. This is particularly significant in light of the increasing respect which the apocryphal and Gnostic gospels are receiving in certain circles as purportedly genuine repositories of some of the earliest traditions about Jesus. Most of the extra-canonical ‘gospels’ do not employ much connected narrative; those that do tend to focus primarily on certain ‘gaps’ in the canonical record. Overall they must be viewed as secondary developments of the gospel tradition, although from time to time items within a given work may be very old and perhaps, occasionally, authentic.

Acts
Not nearly as much research has attempted to analyse the genre of Acts as has been expended on the gospels. The opening verses of Acts make it clear that the book is a sequel to Luke and that the preface in Luke 1:1–4 applies to both volumes. Numerous structural parallels demonstrate the unity of the two-volume work. The gospel follows a geographical outline which portrays Jesus moving from a setting in the context of the entire Roman empire (the known world of that day) to Galilee to Samaria to Jerusalem, whereas Acts inverts this sequence with the programme of expansion of the gospel traced in Acts 1:8. Major episodes in the lives of key characters in Acts closely parallel stories from the life of Jesus. If Luke’s gospel is a theological history, then one should expect Acts to be classified similarly. The overall contents of the book – descriptions of key events in the life of the early church, especially in the careers of Peter and Paul – also make Acts an obvious candidate for some kind of historical genre.

On this much most scholars have agreed. Going into the ‘eighties, a fair consensus would have identified Acts as a ‘historical monograph’. But agreement on this label did not prevent polarization on the question of historical reliability. One group of commentators, primarily British, compared Acts favourably with such historians as Herodotus and Thucydides, and argued for a substantial measure of historicity. Sir W. Ramsay blazed the trail for this group of scholars. A second group appeals to E. Haenchen’s work as foundational. These scholars, primarily German, agreed that Luke had historical intentions but believed that he botched the job rather badly. Fortunately, Luke also wrote as a theologian, so that the theology of Acts remains instructive even where the historical details of his narrative cannot be trusted.

In the ‘eighties, a third, primarily American, approach has emerged. Pioneered by R. Pervo, this attempt to label the genre of Acts classifies the book as a historical novel. In other words, Luke had more in common with other Greco-Roman writers of fiction than he did with authors of history or biography. Pervo points out how Acts brims over with adventure and entertainment. He points to numerous portions of the text which seem implausible and far-fetched. He stresses that it is not these apparent errors or contradictions which make him assess Acts as a largely fictitious genre but rather the formal features which Acts shares with other novels. Yet not one of these features is unique to fiction; in the final analysis it is the ‘implausibility factor’ with which Pervo’s case stands or falls. And here Pervo takes virtually no account of the various explanations and harmonizations which more conservative scholars have proposed. Among these, C. Hemer’s posthumously published work goes a long way toward establishing the historical credibility of those portions of the Acts which can be tested against their Hellenistic background.

Two somewhat distinctive features of Acts have often led commentators to argue for or against a historical genre. One is Luke’s use of speeches (primarily on the lips of Peter and Paul); the other involves the so-called ‘we-sections’ (in which the narrator suddenly begins to write in the first person plural). It is commonly known that ancient historians often composed speeches that they believed were appropriate for particular occasions even when they had no firsthand knowledge of the contents of a particular address. It is also evident that narrators frequently wrote in the first person as a literary device even when they themselves did not witness the action they describe. Yet the breadth of ancient literature which employed either or both of these devices ranges so widely from relatively reliable history to sheer fiction that their presence in Acts does not very much aid in assessing its genre. If, on other grounds, as seems likely, one ought to speak of Acts as a theological history, implying both historical trustworthiness and theological motives, then neither the speeches nor the we-sections need undermine this assessment.

