

C. CLIFTON BLACK

The Rhetoric of the Gospel

Theological Artistry in the Gospels and Acts

SECOND EDITION

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Contents

Preface to the Second Edition	ix
Preface to the First Edition	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Abbreviations	xv
Introduction	
1. Rhetorical Questions in New Testament Study	2
The Gospels	
2. Matthew's Characterization of Faith	22
3. An Oration at Olivet	43
4. Theophilus, Meet Theophrastus	67
5. "The Words That You Gave to Me I Have Given to Them"	83
The Acts of the Apostles	
6. The Case of the Feckless Ficelle	102
7. The Rhetorical Form of the Early Christian Sermon	118
Preaching	
8. Four Stations en Route to a Parabolic Homiletic	136
9. For the Preacher: Counsel from an Old Lawyer	150
Conclusion	
10. Peroration	168
Bibliography	173
Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Sources	195
Index of Ancient Terms	212
Index of Modern Authors and Subjects	214

Preface to the Second Edition

By dominical precept we know that new wine doesn't belong in old wineskins (Mark 2:22). What of old wine in new wineskins? Since Jesus does not directly address that question, the agents of Westminster John Knox Press have apparently reckoned it seemly to reissue this book, first published in 2001. For that kindness, and particularly for the conscientious counsel of my editors, Marianne Blickenstaff and Daniel Braden, I am grateful. Like its predecessor this volume gathers kindred studies undertaken across many years, updated to take account of recent research. Chapters 4 and 9 are fresh additions, written for this edition. Though grounded in the classical tradition of rhetoric, where I feel most at home, this book persists in adopting a broad approach, embracing an audience of scholars and pastors, graduate and theological students. Everyone is welcome to this sideboard; nosh as you please.

In addition to the many creditors acknowledged in the first edition's preface, I am indebted to Melanie A. Howard, a candidate for the PhD in New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, who provided invaluable bibliographical assistance in bringing my thoughts up to date. I also thank Professor John T. Carroll, of Union Presbyterian Seminary, and Professor George L. Parsenius, of Princeton Seminary, for their critique and encouragement of my work.

C. C. B.

THE NATIVITY OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, JUNE 24, 2012
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Preface to the First Edition

Some years ago my friend and editor Jon Berquist invited me to write a primer on rhetorical analysis of the New Testament for students in seminaries. Since by then several fine introductions to the field had already appeared in print, my heart didn't leap at the thrill of opportunity.

As the days thence were melting away, I did notice, however, two curiosities. To me it seemed, first, that the lion's portion of New Testament rhetorical inquiry was being awarded the Epistles and even the Revelation to John. Meanwhile, a number of folk expressed to me appreciation for some literary studies, scattered in places far off the beaten path. For those reasons I am emboldened to gather these pieces on the Gospels and Acts between more convenient covers, belatedly accepting while modifying Dr. Berquist's kind invitation. Some who have encouraged me in this venture are pastors. Along with theological students and other scholarly colleagues, preachers are among those for whom I have prepared this book. I hope it may find its way into their hands. Even more, I hope it may help them, despite its refusal of pretense to offer practical guidance in the art of sermon preparation.

The chapters assembled here originally appeared in various books and journals across a dozen years. I am indeed grateful to all the publishers who have graciously permitted me use of those essays for this fresh purpose. All the contents have been revised, lightly or heavily, to fit the need. Throughout I have made a good-faith attempt to update notes and bibliography. Rhetorical criticism has become so voluminous that I cannot hope to have succeeded; where I have failed, I can only beg my reader's pardon.

I just spoke of my debt to Jon L. Berquist, Academic Editor of Chalice Press. There are others to whom I am debtor. Several chapters were immediately

stimulated by the findings of scholars who have taught me much about the New Testament, even when I have been unable to agree with all their conclusions. For introducing me to the study of rhetoric, I thank George A. Kennedy, Paddison Professor of Classics, Emeritus, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Visiting Professor of Speech Communication at Colorado State University. Earlier versions of this material received critical readings by many learned friends: Jouette M. Bassler, R. Alan Culpepper, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, James B. Glasscock, Joel B. Green, Amy-Jill Levine, John R. Levison, Vickie E. Pittard, Frank Thielman, Duane F. Watson, Lawrence M. Wills, and Patrick J. Willson. For the blemishes and howlers that remain, they are not to be faulted: them I heard but didn't always heed. For technological and bibliographical assistance, I am grateful to Justin Mitchell and Callie Plunket, students matriculating for the PhD at, respectively, Southern Methodist University and Princeton Theological Seminary. As always, my debts to Harriet and Caroline are as inexpressible as they are profound, and affectionate.

C. CLIFTON BLACK

THE FEAST DAY OF SAINT PETER AND SAINT PAUL

JUNE 29, 2000

Introduction

Chapter One

Rhetorical Questions in New Testament Study

Words!
Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through;
First from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?

*Eliza Doolittle*¹

As Wilhelm Wuellner once prophesied, a tidal wave of rhetorical analysis continues to pound NT conferences, journals, and bibliographies.² Its force is tsunamic, with no signs of ebbing. For the uninitiated this must seem bizarre, since the “rhetoric” to which our news media alert us is, in the lead entry of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, “the undue use of exaggeration or display; bombast.”³ If this is what NT interpreters are now expected to study, most of us would gladly lie down until the urge passes.

