

appreciate what was said in the letters, there is nothing to suggest that the problem was caused by their failure to understand the language itself in which the letters were written. It was in Greek that the writings not only of the Greek New Testament were preserved, but of virtually all of the apocryphal New Testament materials as well, not to mention the Septuagint and Greek pseudepigrapha, which formed such important sources for the New Testament and early Church writers. The earliest Church Fathers were Greek writers. Thus, knowledge of this language provides an important prerequisite to exegesis of the Greek New Testament (for further bibliography, see the Bibliographical Essay above).

THE GENRES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

BROOK W.R. PEARSON AND STANLEY E. PORTER

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS GENRE?

Genre has long been a subject of debate in both literary theory and criticism. Perhaps not surprisingly, it has also become an important issue in the realm of New Testament studies, with much weight being placed on identifying the particular literary species of the various books of the New Testament. Although there is much more at stake in this discussion than the mere identification of the genres of the New Testament documents, this has dominated most of the discussion of genre, as the following pages make amply clear. A more fundamental question, however, is that of what role genre should play in exegesis.

Perhaps the most illuminating study of this question is that of E.D. Hirsch in his *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch was concerned with showing how works are better examined by the material intrinsic to themselves than by that which is drawn from a document's extrinsic 'context'. So, while he makes a statement as bald as 'All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound',¹ he goes on to drastically qualify this by drawing a distinction between 'intrinsic genre' and 'extrinsic genre':

We can...define quite precisely what an intrinsic genre is. It is that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy...²

This definition of genre greatly modifies our understanding of his earlier words to the effect that all interpretation is bound by genre. Unfortunately, Hirsch's first statement about genre is often taken out of context to make genre, as an external characteristic, a determinative factor in interpretation (that is, suggesting that a particular document

¹ E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 76. Although Hirsch's treatment of genre is one of the most salient available, there are other aspects of his literary-philosophical program that are less convincing, especially his credulity toward the idea of 'objective' interpretation. Reliance in this chapter upon his treatment of genre should not be seen as endorsement of such aspects of his program.

² Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 86.

or part of a document may or may not mean in a particular way because other documents with a similar genre do or do not do so).³

With regard to this, Hirsch goes on,

If an intrinsic genre is capable of codetermining any partial meaning, there would seem to be left small *Spielraum* for that useful, catchall term, 'the context'. Ordinarily we cannot do without the term... [By this term] We mean the traditions and conventions that the speaker relies on, his attitudes, purposes, kind of vocabulary, relation to his audience, and we may mean a great many other things besides. Thus the word 'context' embraces and unifies two quite different realms. It signifies, on the one hand, the givens that accompany the text's meaning and, on the other, the constructions that are part of the text's meaning... My purpose is to show that we use 'context' to signify two necessary but distinct functions in interpretation. By 'context' we mean a construed notion of the whole meaning narrow enough to determine the meaning of a part, and, at the same time, we use the word to signify those givens in the milieu which will help us to conceive the right notion of the whole. In certain situations, certain types of meaning are very likely to occur. In addition to usage traits, therefore, we can have situation traits which help us to guess what kind of meaning we confront. But the givens of a situation do not directly determine verbal meanings. They help suggest a probable *type* of meaning, and it is this *type* idea which determines the partial meaning of which we defend when we invoke the word 'context'. In other words, the essential component of a context is the intrinsic genre of the utterance. Everything else in the context serves merely as clue to the intrinsic genre and has in itself no coercive power to codetermine partial meanings. Those external clues may be extremely important, but often (as in some anonymous texts) they are almost entirely absent. To know the intrinsic genre and the word sequence is to know almost everything. But the intrinsic genre is always construed, that is, guessed, and is never in any important sense given... One of the main tasks of interpretation can be summarized as the critical rejection of extrinsic genres in the search for the intrinsic genre of a text.⁴

We have chosen to give this quotation rather than a summary because this is perhaps the most succinct statement on the subject of genre that has been made, and summary would simply do it no justice. However, some explanation may be in order. The idea of genre, according to Hirsch's formula above, is not one that is drawn from *outside* the text

³ A good example of this is found in D.E. Aune, 'The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C.H. Talbert's *What is a Gospel?*', in *Gospel Perspectives. II. Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R.T. France and D. Wenham; 6 vols.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), p. 9.

⁴ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 86-89.

(for example, in the case of one who suggests that, as *Hamlet* is a tragedy, all of the characteristics of tragedy, ancient and modern, must be understood before one can appreciate the significance of the action in the play), but rather something that is drawn from reading the work itself (continuing the same example, understanding that the action in *Hamlet*, while similar to other works often labeled as tragedies, is unique to itself and can only be understood by a thorough examination thereof). While this does not do justice to the breadth of implication of Hirsch's formulation of the problem, it does highlight the essential dichotomy with which he confronts us.

When it comes to the question of the genres of the New Testament, much of the discussion has been concerned more with the question of *extrinsic* genre than *intrinsic*. Genre criticism has been touted as an important key to the determination of meaning in texts,⁵ but it is probably best understood simply as a helpful tool to discover the situational circumstances within which the document came into being (i.e. *Hamlet* was not written so much as a tragedy as it was written as *Hamlet*, and, in the same way, we can expect that the Gospels were written not so much as Gospels as they were as Matthew, Mark, etc.).

The place of a particular work within the history and development of a genre is also significant. As Heather Dubrow puts it: 'writing in a genre can be a highly polemical gesture, a way of attempting to initiate a new chapter of literary history through the act of creating a single work of art'.⁶ 'In other words, it is by overturning our generic expectations that a writer can induce in his reader a series of intellectual reflections and emotional experiences very like those being enacted in and by the work itself.'⁷

When it does come to drawing broad classifications, however, which is what most work on genre is concerned to do, we need to

⁵ See G.D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2nd edn, 1993), p. 19: 'To interpret properly the "then and there" of biblical texts, one must not only know some general rules that apply to all the works of the Bible, but one needs to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms (genres)'. Also, A.Y. Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 2: 'The decision about the genre of Mark is not merely a matter of taxonomy or academic scholarship. One's assumptions about the literary form of Mark affect the way this work is allowed to function in the lives of the readers, in the life of the church, and in society.'

⁶ H. Dubrow, *Genre* (Critical Idiom, 42; London: Methuen, 1982), p. 30.

⁷ Dubrow, *Genre*, p. 37.

drastically switch theoretical tracks and look to the work of the formalist literary critics, René Wellek and Austin Warren. Although such a formulation as Hirsch's obviates the need for genre as an important interpretative tool, he still suggests that it is helpful as a key to seeking the meaning of a text. Unfortunately, his theoretical program does not drive him to provide much in the way of practical suggestions for how such an external feature could be found. Wellek and Warren, however, do provide us with a helpful working definition:

Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form [common formal characteristics]...and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be one or the other...but the critical problem will then be to find the *other* dimension, to complete the diagram.⁸

It is this definition which will be utilized throughout the rest of this chapter to determine the specific genre of the various books of the New Testament, turning back to Hirsch for discussions of the exegetical implications of genre.

The Distinction between Literary Genre and Literary Form

The distinction between smaller units within complete works and the larger wholes of which they are constituent parts is something important to be aware of at the outset. As Wellek and Warren state: 'complex literary forms develop out of simpler units'.⁹ So, we do not talk of, for example, the parable as a *genre*, but rather as a literary *form*,¹⁰ which works of many genres may include.¹¹

Ancient Definition of Genre Versus a Modern One

Genre has been a subject of discussion in the western literary tradition since its earliest days. Aristotle and Horace are our main sources for the early views of genre theory, but the line of speculation and classification has continued throughout the following millennia. This, however, begs the question of whether we should utilize ancient

⁸ R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 3rd edn, 1956), p. 231.