When one turns to the apocryphal acts, one discovers a variety of parallels in form, content and function. There is also a number of non-Christian Greek works entitled ‘praxeis’. But this Greek word is ‘a nontechnical, descriptive term for narratives of the accomplishments of noteworthy individuals or cities (whether mythical, historical, or fictional). Probably not as many generic distinctions separate canonical and non-canonical Acts as distinguish canonical and non-canonical gospels, but in terms of reliance on trustworthy tradition the gap may actually be greater. As with the gospels, the Acts may be compared with a known genre of Hellenistic literature while at the same time retaining features which make it sui generis. Theological history may be the best label for the combination.
Once again, interpreters do well to be sensitive to this balance between theology and history. Acts contains much more chronology than do any of the gospels, yet even in his second volume, Luke occasionally organizes material thematically. Acts 11:27-30 probably occurred after 12:1-24 (at least according to Josephus’ dates for the Judean famine and Herod’s death), but Luke places it earlier so that he may keep together several strands of tradition about Antioch (cf. 11:19-26). So too, once the reader recognizes the theological outline which governs the book, he can learn to emphasize what Luke wanted to stress rather than that on which contemporary Christians usually concentrate. Acts 1:8 indicates more than geographical expansion. Luke’s second volume traces the miraculous, thirty-year-long transformation of an exclusively Jewish sect found only in Jerusalem into an empire-wide, predominantly Gentile religion solidly rooted even in Rome. Thus Luke’s foremost concern in the two episodes involving Philip in Acts 8 is that the gospel came even to Samaritans and eunuchs (two categories of outcasts according to orthodox Jewish perspective). Questions which divide exegesis today concerning the order of and intervals between repentance, baptism, and the filling of the Holy Spirit were probably not even in Luke’s mind.

Epistles

Only recently have scholars shown much interest in the genre criticism of the epistles, but in the ‘eighties this discipline has flourished. Good overviews of the various kinds of letters which were common in the Hellenistic world appear in the works of J. L. White, S. Stowers, and A. Malherbe. To be sure, it has long been recognized that the framework of many of the NT letters resembled that of other Hellenistic letters from the first century. Many began with an epistolary prescript, identifying the sender and the recipient and conveying greetings. Many continued with an inquiry about or wish for the health of the recipient, along with a prayer for his well-being or a word of thanksgiving. At the end of the typical letter appeared a postscript with additional greetings and a farewell formula. Often this was preceded by a hortatory or parenetic section. Paul gave several of these components of the letter a distinctive stamp (e.g. combining Greek and Jewish salutations — ‘grace and peace’ — and expanding parenetic material) but otherwise largely followed Hellenistic convention. But the body of the letter, which comprised the substantial majority of any given epistle, was seldom seen as following any well-established literary patterns.

A significant step in specifying epistolary genres was taken by Adolf Deissmann nearly a century ago. On the basis of his study of Egyptian papyri, he subdivided the letter genre into ‘real’ and ‘non-real’ letters. Real letters, like the papyri, were private, non-literary, informal and artless, addressing specific circumstances. Non-real letters, like the classical writings, were public, deliberately literary and designed to address a general audience without regard to occasion. For Deissmann, Paul’s letters were therefore real, private, non-literary, and artless. But these distinctions were too neat. Deissmann’s dichotomy was based exclusively on materials from one Egyptian province and did not take into account the literary nature of Paul’s letters nor even of the papyri, all of which followed various literary conventions. At the same time, general letters often tended ‘to avoid or even suppress typically epistolary forms and styles for other types of discourse’.

Further progress has been made in recent years. Several writers have stressed the role of letter-writing as a substitute for an apostolic presence. Genre criticism of the epistles has tended to follow two paths. One classifies the letter functionally; one analyses them rhetorically. Paradigms for functional classifications come from the proggynsmata, scholastic exercises in letter-writing which have been preserved from Greco-Roman antiquity, as well as from ancient epistolary theory and genuine letters. Instruction about rhetoric comes from the works of the masters such as Aristotle and Quintillian, who use a tripartite categorization: rhetoric may be judicial (apologetic, forensic), symbouletic (deliberative, hortatory) or epidieitc (demonstrative, laudatory).

Several of Paul’s letters may be helpfully analysed when viewed as a specific functional genre of epistle. For example, 1 Thessalonians is probably best described as a parenetic letter — a conscious exhortation to or dissuasion from a specific action or attitude, often incorporating antithesis and personal example as part of the persuasive argument. The sustained praise and autobiographical commentary which dominate 1 Thessalonians 1 - 3 may thus be seen as quite deliberate. Paul has established his friendship with the Thessalonians and emphasizes that, for the most part, they do not need his instruction. Still, he has important but delicate corrections to make to the Thessalonians’ ethics and eschatology, on which chapters 4 and 5 focus, and he is carefully preparing the way for this teaching in the opening chapters. The pastoral epistles, especially 1 and 2 Timothy, are often similarly classified; Paul’s personal remarks contained therein serve to exhort Timothy to emulate his example, set in contrast to the actions of the false teachers. Other epistles, most notably 1 Peter, are steeped in exhortation without formally corresponding to the parenetic letter genre.