The problem, as one might guess, lies less with rhetoric than with its cheap connotation in our vernacular. For wherever someone attempts to persuade others—whether from the pulpit or the Op-Ed page, in a term paper or around the kitchen table—there you find rhetoric employed. As I shall use the term in this book, rhetoric bears on those distinctive properties of human discourse, especially its artistry and argument, by which early Christian authors endeavored to convince others of the truth of their beliefs.

1. Lerner and Loewe, *My Fair Lady*, 146.
2. Wuellner, “Rhetorical Criticism.” Watson tabulates thousands of investigations in *Rhetoric* (2006).
3. Flexner, *Random House Dictionary*, 1650.

THE TRADITION OF RHETORICAL PRACTICE AND STUDY

If the study of rhetoric appears innovative to modern biblical interpreters, then that bespeaks their philosophical amnesia. The practice of oratory is as old as Homer (ninth or eighth century BCE), whose epics are not only punctuated with heroic speeches but also are themselves exquisite testimonies of the bard's own oratorical craft.⁴ By the fifth century BCE the Sicilian teacher Corax, also known as Tisias,⁵ had compiled technical handbooks on rhetoric for the use of ordinary Greek citizens in political assemblies and courts of law.⁶ Gorgias (ca. 480–375 BCE) and Isocrates (ca. 436–338 BCE) refined the sophistic approach to rhetoric: the orator's skillful deployment of rhythm, rhyme, and other poetic embellishments to move or to entertain an audience. A backlash against the morally vacuous exploitation of sophistic rhetoric appears in some dialogues of Plato (ca. 429–347 BCE; see esp. his works *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*).⁷ Yet it was Plato's own pupil Aristotle (384–322 BCE) who systematized the theoretical substructure of classical rhetoric and related its practice to the arts, sciences, and dialectical logic in particular.⁸

With the hellenization of the Mediterranean world, first by Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) and later by imperial Rome (27 BCE–476 CE), technical rhetoric became essential in secondary education and its preparation of Roman citizens for advancement in public life.⁹ Although it is impossible (and needless) to demonstrate that Jesus, the earliest apostles, or the authors of the Gospels received formal education in rhetoric, indisputably they lived in a culture whose everyday modes of oral and written discourse were saturated with a rhetorical tradition, mediated by such practitioners and theoreticians as Caecilius (a Sicilian Jew of the late first century BCE), Cicero (106–43 BCE), and Quintilian (ca. 40–95 CE). The influence of technical and sophistic rhetoric on Christian preaching, teaching, and apologetics is manifest throughout the patristic period, conspicuously in the Greek sermons of John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) and of the three great Cappadocians: Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–389), Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–379), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–395).¹⁰ Of the eight most notable Latin fathers

4. Toohey, "Epic and Rhetoric," articulates the structure and its elaboration in Nestor's four speeches of the *Iliad* (1.254–84; 7.124–60; 11.656–803; 23.626–50)—an unexpected level of development, since Homer wrote years before the formulation of rhetoric as a discipline.

5. Classicists debate whether Tisias was Corax's pupil or the two names refer to the same person ("Tisias the Crow"). Recent scholarship leans toward the second possibility: see Kennedy, *A New History*, 11, 18, 32–34.

6. Consult Harris, "Law and Oratory."

7. See Herrick, *History and Theory of Rhetoric*, 52–72.

8. Consult Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*.

9. Clark's *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (1957) and S. Bonner's *Education in Ancient Rome* (1977) are standard histories of the subject.

10. See Kennedy, *Greek Rhetoric*, 180–264; Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric*; Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*.

of the church, three were schooled in rhetoric: Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315–367), Ambrose (ca. 337–397), and Jerome (ca. 345–420). The remaining five had been professional rhetoricians before their conversion to Christianity: Tertullian (ca. 160–225), Cyprian (d. ca. 258), Arnobius (d. ca. 330), Lactantius (ca. 240–320), and Augustine (354–430).¹¹ In his celebrated *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine first educed the implications of rhetorical theory for Christian belief and practice, hermeneutics and homiletics.¹²

Not only did rhetorical study pervade the early Christian tradition; it also enriched the medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment academic legacy of which modern theological students are beneficiaries. As barbarism descended on Italy, Cassiodorus Senator (ca. 487–585) kept aflame the study of rhetoric and the other six liberal arts (grammar, dialectic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music) from his monastery at Vivarium.¹³ During the European Renaissance and Reformation, the renewal of biblical criticism and the recovery of Ciceronian rhetoric fit hand in glove in the scholarship of such humanists as Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406–57), Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536), Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), and John Calvin (1509–64). Buoyed by the neoclassical revival of the arts in Europe and North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rhetorical modes of NT analysis persisted into the early twentieth century, as illustrated by the dissertation of the young Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)¹⁴ and the still-standard grammar of NT Greek by Friedrich Wilhelm Blass (1843–1907).¹⁵ The exercise and conceptualization of classical rhetoric have exerted profound impact, not only on the NT writings, but also on successive centuries of its study. Viewed in that light, rhetorical criticism is one of the oldest approaches to NT interpretation.