⁹ Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 236, citing André Jolles.

¹⁰ A good example of the confusion of these two is J.L. Bailey and L.D. Vander Brock, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1992).

¹¹ See D.E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 13.

theories of genre which are at least roughly contemporary with the writings of the New Testament, or make use of modern genre theory which is based not so much on historical precedent and context as it is on hermeneutical philosophy and literary theory. There are two considerations with regard to this question. The first is the relative usefulness of ancient genre theory, and the second is whether or not much of what we do have in the way of ancient genre theory is actually contemporary or relevant to the writings of the New Testament. On the first point, Wellek and Warren again offer some insight:

Anyone interested in genre theory must be careful not to confound the distinctive differences between 'classical' and modern theory. Classical theory is regulative and prescriptive, though its 'rules' are not the silly authoritarianism still often attributed to them. Classical theory not only believes that genre differs from genre, in nature and in glory, but also that they must be kept apart, not allowed to mix...

Modern genre theory is, clearly, descriptive. It doesn't limit the number of possible kinds and doesn't prescribe rules to authors... Instead of emphasizing the distinction between kind and kind, it is interested...in finding the common denominator of a kind, its shared literary devices [forms] and literary purpose.¹²

As to the second point, D.A. Russell, in his monograph on the subject of ancient criticism, has a lengthy discussion on the question of ancient genre theory, and, in parallel with much work currently being done on the application of ancient rhetorical categories to the interpretation of the New Testament,¹³ he concludes that, as the material that we have from antiquity is almost uniformly concerned with the *production* of literature, and not its *interpretation*, 'It follows that [its] value as evidence either of poetic practice or of "genre theory" is limited and uncertain'.¹⁴

¹² Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, pp. 233-34.

¹³ See the chapter in this volume on rhetorical criticism, and the articles by S.E. Porter, J.T. Reed, and C.J. Classen in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (ed. S.E. Porter and T.H. Olbricht; JSNTSup, 90; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 100-122, 292-324 and 265-91, as well as the relevant portions in S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period (330 B.C.-A.D. 400)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

¹⁴ D.A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 158.

So, we suggest that, in the application of genre theory to the New Testament texts, while taking into account works and categories of works that could have a bearing on understanding the meaning of the New Testament writings,¹⁵ it should be understood that there is no such thing as an ancient genre theory. Thus, ancient writings on generic categories should be used with great caution, as they are generally concerned with the *creation* of literature, not its *interpretation*. To interpret literature along the lines delineated in ancient authors is a misuse of the original purposes of those discussions. However, if for no other reason, this practice should be avoided from a practical point of view, as Wayne Meeks has pointed out:

There was a time when nearly every New Testament scholar had been trained in the Greek and Latin classics. Comparing the genres and styles of the early Christian writings with other ancient literature was for them natural and obvious, though such comparisons did not always produce better understanding. The differences between the New Testament books and the literary works of the Golden Age were so great that often the result of comparing the two was that the Christian documents were put in a class by themselves.¹⁶

Of course, as Meeks goes on to suggest, the discovery of the papyri and increased availability of other Greco-Roman literature have made possible the comparison of the New Testament documents with others of the same time period, but this process of discovery has still not taken us any closer to discovering an ancient 'genre theory' that was, or could be, used for interpretative purposes.

Pseudonymity and the Investigation of Genre

The question of pseudonymity is an important and crucial question for the study of the New Testament documents.¹⁷ That the Gospels, Hebrews, the Petrine and Johannine epistles are all formally *anonymous* is a well-known and recognized fact, with obvious exegetical consequences and limitations imposed as a result. However, it is also often assumed or asserted that a good deal of the Pauline literature and much of the remaining *antilegomena* are *pseudonymous*, which has exegetical consequences that are not so

¹⁵ For which the most complete and accessible survey available is Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*.

¹⁶ W.A. Meeks, 'Foreword', in Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, p. 7.

¹⁷ See the Chapter in this volume on the Pauline Letters for further comment.

often discussed. As far as genre goes, we must recognize that, if, for example, the Pastoral Epistles are pseudonymous, then their genre becomes a very sticky question. Both their form and content indicate that, while somewhat dissimilar from Paul's other, undisputed letters, they are still letters, and they are all obviously superscripted by Paul. But, if they are not letters, then what are they? They are obviously mimicking true letters, and the idea of their inclusion in the early Christian scriptural canon suggests that they must have been seen as genuine—but what does this do to our interpretation of them? If we begin from our external 'evidence' that indicates pseudonymity and use that as a directional finder that will help us determine the intrinsic genre of these documents, we must be aware that, if this is so, we are dealing with something totally other than a 'true' letter, and which stands as, in some ways, a parody of that genre. If, though still taking into account this extrinsic factor, we rely instead on intrinsic factors to be our ultimate guide to the meaning of these documents, then such questions will not prevent us from interpreting the documents themselves.¹⁸

THE GENRES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels

The Gospels have been the most hotly contested New Testament documents insofar as their genre is concerned. The most difficult factor in establishing the genre of the Gospels is that, on first examination, they seem to have no close parallels in the ancient world. This is not to say that they are entirely without parallel, but the very fact that there is a *great deal* of similarity among the canonical four (and especially among the three Synoptics) makes them seem as if they somehow sprang from the early Christian communities that produced and used them as a wholly new form of literature (often called *sui generis*). This was indeed the conclusion of many of the early form critics, such as Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and K.L. Schmidt.¹⁹

Most of the subsequent discussion of the genre of the Gospels has,

¹⁸ For further discussion, see S.E. Porter, 'Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon', *BBR* 5 (1995), pp. 105-23.

¹⁹ See the survey of this period in R. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', in *The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 173-208, esp. pp. 186-94.

however, revolved around their similarity with various forms of ancient biography. Ancient biography was not, of course, what we may think of as biography—many of the concerns of modern biography were simply not the concerns of the ancients,²⁰ and subjects for biography often included even the gods. Thus, when asserting that the Gospels are most similar to biography, this is not tantamount to calling them 'histories', as we shall see, although this is certainly one of the possibilities.

There have been other attempts to determine the genre of the Gospels,²¹ but the overwhelming trend has been towards seeing the Gospel genre as some kind of biography. Indeed, the idea that the Gospels are biographies has been discussed in modern times at least since Clyde Votaw's programmatic essays published in 1915.²² Indicative of the wide variety of modern approaches to the Gospels as biographies are the works of Charles Talbert, Philip Shuler, and Richard Burridge.

²⁰ Such as the interior, psychological development of the character in question.

²¹ G.G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). Even though Bilezikian uses Aristotle's *Poetics* as the basis of his assessment, he admits that Mark was not trying to write a Greek tragedy, but rather to put together a new literary work (genre?) to promote a unique religious message (p. 109). This, however, merely amounts to the *sui generis* hypothesis in different clothing. Another view that has been promoted, although not widely followed, is that the Gospels were written in the form of Jewish lectionaries, carrying on in the tradition of the synagogue, if not within the synagogues themselves. The most recent proponent of this view is M.D. Goulder, *The Evangelists' Calendar: A Lectionary Explanation of the Development of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1978). Another divergent view, though quite popular in the late sixties and early seventies, has dropped almost completely from sight. This is the idea that the Gospels are *aretalogies*, biographies which were written to establish the divine nature of a human being, often referred to as 'divine man' biographies or myths. This was most strongly put forward by M. Hadas and M. Smith in their *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). The most telling criticism of this position is that, as Hadas and Smith themselves admit, we simply 'have no complete text surviving from the past specifically labeled aretalogy' (p. 60). It is almost certain that this never constituted a genre in and of itself.