A second example of functional genre is the letter of recommendation (also called an introductory or intercessory letter). These letters were common among the papyri, introducing the bearer of the letter to its recipient and then requesting a favour on behalf of the bearer, often on the basis of the friendly or familial relationship existing between the two. Frequently the sender obliged himself to the recipient for reciprocal favours. Paul’s letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus fits this pattern well. Paul relies on his relationship with Philemon as a vital part of his request, reminding him of his debt to Paul and charging Onesimus’ debt to his account. Philemon could have been expected to recognize the form of the letter and realize his obligation to comply with the requests. To a certain extent, 3 John also appears to be a letter of recommendation — on behalf of the travelling Christian missionaries whom John encourages Gaius to welcome.

More common among recent genre criticism of the epistles has been a rhetorical analysis. Judicial rhetoric sought to convince a judge or jury of the rightness or wrongness of a past action. Deliberative rhetoric tried to persuade or dissuade an assembly concerning the expediency of a future action. Epideictic rhetoric used praise and blame to urge an audience to affirm a point of view or set of values in the
present. A full-blown rhetorical speech would contain all of the following features: 

**exordium (proemium)** — stated the cause and gained the hearer's attention and sympathy 

**narratio** — related the background and facts of the case 

**propositio (divisio, partitio)** — stated what was agreed upon and what was contested 

**probatio (confirmatio)** — contained the proofs, based on the credibility of the speaker, appeals to the hearer’s feelings, and/or logical argument 

**refutatio (confutatio)** — refuted opponents’ arguments 

**peroratio (conclusio)** — summarized argument and sought to arouse hearers’ emotions.

In many instances, however, one or more of these elements might be missing.

Probably the most well-known example of the implications of rhetorical genre is H.-D. Betz’s analysis of Galatians as an ‘apologetic’ letter, the written analogue of judicial rhetoric. Betz’s approach removes attention somewhat from the classic Lutheran emphasis on ‘justification by faith’ and places it squarely on Paul’s own self-defence as he justifies his past actions and demands a decision in his favour. And as B. Brinsmead elaborates, the apologetic speech genre suggests that Galatians is thoroughly dialogical — both with the opponents who are intruders and with those Galatians who have accepted their theology.

Betz’s thesis, however, has been convincingly challenged. While the narratio of 1:12 – 2:14 certainly reads like a self-defence, another look shows that Paul uses it to establish the heavenly origin of his gospel. This functions more as a proof based on personal credibility, properly part of the probatio. G. Kennedy suggests that these verses are in fact part of an extended series of proofs which run through to 5:1. Further, Betz’s exhortatio of 5:1 – 6:10 seems inappropriate in a letter focused on the past actions of the writer. Exhortatio in fact is notably absent from ancient rhetorical theory. Kennedy therefore prefers the deliberative genre. The parenetic section fits nicely into a letter which seeks as its goal the Galatians’ decision to reject, in the future, circumcision and the adherence to the Jewish Law which it entails. Several recent studies have further endorsed and refined an analysis of Galatians as deliberative rhetoric. 2 Thessalonians may offer a second Pauline example of this category of rhetorical genre.

The letter to the Romans has been helpfully analysed in terms of epideictic rhetoric. Older studies often spoke of it as a ‘letter-essay’ — a ‘real’ letter sent to specific recipients dealing with specific topics but intended for a broader audience as well. But the substantial tensions between the personal nature of the introduction and conclusion and the literary or treatise-like nature of the body, and between the theology of chapters 1 – 11 and the parenthesis of 12 – 15 had never been entirely satisfactorily resolved. Epideictic rhetoric, on the other hand, provides a structure which incorporates all the disparate parts of Romans into a cohesive whole. The features of a personal letter at beginning and end establish Paul’s credibility and a relationship with the Romans. In between appear the propositio (1:16-17) and confirmatio (1:18 – 15:13). R. Jewett is even more specific: Romans represents one particular kind of epideictic rhetoric, an ambassadorial letter. Among other things, this identification makes chapter 16 an integral part of the epistle rather than a fragment of personal greetings originally addressed to some other community. Of course, room must be preserved for Paul’s unique style and for the flexibility ancient authors had in deviating from convention. But until recently almost all of Paul’s letters were seen as almost entirely distinctive, so a healthy emphasis on generic features shared with other letter-writers is still needed for some time.