MAJOR CURRENTS IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

As suggested by the preceding differentiation of its technical, sophistic, and philosophical varieties, orators and their analysts have never agreed on how rhetoric should be conceptualized. Similar disagreement, if not confusion, characterizes contemporary rhetorical analyses of the Bible. Much as “literary criticism” has been applied to so broad a field of interpretive strategies¹⁶ that

11. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 132–60.

12. R. Green, *Augustine*, is the current critical edition.

13. See Jones, *Cassiodorus Senator*; Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*.

14. Bultmann, *Der Stil*; refined by Stowers, *The Diatribe*.

15. Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar* (first German edition, 1896).

16. During the past sixty years, “literary criticism” has been used with reference to source reconstruction; analysis of poetic structure; study of a narrative’s genre, plot, or characters; psycho-anthropological decoding of a text’s “deep structure”; postmodernist deconstruction of a text by an individual or community of readers; and a great many things besides. For a good overview, see Aune, *Blackwell Companion*, 116–39.

the label probably deserves retirement from overwork, “rhetorical criticism” is a portmanteau that carries kindred yet distinguishable approaches to biblical exegesis.

Rhetorical Analysis as Study of the Bible’s Literary Artistry

Among both OT and NT scholars the term “rhetorical criticism” is intimately associated with James Muilenburg (1896–1974), whose 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature summed up his career-long interest in biblical poetics while issuing a programmatic call for the study of Hebrew literary composition. Muilenburg conceived rhetorical criticism as a supplement to the work of form critics, among whom he sympathetically numbered himself, and as a corrective to some of that earlier method’s exaggerated tendencies. In an era that had stressed a literary genre’s typical and representative aspects, abstracted from their settings in Israel’s social and religious life, Muilenburg argued for recovery of the particularities of any given pericope—“the many and various devices by which the predications [in a literary unit] are formulated and ordered into a unified whole”—with attention to the author’s intention, historical context, and distinctive blending of form and content.¹⁷

In NT research the writings of Amos Niven Wilder (1895–1993) approximate Muilenburg’s understanding of biblical rhetoric. Like Muilenburg’s, Wilder’s approach was historically grounded, regarding the study of modes of NT discourse as a complement to historical criticism of biblical traditions. Also like Muilenburg, Wilder rejected the separation of form and content: biblical genres like dialogue, story, parable, and poem are “deeply determined by the faith or life-orientation that produced them,” which themselves were governed by specific social and religious patterns.¹⁸ More so than Muilenburg, Wilder probed biblical rhetoric’s phenomenological dimensions, the ways in which human existence is experienced and interpreted through religious discourse.¹⁹

Whether Muilenburg and Wilder founded a definable school of rhetorical criticism is debatable. Easier to assess is the degree to which they reopened convergent avenues of research into biblical rhetoric that have ended up veering appreciably from their own approaches. Typical of much interpretation that takes its bearings from Wilder and Muilenburg is an understanding of rhetoric that concentrates on the aesthetic or inherently literary properties of biblical discourse, with

17. Muilenburg, “Form Criticism,” 4–8. Muilenburg’s challenge amounted to proof of a pudding he had tasted a dozen years previously (“Book of Isaiah,” in *IB* 5 [1956]). Esp. in Deutero-Isaiah (ibid., 386–93, 415–18), Muilenburg discerned hallmarks of strophic structure and poetic style: parallelism, meter, assonance, triads, and repetitions of key words.

18. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 25–26.

19. See Wilder, *The New Voice* and *Jesus’ Parables*; with his approach compare Hyde and Smith, “Hermeneutics and Rhetoric”; and Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God*.

attention paid to its metaphorical, stylistic, and structural features.²⁰ This mode of rhetorical analysis often melts into so-called New Criticism, adopted by many Anglo-American literary critics of the mid-twentieth century.²¹ At the point where it prescind from considering the historical and social location of biblical texts and their authors' intent, rhetorical criticism of this sort diverges from Muilenburg's or Wilder's own exegetical inclinations.²²

Analysis of the New Testament according to the Canons of Classical Rhetoric

Muilenburg's and Wilder's historical interests are deliberately fulfilled in the work of the North American classicist George A. Kennedy (b. 1928). For Kennedy, rhetoric refers less to "literary artistry" than to the disciplined art of persuasion, as practiced and theorized by Greeks and Romans of the classical and Hellenistic periods. "What we need to do is to try to hear [early Christian authors'] words as a Greek-speaking audience would have heard them, and that involves some understanding of classical rhetoric," particularly the norms of persuasive discourse that suffused the culture of Mediterranean antiquity. While Kennedy is not the first scholar to have reclaimed technical rhetoric for biblical exegesis,²³ his accessible presentation of classical concepts has been the most influential among English-speaking scholars.²⁴

Kennedy's method of rhetorical criticism may be summarized in six steps, the first of which is determining the rhetorical unit to be analyzed. As form critics (like Muilenburg) identify discrete pericopes, so also rhetorical critics like Kennedy search for evidence of inclusio, opening and closure, in a unit of discourse with some magnitude. Second, an attempt is made to define the rhetorical situation: the complex of persons, events, and relations that generates pressure for a verbal response. With this one might compare the form critic's discovery of a genre's *Sitz im Leben*, or setting in life. Third is to identify the primary rhetorical problem addressed by the discourse. Kennedy suggests two classical frameworks within

20. Thus Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*; J. Jackson and Kessler, *Rhetorical Criticism*; Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*.