²² Originally published as C.W. Votaw, 'The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies', *AJT* 19 (1915), pp. 45-73, 217-49, they have been re-issued in *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970).

Charles Talbert: The Gospels as Varied Mythical Biographies. Talbert has published two monographs on the subject of the Gospel genre. His first, published in 1974, suggests that the genre of Luke-Acts is patterned after such things as the lives of the eminent Greco-Roman philosophers, but adapted by Luke into a cultic function to show his readers 'where the true tradition was to be found in his time...and what the content of that tradition was'.²³ In his second monograph on the issue, published three years later, he expanded this initial survey of the genre of Luke-Acts to a survey of all the canonical Gospels. In this second monograph, Talbert moves more strongly in the direction of his 1974 book, and, though classifying all four Gospels as biographies, assigns them to the realm of myth, rather than historiography.²⁴

On the basis of a typology of Greco-Roman biographies which he began in his 1974 work and continued in his later book, Talbert claims that Mark, Luke-Acts (taking them as a single work with a single generic form) and Matthew are all 'written in terms of the myth of the immortals', with Luke-Acts having the additional feature of being a 'myth of origins for an early church', and Matthew being written exclusively for a 'cultic setting'. John is seen as a 'myth of a descending-ascending redeemer figure', unlike anything else in Greco-Roman biography.²⁵ The essential bifurcation Talbert identifies in Greco-Roman biography is between didactic and non-didactic biography, and, according to Talbert, all of the Gospels are examples of the former. He further splits didactic biography into various subtypes, all of which he finds reflected to some degree in his characterizations of the Gospels. An additional point which is important in his analysis of the issue of genre revolves around his placement of the didactic type of biography in a cultic setting.

Talbert's work, while initially received with some warmth, received a shattering blow from David Aune in his thorough and complete assessment and debunking of Talbert's hypothesis.²⁶ Aune's thoroughgoing critique of *What Is a Gospel?* pointed out quite well one of the continuing problems in New Testament studies, namely

²³ C.H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (SBLMS, 20; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), p. 135.

²⁴ C.H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

²⁵ Talbert, *What is a Gospel?*, pp. 134-35.

²⁶ Aune, 'Genre of the Gospels', pp. 9-60.

that, when disciplinary boundaries are crossed, as in this case into the territory of classical philology, it is often done in a haphazard manner. As Aune puts it, 'the author roams the breadth and length of Graeco-Roman literature...virtually unencumbered [by] modern classical philology... While this guarantees a "fresh" approach, it also conjures up our image of a blindfolded man staggering across a minefield.'²⁷ Aune's assessment most certainly does not suffer from such a shortcoming. His final conclusions on the question of the Gospels' relationship with Greco-Roman biography do, however, leave one disappointed. In several pages demonstrating that Talbert's formulation of the problem is impossible, he offers only a single piece of evidence that the Gospels could not be biographies, namely that they are anonymous, and, according to this early formulation, 'with few exceptions, all ancient biographies of the Graeco-Roman world were written in the names of real or fictitious/pseudonymous authors'.²⁸ However, in his later work on the subject, Aune drops this singular objection, and agrees with what is swiftly becoming a scholarly consensus, that the Gospels are examples of Greco-Roman biography.²⁹

In a paper subsequent to the two volumes discussed here, Talbert, perhaps feeling the weight of such criticisms, suggests that 'It is among the biographical literature of antiquity that one finds the greatest affinities with the canonical Gospels. Exactly how the Gospels fit into the *bios* literature remains for future study to clarify.'³⁰ This is exactly what both Philip Shuler and Richard Burridge have attempted to do, albeit in two significantly different manners.

Phillip Shuler: Matthew as Encomium Biography. Shuler wrote in 1982, too late, apparently, to have the benefit of Aune's damaging review of Talbert's thesis, or for his warnings concerning improper appropriation of classical material. Perhaps as a result of this unfortunate timing, his attempt to situate the Gospels in the milieu of

²⁷ Aune, 'Genre of the Gospels', p. 17.

²⁸ Aune, 'Genre of the Gospels', p. 44 (emphasis his).

²⁹ Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, pp. 17-76, esp. pp. 63-66.

³⁰ C.H. Talbert, 'Seminar on Gospel Genre: Introduction', in *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches* (ed. B.C. Corley; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), p. 200.

Greco-Roman biography has also not met with an overwhelmingly positive response.³¹

Shuler has several key presuppositions which seem to color his particular solution to the problem. These presuppositions are compounded by a misunderstanding of the literary theory of genre. The most important presupposition which Shuler brings to his discussion is that the Gospels, while containing some historical information, 'were apparently not primarily conceived for the purpose of conveying historical information'.³² This assertion (which he characterizes as an observation) leads him to search for an ancient genre which would allow the Gospels to have some other function than strict historical documentation. For such a genre he turns to what he calls '*epideictic oratory...more specifically the encomium*'.³³ The most telling blow to Shuler's work is that he *never demonstrates that such a genre existed*. He uses several words which he sees as synonyms for 'encomium', but does not show that they have any connection, other than the fact that he draws them together to create his fictitious genre.

The analysis in Shuler's book relies on Matthew, making the title of the book somewhat misleading, probably because the dissertation upon which this book is based did deal with all of the Synoptics (although he states in his conclusion that the application of his idea to the other Gospels awaits further research). It is perhaps not surprising that, no matter how persuasive his reasoning may be, the fact that there is little or no evidence for the claims he makes has left this as merely another example of an unsuccessful attempt to establish the genre of the Gospels.

Richard Burridge: The Gospels as Biographies. Burridge's monograph on this topic, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*,³⁴ has come as a breath of fresh air in this

³¹ For a thorough review, see that by S.E. Porter in *JETS* 26 (1983), pp. 480-82.

³² P.L. Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 36-37.

³³ Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, p. 37. Encomium, loosely defined, is a biography told for the purpose of flattery or praise, usually highly exaggerated and full of apocryphal stories inserted for the purpose of reinforcing the image of the subject.

³⁴ R.A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS, 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

discussion. He carries out with gusto the program which was suggested by Aune in his attack on Talbert's position, using a macro-level approach to determine a 'family resemblance' between the Gospels and other Greco-Roman biography. Rather than focusing on the individual items of dissimilarity between the Gospels and other biography, Burrige focuses on the widespread similarities. He discusses and analyzes such features as the opening, the degree to which the subject of the biography is also the subject of the verbs in the piece, mode, setting, size, structure, topic and character. He finds a high degree of similarity between the Gospels and their biographical counterparts in the use and presence of such features, leading him to be able to assert with confidence that 'the time has come to go on from the use of the adjective "biographical", for *the gospels are bioi!*'³⁵

The establishment of a generic category for the Gospels is not, however, the end of the debate. There are further questions that need to be more fully examined, each with their pursuant exegetical implications. Such questions might include examination of the implications of the relationships between the various Gospel writers as they made use of each other's work,³⁶ and investigation of the social implications of the appropriation of the biographical genre, among others.

Acts

The genre of Acts is often treated along with the genre of Luke. This is not surprising, given the close relationship which is almost universally recognized between the two writings. However, it must be recognized that, no matter that they both probably had the same author, or that they form two parts of the same story, they are different works.³⁷ We will thus treat Acts as a separate work in this chapter, with the recognition that the investigation of the genre of Acts may very well have implications for the genre of Luke, and *vice versa*, but that that will have to be a subject for further study.

There are three major views concerning the genre of Acts. The first two, attractive for their possible exegetical pay-off, have not, unfortunately, met with overwhelming acceptance. The final one, the

³⁵ Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?*, p. 243.

³⁶ A subject treated briefly in Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, pp. 65-66.