The diatribe has been considered by some to be a functional genre and by others a rhetorical style. Either way, additional insights into Galatians and Romans (primarily chapters 1 – 11) emerge when one recognizes that writers of this type of conversational discourse, employed by teachers in various philosophical schools, regularly postulated and refuted the objections of hypothetical opponents, whether or not any were actually present among the audiences addressed. Paul’s responses, therefore (most notably his impassioned use of me genoi (‘may it never be!’), while they may represent actual debates Paul encountered in his ministry, function primarily as transitions to new stages in his argument. One may not conclude that actual opponents were present in the communities to which Paul was writing merely on the basis of these features. Sections of 1 Corinthians (especially 4:6-15; 9:1-18; 15:29-49) also seem to fit well with the ancient form of diatribe.

Functional and rhetorical genre criticism also shed light on the unity of various epistles. Philippians and 2 Corinthians are the two NT letters whose integrity has been most doubted. Both are regularly seen as a composite of three or four (or more) separate fragments, yet several fresh proposals have demonstrated that each fits fairly well into an identifiable genre in its entirety. D. F. Watson builds on several recent studies that have found inclusions and repetition linking otherwise disparate parts of Philippians and argues that the structure of the letter as it stands closely corresponds to the outline of a typical deliberative letter (although he has to see 2:19-30 as an epideictic digression). L. Belleville has suggested that 2 Corinthians 1 – 7 follows the paradigm for an apologetic self-commendatory letter, with the body opening in 1:8 and the transition to the request section in 6:1. I have elsewhere suggested that most of chapters 1 – 7 may also be seen as a tightly structured chiasmus. In each instance the case is enhanced for the literary integrity of material frequently parcelled out into different source documents.

Rhetorical analysis of the Corinthian epistles is also significant in that it corrects misinterpretations of texts like 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Despite his apparently sweeping disclaimer, Paul does not eschew rhetoric nor reject subtle literary devices aimed to persuade. 2 Corinthians 10 – 13 is laden with intricate and sophisticated approaches to winning over a hostile audience, most notably with Paul’s ‘boasting in humility’, a strategy ancient rhetoricians believed was the most praiseworthy form of boasting. Rather Paul disavows that kind of human ‘wisdom’ which rejects Christianity and which divorces form from substance. But when he is convinced he has a word from the Lord, Paul will use every weapon in his rhetorical arsenal to try to communicate it to others in a convincing fashion.
Genre criticism of the so-called catholic or general epistles has been laden with pitfalls. Various features of Hebrews, James, Jude and the letters of Peter and John make scholars question whether or not they even reflect genuine epistolary form. Hebrews lacks the conventional preface. James lacks the postscript. 1 John has neither. 2 Peter and Jude substitute a doxology for a postscript. Nevertheless, these letters too are receiving increasing scrutiny, and significant proposals have been put forward to help one understand their structure and form.

The author of Hebrews describes his work as a ‘word of encouragement/exhortation’ (Heb. 13:22). This phrase reappears only once in the NT, referring to a preached sermon (Acts 13:15). W. L. Lane notes several additional features which Hebrews shares with homiletical or sermonic material: alternating exposition and application/exhortation, alliteration, oratorical imperatives, euphony, and unusual word order. 45 Probably Hebrews was never intended to be a letter in the typical sense, but was prepared as a sermon to be preached and then later given an epistolary closing. Among other things, this casts light on the use of Hebrews' key warning passages (e.g. 6:4-6; 10:26-39). Theologians may debate whether these texts best fit a Calvinist or Arminian perspective, but Christians must preach them because professing believers do apostatize and must be warned about the consequences.

Commentators traditionally viewed James in the same way form critics analysed the gospels — as loosely related units of material strung together with no overarching pattern or clearly discernible outline. 46 But the pendulum has definitely swung in the opposite direction today, in favour of redaction criticism, so that James is now viewed as a theologian in his own right, carefully constructing his 'epistle' according to a predetermined outline. The most significant proposal concerning genre has been to identify James as a complex chiasmus. Of several important proposals, the most notable has been that of P. Davids, who sees James as highlighting three major themes: trials and temptations, wisdom and speech, and wealth and poverty. James 1 introduces each of these three themes twice; chapters 2 – 5 unpack them in greater detail in inverse sequence. 47 Even if Davids' outline imposes a little more structure than is actually present, his theory is helpful in deflecting attention away from ‘faith vs. works’ as the major concern of James. 2:18-26 is a crucial segment of the letter but it is actually a subordinate illustration of the larger theme of the right use of one's material resources (see 2:14-17). A. Vanhoye has put forward an important thesis viewing Hebrews as another elaborate chiasmus, 48 but many of his correspondences are vague or overly subtle. He has certainly demonstrated detailed literary artistry in the epistle, but as a proposal for the overall genre of the letter he fails to convince. 49