21. Frye, *The Great Code*; Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*; Rhoads, Michie, and Dewey, *Mark as Story*, 2nd ed. (1999).

22. In *Rhetorical Criticism* (1994), Muilenburg's student Tribble offers an account of his work and its aftermath.

23. Thus the Venerable Bede (672/73–735), *De schematibus et tropis*: ET, "Concerning Figures and Tropes"; Leon, *The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow* (originating in ca. 1420–75 CE). In the early twentieth century Norden was an important exponent of the Bible's rhetorical artistry, particularly in Paul's Letters: see *Die antike Kunstprosa* and also *Agnostos Theos*.

24. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, esp. 10. This approach is based on ancient rhetorical handbooks that are all available, with English translation, in the LCL: Aristotle, *Ars rhetorica*; Cicero, *De inventione rhetorica*; Cornificius, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*; and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*. See also Wooten, *Hermogenes' "On Types of Style"*; and Kennedy, *Invention and Method*. Critical assessments of Kennedy's scholarship may be found in Black and Watson, *Words Well Spoken*.

which this identification can be made: one may pinpoint the *stasis*, or specific question, at issue (which can be crucial for interpreting Paul's Letters, the speeches in Acts, or Jesus' controversies with Pharisees). Alternatively, the critic can ascertain the kind of judgment that an audience is asked to render: whether it is a *judicial* assessment of past circumstances (e.g., the character of Paul's ministry in Corinth, to which much of 2 Corinthians refers), a *deliberative* reckoning of actions expedient or beneficial for the listeners' future performance (thus the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5–7), or the *epideictic* instillation and enhancement of beliefs or values in the present (for instance, Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in John 14–16).²⁵

Considering the arrangement (*taxis*) of the parts into a unified discourse is the fourth of Kennedy's critical steps. Compared with the structure of deliberative and epideictic address, judicial oratory displays the most elaborate arrangement: an introductory *proem*, followed by a *narration* of background information, the *proposition* to be proved, the *proof* itself, *refutation* of contrary views, and a concluding *epilogue*. The fifth step is analysis of the discourse's invention and style. Invention (*heuresis*) is the crafting of arguments based on proofs: *ēthos*, the persuasive power of the speaker's authoritative character (see Mark 1:22); *pathos*, the emotional responses generated among listeners (cf. Acts 2:37); and *logos*, the deductive or inductive arguments of the discourse itself (e.g., Heb. 1:1–2:14). Style (*lexis*) refers to the text's choice of words and their formulation in "figures" of speech and of thought. Sixth, reviewing the whole analysis, the critic assesses the unit's rhetorical effectiveness.

In this classical mode rhetorical criticism has stimulated so much NT research that it defies easy summary; nevertheless, some basic trends are discernible. (1) Application of Kennedy's six-stage method to various canonical documents (usually Epistles) is notable in the works by Robert Jewett²⁶ and Duane Watson.²⁷ (2) Perhaps most fruitful to date for interpreting the Gospels is the study of *chreiai*, didactic anecdotes developed by Hermogenes of Tarsus (late second century CE) and other rhetoricians for training pupils in composition and orations.²⁸ (3) As exemplified by Margaret Mitchell's constructive argument for the

25. Connor (*Greek Orations*) collects examples of all three major genres of ancient oratory. Great speeches in modern history also conform to these basic genres. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863) is an unforgettable instance of epideictic: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Zola's demand that Dreyfus be exonerated of treason (February 22, 1898) lodges a judicial plea: "[He] is innocent: I swear it; I stake my life on it—my honor!" Churchill's appeal to Parliament for approval of Britain's war against Germany (May 13, 1940) is essentially deliberative, most memorable for his alliterative offer of "nothing . . . but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

26. Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*; idem, *Romans*.

27. Representative of Watson's many investigations is *Invention, Arrangement, and Style*.

28. Primary texts are available in Hock and O'Neil, *Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric*; and Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*. On *chreia* in the Gospels, see Mack and Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion*. Generations of North American children have been schooled in honesty through an apocryphal *chreia* popularized by Mason Locke Weems (1759–1825): young Washington's confession of chopping down a cherry tree (*The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* [1801]).

unity of 1 Corinthians,²⁹ ancient rhetoric has been employed to throw fresh light on long-standing questions of NT exegesis. (4) Theorists have adopted classical rhetoric in reformulating traditio-historical forms of interpretation like form criticism.³⁰ (5) Most provocatively, some scholars use ancient rhetorical precepts and practices as a springboard for revising the concepts of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis themselves. With that, we dive into yet another wave of rhetorical criticism.