³⁷ See Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?*, pp. 244-47.

idea that Acts is most properly defined as history, while not on the surface having the same potential for quick exegetical pay-off, does, in our opinion, do the most justice to the text of Acts.

One thing that must be noted at the outset of any discussion of the genre of Acts is that there are several factors that often influence scholars to choose one genre over another, but that really have little to do with genre at all. A good example of this is found in the work of Gerd Lüdemann,³⁸ whose redactional approach aims to separate 'tradition' from 'redaction' in Acts. This is an attempt on his part to cut away that material which does not reflect a 'historical' situation, or at least to find what he sees as the earliest strands of tradition in the book. The problem with this approach, as with much historical criticism, is that there are un-provable presuppositions at the bases of such a program that distinctly color the results. The single most damaging presupposition is that the supernatural and miraculous events described in the book simply cannot be historical. As with the investigation of many of the central events of the New Testament, while it is quite true that such events and themes are not perhaps historically *quantifiable*, neither is it possible to disprove them on a historical basis. However this debate moves back and forth, it is important to realize that it really has nothing to do with the *genre* of Acts. If genre is to be found, according to the working definition from Wellek and Warren that we adopted above, as a combination of form and content/subject matter, then questions about the *character* of that subject matter must be left to one side when attempting to determine genre. Suggesting that Luke wrote history does not obviate the question of whether or not that history is reliable, nor, for that matter, does asserting that Luke was a novelist mean that he did not relate historical matters. Genre is not a question that can be settled simply on the grounds of how reliable or unreliable the material of a particular work may be. We would do well to remember this when discussing all of the generic questions which relate to the New Testament, but especially when approaching the question of the genre of Acts, which

³⁸ G. Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). Lüdemann is, of course, not the only one to approach Acts redactionally. See also H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

so often seems to boil down to scholars' beliefs about the reliability of Luke's historical information.³⁹

Acts as a Romance or Novel. This view, defended most strongly by Richard Pervo,⁴⁰ essentially posits that Acts was written in the form of an ancient novel (or romance), and that the themes and patterns found in Acts are very similar to other such works in the Greco-Roman world. The exegetical implications of such a 'discovery' seem obvious: if we were able to determine such a relationship, we would be able to examine Acts in light of several other works that contain similar material. (Or, alternatively, such an association would allow us to side-step some of the more difficult historical questions which attend the study of Acts.) We would be able to see where Acts was similar to other such works, and, perhaps more importantly, we would be able to determine where Acts differed—where it was making a special point. We would be able to understand, so the reasoning goes, more about the implicit contract that the writer of Acts had with his audience, and could use this to interpret the flow of action in the book of Acts.

As seductive as such an idea is, the identification of Acts with the

³⁹ Further, the genre of Acts is not affected by discussions of the date of Acts. If one places Acts in the second century or the first, it does not affect either the form or subject matter of the book. Neither do questions concerning the authorship of Acts have any bearing on its genre, as the book is formally *anonymous*, not pseudonymous.

With regard to the question of pseudonymy, much has been made of the so-called 'we-passages', that is, if the 'we-passages' reflect an attempt on the part of the author to give the impression that he was present during the events he describes in those sections, then this, assuming a late date for Acts, would amount to pseudonymous authorship. This, of course, relies on several tenuous assumptions, most notably that of a late date for Acts. No matter what one believes about the date of Acts, however, S.E. Porter ('The "We" Passages', in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*. II. *Graeco-Roman Setting* [ed. D.W.J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], pp. 545-74) has demonstrated that the 'we-passages' form one continuous source which the writer of Acts has employed in the construction of his narrative. Thus, no matter what the date or who the author of Acts, they have no real bearing on the genre.

⁴⁰ R.I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); see also R. Hock, 'The Greek Novel', in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (ed. D.E. Aune; SBLSPS, 21; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), esp. pp. 138-44.

ancient novel or romance runs into some extremely difficult ground. The study of the ancient novel has received much attention from classicists in recent times, which has been a positive step away from the elevation of the more popular and 'high-brow' writers of the classical period towards a broader appreciation of the spectrum of ancient literature.⁴¹ As positive as this attention has been for our overall understanding of Greco-Roman culture, it simply does not do much to illuminate the genre of Acts. Pervo has sought to establish several parallel features between ancient novels and Acts, and comes up with a genre for Acts which he calls the 'historical novel'.⁴² Unfortunately, such a category does not actually seem to exist, even among the texts which Pervo himself cites. In another place, he defines Acts as 'a theological book and a presentation of history, [which] also seeks to entertain'.⁴³ It is arguable whether this definition does much to place Acts within the category of the ancient novel, since the functions which he lists are quite natural ones for historical writings, as well.⁴⁴ Pervo's failure to place Acts in the category either of the novel or of history means that his genre of the 'historical novel' is not reflective of the ancient literature which he cites, and leaves the reader wondering exactly what it is that he is trying to prove. Indeed, the features which he does point out as parallel with ancient novels (such as imprisonments, shipwrecks, travel narratives, etc.) are all paralleled not only in novels, but also in non-fictional writing. There are also several elements of Acts that must be minimized to make an identification with the novel possible,⁴⁵ the most serious of which seems to be the fact that one of the distinguishing features of the ancient novel was its predictable ending, something quite definitely not present in Acts' somewhat abrupt and, from a literary standpoint, unsatisfactory ending.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See T. Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); B.E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of their Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

⁴² Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, p. 136.

⁴³ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, p. 86.

⁴⁴ On the entertainment value of ancient historical writing, see B.L. Ullman, 'History and Tragedy', *TAPA* 73 (1942), pp. 250-53; F.W. Walbank, 'History and Tragedy', *Historia* 9 (1960), pp. 216-34.

⁴⁵ See L. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS, 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) for a recent, if dated, summary of such elements.

⁴⁶ A point recognized by Pervo himself, *Profit with Delight*, pp. 48-50.

Pervo's assessment suffers most seriously, perhaps, not so much from his analysis as from his faulty reasoning. A good deal of weight is placed on the similarities which he finds between Acts and the subsequent apocryphal acts of the various apostles. The fact that these works are late and clearly derivative does not seem to bother him, since he reasons that, if the first Acts was fictive, then it can be assessed on the basis of all subsequent fictive 'acts'. The logic of such an exegetical move escapes us, but is, unfortunately, not universally rejected.⁴⁷

All-in-all, the case for the novel being the basis for the genre of Acts has not been well enough argued to date. Unfortunately, this has not meant that it has been rejected as a category for the study of Acts, and Pervo continues to be cited as evidence and support for this idea, regardless of the relative weakness of his position.⁴⁸ Until further evidence is brought forward which builds a more convincing case, we would do much better to leave the idea of the novel to one side in terms of the question of a genre for Acts.

Acts as a Travel Narrative or Sea Voyage. From the standpoint of genre, the idea that Acts, with its problematic 'we-passages', is in the 'conventional' form of an ancient account of a sea voyage is attractive for one reason in particular: it makes the questions of date and authorship, often seen to be integral to the interpretation and implications of the 'we-passages', irrelevant, for, if the passages are simply conventional, then there can be no question of deception or pseudonymy on the part of the author. Of course, this also means that their value as historical sources comes into question. This position is advocated most strongly by Vernon Robbins.⁴⁹ Robbins bases his

⁴⁷ See, e.g., W. Bindemann, 'Verkündigter Verkündiger: Das Paulusbild der Wir-Stücke in der Apostelgeschichte: Seine Aufnahme und Bearbeitung durch Lukas', *TLZ* 114 (1989), pp. 705-20.

