

Week 9: NT Genres (continued) – Epistles and Revelation

I. *Epistles*

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

a. Letters from the apostles and other early church leaders to Christian communities and individuals, which are carefully structured, didactic, and primarily teach theology and offer ethical instruction.¹

b. Biblical Epistles vs. Ancient Epistles in General: “The NT letters are less literary, formal, and artistic than many classical Greek treatises but still generally longer, more carefully structured, and more didactic than typical personal correspondence.”²

2. Of all the genres, knowledge of historical background is *most important* when it comes to epistles.

3. Ancient Letters have a distinct form that needs to be taken into account:³

a. Salutation

b. Thanksgiving and/or Prayer

c. Body

d. Exhortation and Instruction

e. Conclusion

4. Authorship⁴

a. It was typical to use an amanuensis (see esp. Romans, and the repeated use of *ij[na, di,a*, etc.).

b. The issue of pseudonymous writings.

B. Specific Rules⁵

1. *Study the logical development of the argument.* Remember that the motivation for writing should always be kept in mind. Further, think in the units of thought that the author is, and trace the development of these units.

2. *Study the situation behind the documents.* Since epistles are very occasional documents, one must have a solid grasp on background information. Without this, the arguments set forth will see odd and round-about.

¹ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 426.

² Ibid., 353.

³ Ibid., *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 169-170.

⁴ Ibid., *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 256.

⁵ Ibid., 258-260.

3. *Note the different subgenres employed in the epistles.* Like other genres we have studied, there are numerous subgenres (e.g. hymns, creeds, proverbs) within epistles that must be identified as literary units.

Case Example #13: 1 Corinthians 11

This passage will be nearly impossible for you to interpret if you don't have some notion of the cultural background of 1 Corinthians. Thus, you need to do some homework. Follow these steps:

- Find a good dictionary and read up on the city of Corinth
- Find a good commentary (e.g. Witherington's socio-rhetorical commentary on 1st Corinthians) and read the section on background.
- See if you can identify what is culturally-bound in this passage.
- See if you can find what isn't culturally bound in this passage.

II. *Revelation*

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

- a. "actually a conglomeration of three distinct genres: epistle, prophecy, and apocalypse."⁶
- b. "primarily an apocalypse"⁷

2. In regards to cultural background, it is very important in that Revelation is an epistle (it is addressed to a specific group of churches), and uses much apocalyptic imagery (and thus an awareness of OT imagery is important).

3. It is important to note the various schools of interpretation on Revelation that have existed throughout the history of the church:⁸

⁶ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 440.

⁷ Ibid., *How to Read the Bible*, 232.

⁸ Neil S. Wilson and Linda K. Taylor, *Tyndale Handbook of Bible Maps & Charts* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 569.

Approach	Description	Challenge	Caution
Preterist View	John is writing to encourage Christians in his own day who are experiencing persecution from the Roman Empire.	To gain the same kind of encouragement John's first readers gained from the vivid images of God's sovereignty	Do not forget that most biblical prophecy has both an immediate and a future application.
Futurist View	Except for the first three chapters, John is describing events that will occur at the end of history.	To see in contemporary events many of the characteristics John describes and realize that the end could come at any time	Do not assume that we have "figured out" the future, since Jesus said that no one will know the day of his return before it happens.
Historicist View	The book of Revelation is a presentation of history from John's day until the second coming of Christ and beyond.	To note the consistency of human evil throughout history and recognize that names may change but the rebellion against God has not	Be careful before identifying current events or leaders as fulfilling aspects of the book of Revelation.
Idealist View	The book of Revelation is a symbolic representation of the continual struggle of good and evil. It does not refer to any particular historical events. It is applicable at any point in history.	To gain insight into the past, to prepare for the future, and to live obediently and confidently in the present	Do not avoid the book because it is difficult. Try to understand Revelation within its broader literary context.

B. Specific Rules⁹

1. Revelation must have meant something to the original audience that they could comprehend.
2. Let the author's interpretation of the imagery serve as the starting point for understanding imagery.
3. See the visions as wholes and do not press details.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., *How to Read the Bible*, 235-238.

¹⁰ For a case example on Revelation, refer to week 3 and the analysis we did of Revelation 3:14-22.