Cohesion within Reading Communities: Rhetoric for the Consolidation of Power

Some NT interpretation concentrates neither on ancient poetics nor on classical modes of persuasion. Indeed, for those engaged in “the reinvention of rhetoric,” diachronic pursuit of biblical authors’ intentions is regarded as evidence of “the devastating grip of [historical-critical] positivism in our discipline,” which should yield to the text’s argumentative function for any reader in any age.³¹ Likewise, preoccupation with biblical stylistics is viewed as “the [academic] ghetto,” “the Babylonian captivity” from which rhetorical study must be liberated.³² So what, properly understood, is the role of rhetoric and its criticism? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has proposed one answer:

Whereas the poetic work attempts to create and to organize imaginative experience, rhetoric seeks to persuade and to motivate people to *act rightly*. Rhetoric seeks to instigate a change of attitudes and motivations, and it strives to persuade, to teach, and to engage the hearer/reader by eliciting reactions, emotions, convictions, and identifications. The evaluative criterion for rhetoric is not aesthetics, but praxis.³³

For proponents of so-called New Rhetoric, the seminal work is that of Chaïm Perelman (1912–84) and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1899–1988). In the view of these two theorists, ancient rhetoric offers the modern critic, not so much interpretive norms for repristination, as a foundational if flawed theory to be revised, accenting the inducement or enhancement of an audience’s adherence to particular values by means of various strategies of practical reasoning. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca the key to rhetoric lies in “the social aspect of language,

29. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*. Mitchell’s *Doktorvater* at the University of Chicago, Hans Dieter Betz, has written the most influential Pauline commentary that appropriates the tradition of classical rhetoric: *Galatians* (1979).

30. Thus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*; and esp. Robbins, *New Boundaries*; idem, *Exploring the Texture*; idem, *Tapestry*. In “Rhetoric, Culture, and Ideology,” Bloomquist appraises Robbins’s approach.

31. Botha, esp. 27; see also Thurén, *Rhetorical Strategy*.

32. Wuellner, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 457, 462.

33. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 108.

which is an instrument of communication and influence on others.”³⁴ Thus there is an irreducibly *social* and *practical* thrust to rhetorical criticism: a text’s arguments invite evaluation less in terms of their persuasive intent or logical validity and more with respect to the implied values of their social context and the capacity of those arguments to secure commitment and to motivate action. Similarly, in treatises less systematic and more allusive,³⁵ Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) stresses the capacity of oral and written discourse to induce social cohesion or transformation by projecting comprehensive, symbolic visions of reality.

Of all the currents in rhetorical analysis, the New Rhetoric of Burke, Perelman, and others is most difficult to classify. Among practitioners within the biblical guild, its center of gravity resides in the text’s power to move an audience or community of readers, whether ancient or modern. Grounded in the social experience of reading, the New Rhetoric usually moves beyond aesthetic or historical analysis, deliberately and often eclectically expanding the classical tradition of rhetoric into twentieth-century social psychology, hermeneutics, and semiotics (the study of sign-using behavior). When a rhetorical critic of this stripe explores the intricate creation and subversion of a reader’s expectations by a biblical text, the outcome resembles an ahistorical, reader-response interpretation.³⁶ Nevertheless, other New Rhetorical analyses of the NT exhibit a greater measure of historical interest.³⁷

One such example is Vernon Robbins’s “socio-rhetorical” interpretation of the Second Gospel. Adopting Burke’s perspective and terminology, Robbins explores three stylistic identifications used by Mark in cementing a rapport between the evangelist and his readers: a “conventional form,” portraying the emerging relationship between a teacher and his disciples; “repetitive forms,” which replicate that convention in cycles of relationships within the Gospel narrative; and “progressive forms,” through which the teacher’s character is unfolded in usually logical though sometimes unexpected (or “qualitative”) progression. Robbins deems the Second Gospel a rhetorical success because it perpetuates an image of Jesus and an understanding of discipleship compatible with the ideology of the ancient Mediterranean world.³⁸

34. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 513. Perelman’s interest in rhetoric evolved from his studies of philosophy and jurisprudence; he subsequently pruned and developed his magnum opus in *The Realm of Rhetoric*. By investigating how modern societies publicly reason about values, Perelman returned rhetorical interpretation to its roots in Greco-Roman law.

35. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*; idem, *Rhetoric of Religion*. Crafton (“Dancing of an Attitude”) inquires into Burke’s brilliant yet recondite scholarship. “With a little more help from Burke,” Wudel (“Enticements to Community,” 282) argues, “rhetorical analysis can show how [Matthew’s] Sermon on the Mount employs strategies not only for constituting a community, but [also] for perpetually destabilizing it from within.”

36. E.g., Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss*.

37. To date, Pauline scholars have most ambitiously adopted Perelman’s approach: Siegert, *Argumentation bei Paulus*; Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*.

38. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, 209–13. In “Rhetorical Questions” I assess Robbins’s argument.