⁴⁸ Indicative of this continuing trend is a recent volume of essays from a conference on Luke-Acts, in which, of the three essays dealing even tangentially with the genre of Acts, two of the three rely on Pervo's classification of Acts as a novel (L. Alexander, "'In Journeyings Often": Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance', pp. 17-49, and G. Downing, 'Theophilus's First Reading of Luke-Acts', pp. 91-109, both in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* [ed. C.M. Tuckett; JSNTSup, 116; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995]).

⁴⁹ V.K. Robbins, 'By Land and Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea Voyages', in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts* (ed. C.H. Talbert; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), pp. 215-42.

assessment on a wide variety of parallels which he draws from literature spanning the spectrums of time (1800 BCE to 300 CE), space (Egyptian, Greek, and Latin), and generic form (epic, poetry, prose narrative, oratory, fantasy, autobiography, romance/novel, scientific prose, etc.). Unfortunately, while this breadth may be seen by Robbins as corroborative of his assertion that there was a convention in describing ancient sea voyages, it is better seen as an obvious case of 'parallelomania'. There are simply no controlling criteria by which the examples he includes have been selected. One gets the impression that his results are highly selective and perhaps not entirely representative. A further problem is the inclusion of so many different forms of writing. There is simply no cohesiveness in the examples Robbins cites.⁵⁰ It is probably much better to see the use of the first person plural in ancient texts where sea voyages are described as a natural pattern functioning whenever conveyances with multiple passengers are included in narratives.⁵¹ This 'solution' to the genre of Acts is probably best seen as a side-issue regarding the provenance of the 'we-passages', having little to do with the over-all genre of Acts.

Acts as History. Acts has been understood as a historical document for most of its life in the Church, as well as within most critical dialogue. That it has been recently interpreted in different ways (as above) does not, however, mean that the essential features which originally led most to think of it as a historical document have disappeared. We must re-iterate, however, that we are not speaking here of the historical *reliability* of the document, only of its genre. In terms of form, Acts has many features which recommend it as ancient history. These include its historical preface,⁵² the author's claim to be using

⁵⁰ For analysis of Robbins's various examples, see Porter, 'The "We" Passages', pp. 554-58; J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of his Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 16-22; and W.S. Kurz, 'Narrative Approaches to Luke-Acts', *Bib* 68 (1987), pp. 216-17.

⁵¹ As C.K. Barrett states, 'It is simply that in any vehicle larger than a bicycle there may well be a number of passengers who become, for a time, a community' ('Paul Shipwrecked', in *Scripture: Meaning and Method* [ed. B.P. Thompson; Festschrift A.T. Hanson; Hull: Hull University Press, 1987], p. 53).

⁵² Although Alexander has argued that the preface is similar to scientific prose of the ancient world (*The Preface to Luke's Gospel* and 'Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing', *NovT* 28 [1986], p. 69), she makes the mistake, from a generic point of view, of focusing almost entirely on form, and not enough on content. It is probably better to see it as similar to the prefaces of other Hellenistic historians. See D. Earl, 'Prologue-Form in Ancient

sources in the compilation of his account, its chronologically linear movement, and its episodic nature, among others.⁵³

It seems that the best position with which to go forward is that Acts is a form of historiography common to the ancient world. While this does make the best sense of the evidence, it does not, unfortunately, provide the exegete with a great deal of exegetical 'fire power'. It does not allow esoteric new documents and literary traditions to be brought to bear on the problem. It does not eliminate the need for further historical work to be done concerning the nature of the history contained in Acts. In short, seeing Acts as history leaves one in much the same position in which scholars have always been—needing to go to the text itself to understand its ins and outs, its patterns and purposes. The fact that Acts is best seen as history means that the exegete has a great deal of difficult work to do, because, although its form and content seem best related to the historical genre, the genre of history is very wide indeed. As with most writings, one cannot deduce meaning from genre. One can only begin the task from this point.

Pauline and Other Letters

The Pauline and the so-called 'Catholic' or General Epistles or letters have had perhaps the least discussion from the point of view of genre, although they have had their share of the limelight. While literary genre theory is perhaps least equipped from a theoretical standpoint to deal with epistolary literature (as letters are seldom seen as 'literary' creations, but rather mundane, functional documents), Wellek and Warren's working definition of genre, involving form and subject matter or content, is still helpful in placing them within the Greco-Roman literary world.

Epistle versus Letter. There has really only been one serious question raised concerning the genre of the Pauline letters. This relates to a

Historiography', *ANRW* I.2 (ed. H. Temporini; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), pp. 842-56.

⁵³ An excellent survey of the similarity of Acts to other works of Greco-Roman historiography can be found in M.A. Powell, *What Are they Saying about Acts?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 80-83. See also C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT, 49; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), *passim*; Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, pp. 80-111; W.C. van Unnik, 'Luke's Second Book and the Rules of Hellenistic Historiography', in *Les Acts des Apôtres: Traditions, rédaction, théologie* (ed. J. Kremer; BETL, 48; Gembloux: Duculot, 1979), pp. 37-60; and C.K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth, 1961).

distinction between the *letter*, or the *true letter*, and the *literary letter*, or the *epistle*. This distinction is largely the result of Adolf Deissmann's important investigations around the turn of the century in his *Bible Studies* and *Light from the Ancient East*.⁵⁴ Deissmann was among the first of the New Testament scholars to recognize the value of the papyri for New Testament study, and to utilize them in his work. At the time only recently discovered, the treasure-trove of documents from a stratum of society that had been previously almost entirely hidden from view sent shock waves throughout the world of New Testament studies. Deissmann's famous bifurcation between the two forms of epistolary writings is based primarily on an identification of especially the Pauline letters with many of the newly discovered letters of the ancient Egyptian villages and towns which had yielded their rubbish heaps and archive deposits. Indeed, much of the lexical and grammatical information that has been gleaned from the Egyptian papyri has provided an incredible amount of comparative data for the study of the Greek of the New Testament, but Deissmann's work was based on more than just a recognition of the *koine* of New Testament Greek. He also had a very distinct and Romantic picture of the social world into which Christianity first erupted. In Deissmann's writings, there is a strict delineation between the 'literary' world and the 'unliterary' world which has more to do with his rather naive Romantic sociological approach, than with distinctions necessarily drawn from in-depth study of the New Testament literature. In his own words,

Christianity...does not begin as a literary movement. Its creative period is non-literary.

Jesus of Nazareth is altogether unliterary. He never wrote or dictated a line.⁵⁵ He depended entirely on the living word, full of a great confidence that the scattered seed would spring up... He had no need to write letters...the new thing for which He looked came not in a book, formulae, and subtle doctrine, but in spirit and fire.

Side by side with Jesus there stands, equally non-literary, His apostle. Even from the hand of St. Paul we should possess not a line, probably, if he had remained, like his Master, in retirement. But the Spirit drove the cosmopolite back into the Diaspora...

⁵⁴ G.A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (trans. A. Grieve; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), pp. 1-59; *Light from the Ancient East* (trans. L.R.M. Strachan; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 4th edn, 1927), pp. 146-251.

⁵⁵ Leaving aside the passage in John 8:6-8.

Such sayings of the non-literary Jesus as have been reported to us by others, and such non-literary letters as remain to us of St Paul's, show us that Christianity in its earliest creative period was most closely bound up with the lower classes and had as yet no effective connexion with the small upper class possessed of power and culture...