Raymond Brown has described 1 John as the ‘least letter-like format’ among the NT epistles. 51 This uniqueness has spawned a bewildering array of suggestions as to its genre. Brown refers to it as a commentary on John's gospel, intended to correct misinterpretations of the earlier work. 50 He notes similarities to the prologue and ending statement of purpose in the gospel and suggests this is deliberate imitation. K. Grayston and P. Perkins call it an enchirosis or instructional tract. 51 S. Smalley terms it a paper 'a consideration, for purposes of teaching and further discussion, of the christological and ethical issues which were causing debate and division within the Johannine church'. 52 Aune perhaps comes closest to the mark by terming the book a 'deliberative homily'. 53

R. Bauckham has broken fresh ground with his detailed analysis of 2 Peter as a testament. Drawing deeply on the Jewish tradition of farewell speeches, the author of 2 Peter portrays the apostle like the fathers of Israel, knowing his end is near and making plans for his message to be preserved after his death (2 Pet. 1:14-15). Because most Jewish testaments were pseudepigraphical (e.g. the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs), Bauckham believes 2 Peter is too. Readers would have recognized the genre and not have been deceived or put off by the attribution of authorship. 54 This may or may not follow, but Bauckham's work offers one of the few defences of pseudepigraphy in the NT which has included the type of genre analysis necessary to make pseudonymity both a potentially convincing and a morally acceptable hypothesis. 55 In sharp contrast, Donelson's recent defence of a well-established pseudepigraphic genre which the author of the pastorals allegedly followed regularly assumes what he is trying to prove, while the monograph of M. Kiley on Colossians as pseudepigraphy avoids the issue of genre altogether. 56 On the other hand, G. Cannon has used rhetorical analysis to show that Colossians carefully follows genuine Pauline patterns in ways not easily imitated, thus strengthening the case for that letter's authenticity. 57

In an entirely different vein, Bauckham presents a fresh case for the priority of Jude over 2 Peter based on Jude's tightly knit argument and 'midrashic' structure. With a series of threefold illustrations Jude likens the false teachers threatening his community to those who were judged in OT times, to key characters in intertestamental works, and to unpleasant, atypical events in the world of nature. Although 2 Peter 2 reuses much of this imagery, the symmetry and parallelism is not preserved. 58 As D. Watson has pointed out, the redaction of 2 Peter has thoroughly reworked its source material in a way which affirms its own literary integrity. 59

Revelation
Readers of Revelation have puzzled over its contents for centuries. Here if ever the need for genre criticism becomes apparent. Formally, Revelation shares feature with three distinct genres: prophecy, apocalyptic, and epistle. Traditionally, most commentators understood the book primarily in terms of prophecy. Widely divergent schools of interpretation developed along temporal (preterist, historicist, idealist and futurist) and millennial (premillennial, postmillennial, amillennial) lines. But most agreed that John wrote above all as a prophet, combining proclamation and prediction to encourage the Christians in Asia Minor at the end of the first century that God was in control of history and on the verge of creating a better world for his people. This prophetic model has frequently given rise to attempts to read Revelation in light of the current events of a given epoch of history, often based on the belief that an identifiable generation would witness Christ's return. The best-selling American book of non-fiction in the 1970s, Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth, reflected just such a perspective. 51 The problems with this approach, however, are numerous. Many generations of Christians have believed they could see the fulfilment of
Revelation in their lifetime, precisely because its imagery is sufficiently archetypal so as to fit well with world events of many eras. An exclusively prophetic interpretation usually also insists on an impossibly literal hermeneutic which is therefore inevitably applied inconsistently.