Known for a body of work produced over many years, Wilhelm Wuellner (1927–2004) is an exponent of the New Rhetorical approach. While his analyses of NT texts sometimes intersect with the classical tradition, Wuellner’s musings on rhetoric became increasingly impatient with historical questions, instead emphasizing the intrinsically rhetorical constitution of human beings and discourse as a practical exercise of power.³⁹ “Rhetorical criticism,” Wuellner once claimed, “is taking us beyond hermeneutics and structuralism to poststructuralism and posthermeneutics.”⁴⁰ And yet “the verdict is still out on just how successful and profitable the application of rhetorical theory has become in the rebirth of rhetorical criticism in today’s practices of biblical interpretation.”⁴¹

RHETORICAL CRITICISM APPLIED: THREE TRIPS TO A SAMARITAN WELL

By now the attentive reader is probably suffering a methodological migraine. Let’s get down to cases by testing this variegated rhetorical criticism in reading a specific text. A full-blown exegesis of John 4:1–42 is out of the question and for our purposes unnecessary. All that need be proffered here are some appreciative sips of the current vintage and different varieties of rhetorical analysis.

In a Manner of Speaking

Jesus’ comments in John 4 are exchanges in a dialogue with the Samaritan woman, not an uninterrupted oration. Still, for illustrative purposes we can touch on some aspects of a classical approach to rhetorical analysis.

Kennedy’s understanding of “*the rhetorical situation*” (which is not an ancient notion but a modern abstraction)⁴² offers us a useful way of positioning John 4:1–42 in its literary context. If we ask what conditions have created pressure for Jesus’ declarations at this point in the Fourth Gospel, we might recall such things as his departure from Judea and return to Galilee in the wake of controversy (2:13–21) and incomprehension (3:1–21); the (divine?) necessity of his passing through Samaria (4:4; cf. 3:14); attestations of Jesus’ importance from John

39. See Wuellner, “Hermeneutics and Rhetorics.”

40. Wuellner, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 449. Illustrating Wuellner’s assessment are Schüssler Fiorenza, “Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn”; and Goosen, “Rhetoric of the Scapegoat.” Those essays arrive at conclusions almost diametrically opposed to each other, which would doubtless elicit a smile from Jacques Derrida.

41. Wuellner, “Biblical Exegesis,” 512. Important engagements with Wuellner’s scholarship are collected in Hester and Hester (Amador), *Rhetorics and Hermeneutics*.

42. For this concept Kennedy (*New Testament Interpretation*, 34) is indebted to Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation” (1968), whose proposal has predictably come under fire: among others, see Vatz, “Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” (1973); and Brinton, “Situation in the Theory of Rhetoric” (1981).

the baptizer (1:19–35; 3:25–36), from Jesus' own disciples (1:36–51), and from the Gospel's narrator (1:1–18); and the evangelist's reminder that Jesus is prescient in his dealings with people (2:23–25). Within this framework Jesus and the woman's responses to one another are striking. Forthcoming about his identity (4:26), Jesus initiates and sustains with her a theologically serious, educational dialogue (4:7–26). This woman proves to be a quick study: markedly responsive to "the gift of God" (4:10; cf. 3:3–4), she advances so far in her understanding of Jesus' significance (4:9, 11, 19, 29) that by the story's end she bears witness of it to others (4:28–30, 39).

Following Kennedy's lead, one may inquire about *the overriding rhetorical problem* implied by John 4. Most of Jesus' remarks to the woman seem intended, neither to elicit her judgment about past events nor to spur her future action, but rather to clarify her present understanding of some important religious matters (see 4:10, 21–24, 26). The force of Jesus' discourse therefore is primarily epideictic, which admittedly entails for this woman a judicial reconsideration of previously held beliefs as well as a deliberative decision, by the pericope's end, to missionize on the strength of her encounter with Jesus.

The distinctive *style* of Jesus' discourse in John 4 invites exploration by means of classical canons. Once readers have cultivated an ear for it, Jesus' manner of speech in the Fourth Gospel presents one of the most striking differences between John and the Synoptics. Even in English translation the Johannine Jesus' remarks are less terse and conversational, more exalted and almost operatic: "But the hour is coming, and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24; see also 4:13–14, 21–22).⁴³ On Jesus' lips seemingly innocent turns of phrase in John can be galvanized with double entendre: for instance, ὕδωρ ζῶν (*hydōr zōn*, 4:10) can mean "running water" (as the woman takes Jesus' comment, v. 11) but is surely intended by him to suggest "living water" (see also 6:35; cf. Jer. 2:13; Zech. 14:8; Sir. 24:21).⁴⁴ From the Johannine Jesus' utterances flows a heavenly force that rolls over the heads of his earthbound interlocutors (John 4:7–10, 16–18, 31–34). In John 4, as throughout this Gospel, Jesus' speech displays the otherworldly discernment of one who does not originate from this world but transcends it (3:31–32; 6:31–59; 7:35, 46; 8:22–23).⁴⁵

43. Scripture translations are NRSV unless otherwise indicated. My rendering is identified as author translation (AT). First appearances of Greek words are immediately followed by English transliterations.

44. Another example of turbocharged double meaning occurs in John 4:26 with Jesus' acknowledgment of his messiahship: ἐγώ εἰμι, (*egō eimi*), "I am," functions in John's Gospel as an expression of Jesus' oneness with God (see also 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; cf. Exod. 3:14; Isa. 43:10–11, 25; 51:12).