The creative, non-literary period is followed by the conservative, literary period, but this receives its immediate stamp from the motive forces of the former epoch.⁵⁶

Deissmann puts this assessment at the end of his discussion of the letter form of the Pauline writings, as if it were a discovery of his analysis, rather than its true motivation. In truth, as Stanley Stowers has stated,

Deissmann's antithesis between the natural and the conventional was typical of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Romanticism popularized in Deissmann's day by the writings of Leo Tolstoy and others. Now, however, theorists of literature and culture are widely agreed that there is a conventional dimension to all intelligible human behavior.⁵⁷

Deissmann's contention concerning the Pauline letter form was perhaps the inevitable result of such a strong delineation between 'literary' and 'unliterary'. Of course, this delineation really had more to do with the perceived social make-up of society at the time of the New Testament writings, reflecting contemporary German Romantic ideas of natural religion and the stagnancy of the Church at the time, against which the idealized New Testament Church was held up as an example. Had Paul been shown to be 'literary' (meaning 'upper class', 'conventional' or 'hierarchical'), then the whole contention that there was an ideal pattern of an early Church which could be emulated in modern times would have disappeared. And so, Paul's letters, which are different in form and character from many of the other New Testament epistles or letters, became elevated (or lowered) to a position of the 'true letter', while letters such as James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude are seen as 'literary letters', or 'epistles'. The designation of these as 'epistles' has largely to do with the fact that their content is somewhat universally accessible, and that their addressees (such as Jas 1:1, 'to the twelve tribes of the dispersion') are seen to be a 'public'

⁵⁶ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 245-47.

⁵⁷ S.K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 19. See pp. 17-26 for a thorough analysis of Deissmann's position and an overview of recent epistolary theory.

(Christian) audience. In contrast to these, Paul's letters are seen to be more circumstantial, contextual, and spontaneous, as well as all being relatively private (that is, to a limited, known group of people, or to an individual. Even Galatians, probably a circular letter to the churches in the whole region of Galatia, would have been to a limited group of people that Paul would have largely known, and, in addition, addresses a very particular situation).

In some ways, Deissmann's distinction is valid—there is no point in defending the thesis that the undisputed Pauline epistles are the same in either form or content to some of the Catholic Epistles, or even to the often disputed Pastoral Epistles (the difference in form and content being one of the reasons they are disputed). However, rather than such a distinction as Deissmann draws, it is probably better to see features such as audience, situation, and the character of the content as differentiating one set of letters from another set of letters, rather than as differentiating letters from epistles. One could take Deissmann's two categories (between which even he admits some variation, even if he does see everything which is not actually a 'true letter' as a poor approximation thereof) as poles on a continuum of letter writing, one pole being the personal, completely private letter, the other pole being the public, 'literary' letter intended to be read by a wide variety of people, none of which the author may necessarily know. Between the two poles there is room for great diversity, and, of course, an incredible range of possible subject matter, the only limit being perhaps that the material is something which someone separated for some reason from another person wants that person to know.

The Structure of the Letter: Three, Four, or Five Parts. Concerning the 'form' part of our working definition of genre, that is, what sort of structures we might expect to see if we are to classify something as a letter, there is widespread agreement with a slight bit of variation. The differentiation of opinion is simply over how many parts a letter had in the Greco-Roman world. Three-part,⁵⁸ four-part,⁵⁹ and five-part⁶⁰ letter structures have been proposed. While it is quite true that most ancient Greek letters can be divided into three parts (the opening, the

⁵⁸ See J.L. White, 'Ancient Greek Letters', in Aune (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature*, pp. 85-105, esp. p. 97.

⁵⁹ See J.A.D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTSup, 101; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 11.

⁶⁰ See W.G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), pp. 27-43.

body, and the closing), Paul seems to have been a bit of an innovator in his letter writing. While still very much a Greco-Roman letter writer, some have posited that Paul developed the standard thanksgiving, usually seen as transitional from the opening to the body-opening of Greco-Roman letters, into a part of its own. Similarly, perhaps because of the specific use of the letter form under which most of Paul's extant letters fall, namely the letter to a church, a part of the body of the letter in which Paul develops his moral, ethical, or practical teaching seems to have become a distinct portion of his letter form all of its own. This is usually called the 'paraenesis', and is often seen by those who advocate a three- or four-part Pauline letter form as simply being a part of the body of the letter. Paul does seem to have developed this part of his letter form to the point where it is a distinct portion of the letter on its own, but one should not let such an innovation suggest that Paul's letters are not typical, Greco-Roman letters. Even the disputed Pauline epistles, including the Pastorals, evince much the same pattern as the undisputed ones. If, however, as we have discussed above, they are pseudonymous, this raises serious questions concerning their genre, as they then become, perhaps as strongly (and as negatively) as even Deissmann would put it, 'literary letters', but this because of their fictive nature, rather than their social class.

The other letters in the New Testament all have some of these parts, but none has the breadth or consistency of the Pauline letters (although Paul does not even always have all five parts). This should not suggest that the other letters are defective in some way, merely that they are different. Even Deissmann allowed that the last two Johannine letters were 'true letters',⁶¹ and it is indeed true that, along with Philemon, these two letters seem to have the most in common with the papyri letters we have in our possession. However, many of the other Catholic/General Epistles such as 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude all carry some of the features of the typical Greco-Roman letter.

Hebrews and James. Hebrews and James are often separated from the other Catholic/General Epistles because they seem to be the least like letters of them all. Indeed, Hebrews is without an epistolary opening (although, due to the rather abrupt beginning of the document, some have speculated that there was an opening that has been lost in the transmission process), and it is quite unlike any of the other New

⁶¹ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 241-42.

Testament letters that have a body, often composed of doctrinal teaching or discourse, followed by a paraenetic section. In fact, the only epistolary feature of Hebrews, other than its later title, is the epistolary-like ending (which actually seems quite Pauline in nature). As a result of this disparity between Hebrews and either the specific Pauline or the wider Greco-Roman letter form, some have suggested that Hebrews is not a letter at all. Other genres that have been suggested include a homily or sermon, or a collection of such addresses.⁶² Evidence garnered in support of this position includes the reference within the body of Hebrews to itself as a 'word of exhortation' (13:22); the common stance throughout the book reminiscent of that which a preacher might take, for example, in the continual references to the audience as 'brethren' (3:1, 12), as well as the references to the author as 'speaker' (2:5; 6:9; 8:1); and, finally, the pattern of citations of Scripture being followed by explanations thereof.

A similar position is that the text of Hebrews is in the form of a classical rhetorical oration. Hebrews does indeed evince several of the characteristics of classical rhetoric, and some take the presence of such features to mean that Hebrews was composed as an oration. While divided on the exact category of rhetoric under which Hebrews would fall,⁶³ those convinced of this position at least agree that Hebrews does employ stylistic features of Greco-Roman rhetoric. There is, however, a problem with this view. The classification of Hebrews as a particular species of rhetoric is often seen (as with much of rhetorical criticism) as a kind of magic key which will unlock the meaning of the book. This is, unfortunately, not possible, as the controversy over its particular species of rhetoric shows us.

Whether seen as an oration, as a homily or as a collection of homilies, Hebrews is probably best analyzed on the basis of its internal structure, rather than one imposed from outside that may or may not be entirely appropriate to the book itself. Where elements of such external structures can be discerned in the text of the book, they

⁶² See J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd edn, 1918), pp. 428-29; and S. Stanley, 'The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives', *TynBul* 45.2 (1994), pp. 247-51.

⁶³ B. Lindars ('The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews', *NTS* 35 [1989], pp. 382-406) suggests deliberative (concerned with future action); and Aune (*The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, p. 212) suggests epideictic (concerned with the reinforcement of beliefs already held by the audience).

should by all means be appropriated, as long as that does not mean the wholesale importation of other criteria that have not been discerned from within the text itself.