The vast majority of modern scholars of all theological perspectives has therefore focused on Revelation as apocalyptic. The term comes from the Greek title of the book, Ἀποκάλυψις, and associates John's work with numerous other Jewish and Hellenistic works of similar form and content. Nevertheless as recently as the early 'seventies, K. Koch could describe the general state of confusion among scholars both as to what works merited the title 'apocalyptic' and as to what features they had in common. As a result, the Society of Biblical Literature formed a study group on the Apocalypse, which published the findings of several years of research in Semeia 14 (1979). Surveying a significant array of ancient works of Jewish, Greco-Roman, Christian, Gnostic and Persian provenance, this team of researchers identified twenty-eight elements which characterized numerous apocalyptic writings and then assessed how many of the elements each of the works in question exhibited. The resulting definition which they adopted read as follows:

"Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.

Some of the works which best exemplified this genre included 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of John the Theologian, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Book of Revelation.

The proceedings of a subsequent, international colloquium in Uppsala in 1979 were published four years later. This volume reflected a more amorphous group of studies, but there were several contributors who agreed that a definition of apocalyptic should include aspects of function as well as form and content. Much discussion focused on Revelation's social function; recent studies continue to debate whether or not Revelation was written in response to a definable social crisis. More work by another SBL seminar generated Semeia 36 (1986), entitled Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting. This symposium elaborated, challenged, and endorsed various of the proposals which the Uppsala gathering had put forward.

Very little evangelical scholarship, however, influenced any of these gatherings, so that the upshot of all of them has been largely to affirm that apocalyptic is an outmoded worldview. Revelation may have value for the modern reader, but only after it is demythologized. As A. Collins sums up, 'A hermeneutic which takes historical criticism seriously (by which she means understanding Revelation as apocalyptic) can no longer work with an interventionist notion of God.' Instead, one must view Revelation as expressing God's intentions for the world. The Book of Revelation expresses what is real and what is good from the point of view of a believer in the God of Israel and the God of Christ. Moreover, most proponents of apocalyptic have not sufficiently stressed the ways in which Revelation differs from typical apocalypses. L. Morris, for example, lists the following distinctives: (a) frequent reference to the book as prophecy; (b) typically prophetic warnings and calls for repentance; (c) lack of pseudonymity; (d) an optimistic worldview; (e) no retracing of past history in the guise of prophecy; (f) realized eschatology; (g) little angelic interpretation; and (h) the affirmation that the Messiah has already come and made atonement.

The third genre which Revelation resembles is that of an epistle. No other known apocalypse employs the epistolary conventions which frame John's book. M. Karrer has argued at length that Revelation does not represent an apocalyptic genre at all but a genuine letter. He demonstrates parallels in rhetorical style and communication theory between John's and Paul's writings and takes seriously the text's claim to be addressed to seven historical churches in first-century Asia Minor. Other writers have highlighted Revelation's dramatic devices, suggesting that it was meant to be read (and perhaps even acted out) orally as was customary with ancient letters addressed to large assemblies. Still others have postulated liturgical origins for the work, drawing further lines of comparison with parts of NT epistles.

Presumably a balanced assessment of Revelation requires a blending of all three genres. Over three decades ago, G. E. Ladd penned an important but often neglected study, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" Today more and more scholars have come to recognize that some kind of combination of the two is essential. And the presence of epistolary trappings offers a salutary reminder that Revelation is as 'occasional' in nature as any of the apostolic letters, though Karrer has undoubtedly overstated his thesis.

Interpreters of Revelation do indeed face an imposing hermeneutical minefield. But basic rules of thumb may go a long way to aid them in crossing it. To the extent that Revelation is prophetic, one should expect some information about future, historical events. An interventionist hermeneutic is obsolete only if antisupernaturalism is unjustifiably presupposed. God is going to bring history to a climax with the visible, public return of Christ, who will judge the nations and rule the universe. Beyond this, confessions of faith should proceed cautiously. The details of the tribulation and millennium probably combine elements of past, present and future horrors and triumphs, just as OT prophecy mixed together preaching for the present with predictions about the future which themselves were susceptible to multiple fulfilment. As an apocalypticist, the writer resembles a political cartoonist. The meanings of his symbols were presumably intelligible to his original audience but contemporary reconstructions of those meanings must often remain tentative. Many, however, may be deduced from his own explanations, from parallels elsewhere in Scripture, and from extra-canonical sources. Like a parable, apocalyptic often both conceals and reveals, and it regularly includes imagery that simply reinforces the central theme of a passage rather than adding independent information to be deciphered. And like an epistle, Revelation includes information that had to have been intelligible to its original addressees. Any interpretation that allows for no point of contact with what first-century Asians could have grasped must be rejected.