45. Of this I shall say more in chap. 5.

Several stylistic traits are peculiarly associated with religious themes in antiquity: sublimity (ὑψος, *hypsos*), solemnity (σεμνότης, *semmotēs*), and obscurity (ἀσάφεια, *asaphēia*).⁴⁶ In the writings of “Longinus” (first century CE) and others, *sublimity* refers to an inspired form of human utterance that “contains much food for reflection” (*Subl.* 7.3; see also 13.2; 36.1). For Hermogenes of Tarsus (*Per id.* 242.1–246.1) *solemnity* is especially appropriate for expressing general thoughts about the gods and aspects of humanity that intersect with divinity, such as righteousness and the soul’s immortality. Whereas *obscurity* could be regarded as a stylistic fault (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.3.3.1406a), in other contexts (such as pronouncements by the Delphic oracle) ἀσάφεια could be considered appropriate to religion’s mysterious character (thus Demetrius, *Eloc.* 2.101). Since *sublimity* and *solemnity* could be characteristic of the merely wise or noble, these stylistic properties were potentially but not necessarily indicative of proximity to the divine (Philo, *The Worse Attacks the Better* 43–44, 79; Hermogenes, *Per. id.* 246.1–9).

The relationship between these considerations and John’s depiction of Jesus should be obvious. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is recognizably human (1:14; 4:6–7) yet speaks in a way that suggests divinity, according to classical conventions of style. Interlocutors like the Samaritan woman and the disciples are attuned to only the lower level of Jesus’ polyvalent discourse, whose divine nuances are pitched at a frequency inaudible without a boost from God. The exalted tenor of Jesus’ remarks are happily intelligible, however, to one who has read the Gospel’s stylistically similar prologue: John 1:1–18 affords the reader information about Jesus’ transcendent origin, to which the story’s characters (save God and Jesus himself) are not privy. Johannine style attempts to portray “the dialogue between heaven and earth,” and “it is the feature of distortion, perhaps only slight, which is the sign of genuine religious immediacy and creativeness.”⁴⁷

Poetics at Noonday

Considering the rhetoric of John 4 in Muilenburg’s manner invites scrutiny of the text’s bonds and bounds, its internal arrangement and repetitive features. Viewed under this magnifying glass, John’s account of Jesus and the woman at the well exhibits a fugal entwining of (A) request, (B) resistance, (C) explanation, and (D) belief:

A Structural Analysis of John 4:7–42

First Movement: Jesus and an unexpected disciple (4:7–26)

First theme: A taste of eschatological water (4:7–15)

First interchange: Requests for a drink (4:7–10)

- A. Jesus’ request of water from the Samaritan woman (4:7–8)
- B. The woman’s rejection of his request, in the form of a guarded question (4:9)

46. For much of what follows I am indebted to Thielman, “Style of the Fourth Gospel.”

47. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 50–51.

- C. Jesus' response to her rejection (4:10)
 - i. If she were to recognize her interlocutor's identity, (4:10a)
 - ii. she would ask him for a drink (4:10b)

Second interchange: Confusion over "water" (4:11–15)

- B. The woman's misunderstanding of the water mentioned by Jesus (4:11–12)
- C. Jesus' explanation: He speaks of spiritual, not mundane, water (4:13–14)
- A. The woman's request of water from Jesus (4:15; fulfilling 4:10b)

Second theme: A taste of eschatological worship (4:16–26)

Third interchange: Request for the woman's husband (4:16–18)

- A. Jesus' request that the woman call her husband (4:16)
- B. The woman's oblique rejection of this request (4:17a)
- C. Jesus' discerning affirmation of her response (4:17b–18)

Fourth interchange: Confusion over Jesus' identity (4:19–26)

- D. The woman's partial perception of Jesus' identity (4:19–20)
- C. Jesus' explanation: Genuine worship is spiritual (4:21–24)
- D. The woman's leaning toward an accurate identification of Jesus (4:25), which he accepts (4:26; fulfilling 4:10a)

Second Movement: Jesus and his other followers (4:27–42)

Third theme: A taste of eschatological food (4:27–38)

Fifth interchange: Invitations to leave (4:27–30)

- B. Arriving, Jesus' disciples implicitly question the woman's presence (4:27)
- D. Leaving, the woman explicitly invites the city to witness Jesus (4:28–29)
- D. Accepting the woman's invitation, the city leaves in search of Jesus (4:30)

Sixth interchange: An imminent harvest (4:31–38)

- A. The disciples' request that Jesus eat (4:31)
- C. Jesus' explanation: he has food unknown to them (4:32)
- B. The disciples misunderstand the food mentioned by Jesus (4:33; cf. 4:11–12)
- C. Jesus' explanation: He speaks of spiritual, not mundane, food (4:34–38)
 - i. First proverb: No interval between sowing and harvest (4:35–36)
 - ii. Second proverb: The sower's end-time dispatch of the reapers (4:37–38)

Fourth theme: A taste of eschatological knowledge (4:39–42)