Another position advocated regarding the genre of Hebrews posits that the exegetical technique used in the book is closest to the technique of midrash, and that, rather than just utilizing this technique, the book is itself a midrash on Psalm 110. Midrash (from the Hebrew verb meaning 'to seek') is a Jewish exegetical technique that is essentially an extended explanatory commentary on a portion of Scripture. Midrash is a quite fashionable topic at the present moment in New Testament scholarship, and has been applied to almost all of the New Testament writings in one form or another. Here it is posited that, because of the continued references throughout the book to Psalm 110, and the elucidation of the meaning of this text at Heb. 7:11-28, the whole book is a midrash on this psalm.⁶⁴ This position is probably best left to one side, as it does little to explain anything but the sections of Hebrews that discuss Psalm 110, and does not cohere in significant and sustained ways with other examples of the midrashic genre.

The genre of Hebrews is perhaps one of the most difficult to ascertain in the entire New Testament, but, if we remember that genre is merely a tool that we as interpreters can use to help us into the lowest level of meaning of a particular work, this should not be too daunting a problem. It simply means that there is more work to be done to ascertain what Hirsch calls the *intrinsic genre* of the book—we may not know under which circumstances the book was written, but we do have the book, and it is long enough and well enough structured that we can use internal criteria to determine what the book is trying to do and say. Beyond that, we are at somewhat of a loss concerning the genre of Hebrews.

James has been another book which has been debated in terms of its generic character. It was one of Deissmann's so-called 'literary letters', and it has often been seen as such in modern criticism.⁶⁵ The

⁶⁴ See G.W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB, 36; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. xix. For an earlier demonstration that Psalm 110 is not discussed in Hebrews in a way commonly expected in midrash, see D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBLMS, 18; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967).

⁶⁵ Two basic ways of construing James as a 'literary letter' are (1) that it is a form of Hellenistic diatribe (J.H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*

move towards seeing James as a 'literary letter' revolves primarily around the audience addressed ('the twelve tribes in the dispersion'), and the general ethical nature of much of the material in the letter itself which would all be easily understood, so the argument goes, in a general, Greco-Roman context, not necessitating any specific situational setting. The source of this general teaching is, of course, not an issue for the determination of genre, nor is the fact that the audience addressed is a large one that cannot possibly have been known by the author. In fact, as James does exhibit standard epistolary features (opening, two-part body, closing), it is probably best, in terms of genre, to leave it at that.

Revelation

The determination of the genre of Revelation presents us with two distinct problems: (1) the relationship of Revelation to other, Jewish, apocalyptic literature, and (2) how to classify and identify such apocalyptic literature. The first problem is somewhat dependent on the solution to the second, so it will be to this that we turn first.

Views of Jewish Apocalyptic. The word 'apocalyptic', derived from the Greek word for 'revelation', connotes more than just a form of literature. Indeed, the literary genre we call 'apocalypse' is only a part of the overall matrix of belief, eschatology, philosophy, history, and social setting of the wider concept of apocalyptic thought. As John Collins has defined it, 'recent scholarship has abandoned the use of "apocalyptic" as a noun and distinguishes between apocalypse as a literary genre, apocalypticism as a social ideology, and apocalyptic eschatology as a set of ideas and motifs that may also be found in other literary genres and social settings'.⁶⁶ It is true, however, that older scholarship focused more closely on 'apocalyptic' as a form of literature. In this phase of the study of 'apocalyptic', it was usual to have a list of things that were seen as indicative of the apocalyptic genre, and then to measure different pieces against that 'yard-stick'

on the *Epistle of St James* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916]), and (2) that it is a form of paraenesis, closely linked to the Jewish wisdom tradition (M. Dibelius, *James* [ed. H. Greeven; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975], pp. 3-11). James has also been seen, similarly to Hebrews, as a sermon or homily, or a collection thereof. Regardless of its original form, however, it is quite clearly now in the form of a letter, and all that remains from the standpoint of genre is to determine what kind of letter.

⁶⁶ J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 2.

list.⁶⁷ Although D.S. Russell does admit that 'These various "marks" belong to apocalyptic not in the sense that they are essential to it or are to be found in every apocalyptic writing, but rather in the sense that, in whole or in part, they build up an *impression* of a distinct kind which conveys a particular *mood* of thought and belief',⁶⁸ it was not until more recent scholarship that the implications of his admission have been fully felt.

This newer phase of scholarship, instead of enumerating various characteristics of 'apocalyptic', concentrates on the overall *matrix* of belief and thought out of which apocalyptic literature flowed. Thus the definition above.⁶⁹ This has given a tremendous impetus to the study of the apocalypse as a literary genre, and has given us a more useful way of classifying works that seem to fall under this generic term without having to resort to endless enumerations of the content that apocalypses may have.

It has long been recognized that the term 'apocalypse' is not given as the actual title of a book until the end of the first century or beginning of the second.⁷⁰ However, the general matrix of the literary genre that became known as the 'apocalypse' was well in place by at least the third century BCE with the writing of portions of *1 Enoch*.⁷¹

⁶⁷ L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 34-67 lists 13 different characteristics of apocalyptic, while D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 BC-AD 100* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 105 lists 19.

⁶⁸ Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, p. 105.

⁶⁹ Other important works in this newer, matrix phase of apocalyptic scholarship include D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983); and J.J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (*Semeia* 14 [1979]). However, the most recent survey of the language surrounding 'apocalyptic' by R.B. Matlock ('"Apocalyptic" Interpretation and Interpreting "Apocalyptic": A Critique', in his *Unveiling the Apocalyptic Paul: Paul's Interpreters and the Rhetoric of Criticism* [JSNTSup, 127; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 247-316) brings together and raises several of its own criticisms of the whole discussion, most notably, the use of a concept of 'apocalyptic' to interpret the very writings out of which the concept ostensibly sprang—we have no source for 'apocalyptic' or 'apocalypticism' other than apocalypses!

⁷⁰ See J.J. Collins, *Maccabees, Second Maccabees: With an Excursus on the Apocalyptic Genre* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1981), p. 130; *idem*, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Collins, *Maccabees, Second Maccabees*, p. 132. The portions of *1 Enoch* found at Qumran, written in Aramaic, namely the Book of the Watchers (1-36)

Continuing with our definition of genre as a combination of formal characteristics and subject matter or content, the following are the formal characteristics thought now to be typical of apocalypses in general, with, of course, some variation between the various books themselves:⁷² (1) An apocalypse is a revelation. It will thus include 'a narrative framework that describes the manner of revelation'. (2) 'The main means of revelation are visions and otherworldly journeys, supplemented by discourse or dialogue and occasionally by a heavenly book.' (3) 'The constant element is the presence of an angel who interprets the vision or serves as guide on the otherworldly journey. This figure indicates that the revelation is not intelligible without supernatural aid.' (4) 'In all Jewish apocalypses the human recipient is a venerable figure from the distant past, whose name is used pseudonymously.' (5) 'The disposition of the seer before the revelation and his reaction to it typically emphasize human helplessness in the face of the supernatural.' This list of formal characteristics cuts across the whole of the apocalyptic genre, with few exceptions. One additional characteristic which we should like to posit is the frequent command on the part of the explaining angel to the recipient of the vision or otherworldly traveler to seal up or hide the contents of the vision or the journey which he has taken.

On the other side of the generic coin, the question of subject matter or content, Collins also has a helpful set of guidelines:⁷³ 'The content of apocalypses... involves both a temporal and spatial dimension, and the emphasis is distributed differently in some works'. (1) 'Some, such as Daniel, contain an elaborate review of history, presented in the form of prophecy and culminating in a time of crisis and eschatological upheaval.' (2) 'Others, such as *2 Enoch*, devote most of their text to accounts of the regions traversed in the otherworldly journey.' (3) 'The revelation of a supernatural world and the activity of supernatural beings are essential to all apocalypses.' (4) 'In all there are also final judgement and a destruction of the wicked.' (5) The eschatology of the apocalypses differs from that of the earlier prophetic books by clearly envisaging retribution beyond death.' (6)

and the Astronomical Book (72-82), have pushed back the dating of the earliest apocalyptic literature quite significantly. Previously, the earliest apocalypse was thought to be Daniel 7-12 (Collins, *Maccabees, Second Maccabees*, p. 132).