Conclusion
Genre criticism continues to flourish as the final decade of the twentieth century unfolds. Scholars have clearly
abandoned the older positions which viewed the NT writings as largely sui generis, too distinctive from other ancient works to be helpfully classified with them. One must exercise care to avoid the opposite extreme; the canonical writings do exhibit unique features and combinations of features which fit no known generic moulds. But most readers will gain much insight if they understand the genres to which the biblical materials most closely approximate, and they will be more likely to interpret them in ways appropriate for their literary forms. 18


3 G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); L. Koven, How to Read the Bible as Literature (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); idem, Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); idem, Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).


19 Kelber relies heavily on the ‘autonomous’ theory of literary advocated by such people as W. J. Ong and E. Havelock. But this school has been successfully challenged by the ‘ideological’ theories of such researchers as S. Scriver and M. J. Cole and of B. Street. In other words, as a culture (or subculture) becomes increasingly literate it does not develop dramatically new cognitive and psychological perspectives; rather it simply chooses to use oral or written forms in different social settings for different purposes and functions.


25 In fact, it is often precisely when the theological (or redactional) motivations are discerned for one evangelist’s distinctive presentation of a particular pericope that a plausible harmonization with that passage’s parallel becomes more apparent. See my article, ‘The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization’, D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (eds.), in Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 139-174.

26 Many will protest that even if a historical intention can be maintained for the synoptics, such is not the case with John. But see J. A. T. Robinson, The Priority of John (London: SCM, 1985); and my article, ‘To What Extent is John Historically Reliable?’ in the H. Flanders Festschrift (Macom: Mercer, forthcoming).


38 Aune, New Testament, p. 78.
40 Jos. Ant. xx, ii, 5; xix. viii. 2.
42 See e.g. the summary of research as recent as the early 1970s in W. G. Doty, Letters in Primitive Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973). The most thorough study of introductory and concluding forms along with stylized formula used throughout a NT letter's body is F. Schindel and W. Stenger, Studien zum neustamentlichen Briefepigramm (Leiden: Brill, 1987). The most important discussion of Paul’s prayers and thanksgiving sections is P. T. O’Brien, Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul (Leiden: Brill, 1977).
48 Thus Aune, New Testament, pp. 221-222, labels it a ‘paraeenetic encyclical’. Michaels, J. Peter, p. xlvii, prefers a genre label based more on content than form: ‘an apocalyptic diapora letter to “Israel”’.
50 Stowers, Letter Writing, p. 156.
53 B. H. Brunsmead, Galatians - Dialogical Response to Opponents (Chico: Scholars, 1982).
54 Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, pp. 144-152.
57 For a summary of the state of the debate at the end of the 1970s, see K. P. Donfried (ed.), The Romans Debate (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977).
58 Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, pp. 152-156.
62 T. Schmeller, Paulus und die 'Diatree' (Münster: Aschendorff, 1987). On additional rhetorical features which dominate major sections of 1 Cor., see M. Bünker, Briefeformular und rhetorische Disposition im 1. Korintherbrief (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983).
64 L. L. Belleville, 'A Letter of Apologetic Self-Commendation: 2 Cor. 1:8 - 7:16', forthcoming in NovT.
73 In fact, Brown has devoted an entire work to the unpacking of this thesis: The Community of the Beloved Disciple (New York: Paulist, 1979).
79 M. R. Donelson, Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986); M. Kiley, Colossians and Pseudepigraphy (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).
81 Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, pp. 3-17.
82 D. F. Watson, Invention, Arrangement and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).
83 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970.)
85 As typically among classic dispensationalist interpretations. But recent dispensationalists have shifted substantially toward the mainstreams of Christian theology, as nicely surveyed by C. A. Blasing, 'Developing Dispensationalism', BSac 145 (1955), pp. 133-140, 254-280.
88 Cf. the similar approach of J. Carmignac, 'Qu’est-ce que l’Apocalyptique? Son emploi à Qumran', RJ 10 (1979), pp. 3-33.


96 *JBL* 76 (1957), pp. 192-200.


101 See esp. C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), whose work overall remains one of the most important of recent times on apocalyptic in Judaism and early Christianity.


103 I would like to thank my research students Steven A. Johnson and David L. Mathewson for their MA in NT projects on the genre of the epistles and the genre of Revelation respectively. Several sections of this paper are heavily indebted to their surveys.