⁷² The following list is adapted from Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 4-5.

⁷³ This list is also adapted from Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 5.

'Paraenesis occupies a prominent place in a few apocalypses (e.g. *2 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*), but all the apocalypses have a hortatory aspect, whether or not it is spelled out.'

Together, these two lists contain many of the elements that the former phase of apocalyptic scholarship enumerated, but this arrangement eliminates the confusion between form and content, as well as allowing elements that properly belong in the category of 'apocalypticism' or apocalyptic belief to be left out of the discussion of genre.

There have, indeed, been other attempts to classify the genre of the apocalypses, but they have not proved convincing. Bruce Malina's recent *On the Genre and Message of Revelation*⁷⁴ is an attempt to identify Revelation with the wider genre of 'astral prophecy', which is essentially a way of pulling together all literature with an astrological 'bent' under one umbrella term. Malina is quite right to point out the many astrological elements in Revelation, and he is also probably correct that a good deal of apocalyptic imagery was drawn from popular Hellenistic literature, but his wide ranging (both temporally and spatially) review of this literature (not limited to a Hellenistic context) must surely argue in itself for a more specific identification of the genre of the apocalypse. If indeed astrological speculation was as widespread as Malina would have us believe, then it cannot, by definition, help us too much in the search for a genre, as it is not a *distinguishing* feature. This, of course, assumes that his presentation of the evidence is even-handed, which is far from sure. Another attempt, this time aimed at the entire genre of the apocalypse, also widens the field quite drastically. Christopher Rowland's *The Open Heaven*⁷⁵ argues that we should view apocalyptic simply as literature in which heaven is opened up and a revelation is given, ignoring the content of that revelation.⁷⁶ The impetus behind this definition is the wish to eliminate eschatology from the discussion of apocalyptic, and, as with Malina's later attempt to broaden the genre drastically, bring information from many different kinds of texts into play when interpreting apocalyptic.⁷⁷ These two solutions ignore opposite sides

⁷⁴ B.J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

⁷⁵ C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

⁷⁶ Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, p. 14.

⁷⁷ For the wish to do away with eschatology in the definition of the genre of

of the generic formula: Malina ignores formal characteristics, and Rowland ignores content. As such, they should both be rejected on purely methodological grounds.

How Much is Revelation like Jewish Apocalyptic Literature? The question remains, however, concerning how well Revelation fits within the apocalyptic genre. According to the definition we have here adopted, following Collins, Revelation fits all of the formal characteristics save for the fact that Revelation is not (likely) pseudonymous. If one accepts the additional formal element we have suggested, namely that concerning the issue of secrecy of the contents of the revelation, then Revelation also does not accord with this characteristic. It also contains most, if not all, of the elements of content from Collins's list. It seems that, according to Collins's definition, we can safely place Revelation in the genre of the apocalypse.

However, in terms of both form and content, Revelation contains many things which other apocalypses do not. These elements include the incredibly large amount of visual imagery (as opposed to other forms of revelation, such as conversation), the commissioning of a prophet (1:17-19; 10:8-11:2), prophetic oracles (1:7, 8; 13:9-10; 14:12-13; 16:15; 19:9-10; 21:5-8), oaths (10:5-7), seemingly liturgical music of various forms (hymns, 4:11; 5:9-14; 7:10-12, 15-17; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-8; and a dirge, 18:2-24), and lists of virtues and vices (9:20-21; 14:4-5; 21:8, 27; 22:14-15). In addition to these elements, the letters to the seven churches that form the first section of the book after the introduction are also unparalleled in other apocalypses.

While these are not major elements that would necessitate a redefinition of the genre of Revelation, they do lead us to think that there is perhaps more at work in Revelation on the level of genre than that of apocalypse. Richard Bauckham has suggested three different genres at work in Revelation: letter, prophecy and apocalypse.⁷⁸

The letters to the seven churches, the epistolary-like greeting in 1:4, and the short epistolary closing (22:18-21) have led some to believe

apocalypse, see Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, *passim*; and J. Carmignac, 'Qu'est-ce que l'Apocalyptique? Son emploi à Qumran', *RevQ* 10 (1979), pp. 3-33.

⁷⁸ R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1-17. See also G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 12-29.

that Revelation was originally a circular letter to these places. This hypothesis is interesting from a generic point of view, and may have some bearing on the generic sub-category (i.e. 'an apocalypse sent as a letter'), but really does little to affect the overall character of the book. That Revelation would have been produced, according to this view, for specific audiences is in no way different than the supposition concerning other apocalyptic literature.

The other category in Bauckham's three-fold generic category for Revelation is prophecy. We have noted some of the prophetic characteristics above, but we add here the fact that John refers to the contents of the book as prophetic both at the beginning (1:3) and at the end (22:6), together with the famous injunction against addition or subtraction therefrom. Speculation concerning the relationship of Revelation to early Christian prophecy, and indeed, the relationships between early Christian prophecy, ancient Jewish prophecy, and apocalypticism in general is fascinating, but, in the end, inconclusive. It is probably sufficient to note that there was a prophetic tradition within early Christianity, and that Revelation must have had some connection with this tradition. Barring further information, however, we should not lean too heavily on this supposition in the exegesis of the book, unless we can identify the prophetic characteristics from within the text.

The most important and fascinating ways in which Revelation does differ from the rest of Jewish apocalypses are the non-pseudonymous nature of the book,⁷⁹ and the fact that, rather than being commanded to shut up the contents of the book, John is ordered to write what he sees and send it to the seven churches (1:11; 22:10). It is true that, in 10:4, John is commanded not to write down the contents of the seven thunders, but this is quite paltry when compared to the commands to seal up entire books (which, oddly enough, have all been 'broken', or we would not have been able to read the books themselves!). It is probably best to see the command for sealing in the earlier apocalypses as part of the convention of pseudonymity. It is uncertain whether or not the authors of these books expected their audiences to be taken in by such a convention, but the fact that John is first of all ordered to *not* seal the words of his prophecy, and then is ordered to seal up a small portion of what he has heard, *and does*, argues that this

⁷⁹ Assuming that the 'John' mentioned in the book is the same person who had the visions, as there is no attempt to identify this person with any hero of the past.

was an important feature of the apocalyptic genre for John, the manipulation of which should alert us to possible exegetical capital to be made. The motivation given in 22:10, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near', suggests that this formal element had influenced the eschatological content of the book.

While Revelation has both striking similarities and dissimilarities with other apocalyptic literature, we would do well in our exegesis to pay attention to both, for it is in precisely this way that genre can be the most helpful in exegesis, showing us both where a book is similar and where it differs from those that have gone before.

CONCLUSION: THE EXEGETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GENRE

This examination of the various generic categories under which the New Testament books fall has concentrated mostly on the *identification* of their genres. However, this is by far the least important question of genre criticism. The more important questions concern the *implications* of genre for the reading and interpretation of literature. As we have seen, there are those who would make it a determinative factor—know the genre and know the meaning—but this is simply not the way that genre criticism can be responsibly employed. Hirsch's definition of understanding being genre-based, so often misunderstood, provides us with the best entrée. It is by the identification of the *intrinsic* genre—the overall structure and characteristics of a book—that we will go a long way towards understanding that book. In conclusion, then, let us remember that 'One of the main tasks of interpretation can be summarized as the critical rejection of extrinsic genres in the search for the intrinsic genre of a text'.⁸⁰

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