- D. The city believes the woman about Jesus (4:39; cf. 4:29)
- C. Accepting the citizens' invitation, Jesus stays in the city (4:40; cf. 4:30)
- D. Because of Jesus' word the city believes "the Savior of the world" (4:41–42)

For all the distortion generated by any outline, the elegant architecture of John 4:7–42 is clear. Obviously, this story oscillates between the themes of drink and worship (in 4:4–26), of food and missionary acclamation (in 4:27–42; cf. 6:1–59). The woman’s and the disciples’ requests, misunderstandings, and partial realizations repeatedly crack open larger theological issues. These, in turn, stimulate an apparent escalation of belief about Jesus, who is addressed as “a Jew” (4:9), “Sir” (4:11, 15, 19), “greater than our ancestor Jacob” (4:12), “a prophet” (4:19), “Messiah” or “Christ” (4:25, 29), “Rabbi” (4:31), and ultimately as “the Savior of the world” (4:42). The text’s internal unity is tightly stitched with many verbal threads: “drink” (πινεῖν [*pinein*] and its cognates: 4:7, 9, 10a, 12, 13, 14); “water” (ὕδωρ [*hydōr*]: 4:7, 13, 14, 15), which soon shades into “living water” (ὕδωρ ζῶν [*hydōr zōn*]: 4:10, 11) and “eternal life” (ζῶην αἰώνιον [*zōēn aiōnion*]: 4:14; cf. also 7:37–38); “worship” (προσκυνεῖν [*proskynein*] and its cognates: 4:20, 21, 22, 23, 24); “seek” (ζητεῖν [*zētein*]: 4:23, 27); “harvest” (θερισμός [*therismos*] and its cognates: 4:35, 36, 37, 38); “believe” (πιστεύειν [*pisteuein*]: 4:21, 39, 41, 42); “truth” (ἀλήθεια [*alētheia*] and its cognates: 4:18, 23, 24, 37, 42).

Muilenburg’s brand of rhetorical criticism is intended to recover a text’s unique features, which have been clothed in a traditional form. John 4 reminds us of a familiar OT type-scene: the betrothal. Whether its characters are Isaac’s servant and Rebekah (Gen. 24:10–20), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29:1–14), or Moses and Zipporah (Exod. 2:15b–21), the betrothal scene unfolds in a predictable though mutable way. Upon leaving his family circle and journeying to a foreign land, a prospective bridegroom encounters a marriageable woman at a well. After water has been drawn and news of his arrival has been hurriedly reported back home, the stranger is invited to dinner. Soon thereafter, the betrothal is consummated. Robert Alter has argued that contemporary audiences of these ancient stories—who were as familiar with their conventions as we are with those of detective mysteries or westerns—would have enjoyed their skillful adaptation: “As is true of all original art, what is really interesting is not the schema of convention but what is done in each individual application of the schema to give it a sudden tilt of innovation or even to refashion it radically for the imaginative purposes at hand.”⁴⁸

In this light John 4:4–42 dances recognizably and mischievously. Indeed, it is a tour de force. All the familiar elements of the betrothal-scene are in play: on leaving his “family circle” (“the Jews” of John 2:13–25; 4:1–3) and journeying to a foreign land (Samaria: 4:4), a “bridegroom” named Jesus (3:29; see also 2:1–11) encounters a woman at a well (4:6–7a). After a request to draw water (4:7b), news of the stranger’s arrival is hurriedly reported back home (4:28–29), and he is invited to stay (4:40). John’s adoption of this ancient *form* intimates the *content* of Jesus’ forthright announcement in 4:22–23: the same God who established the

48. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47–62, esp. 52.

rhythm of Israel's history is the Father of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Yet the Fourth Evangelist has twisted the type-scene to potent theological effect: now it is *Jesus* who gives to those who believe in him "living water, gushing up to eternal life" (4:14 AT). The result is a very different betrothal—not in marriage, but in worship (4:21–24) and in mission (4:35–42).

What Is a Reader to Do?

Since the New Rhetoricians have not yet arrived at a procedural consensus, any attempt to offer a fully representative interpretation of some portion of John 4 from this point of view is hopeless. It is on *general outcome* that the New Rhetoricians tend to concur: because the experience of reading is tethered to the reader's socially situated experience, the fundamental criterion for rhetorical analysis is not aesthetic but practical.

Following Perelman and Wuellner's lead, we begin with the proposition that the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is presented in John for the same purpose as the Gospel's other components: "so that you may come to believe [or "continue to believe"] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). John 4:4–42 induces or enhances belief in these values. Just here in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus does what the Jews will demand of him in 10:24: he plainly acknowledges that he is the Messiah (4:26). Trust that Jesus is the Christ, the agent of indestructible life for the world, is the final destination to which Jesus' discourse is intended to lead, not only for the Samaritan woman and her fellow citizens (4:10, 14, 26, 36, 41–42), but also for the audience of John's narrative.⁴⁹

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca categorize four general techniques of argumentation: (1) quasi-logical arguments, which operate in the domain of common sense; (2) arguments that, by appealing to customary relationships of cause and effect, derive from assumptions about the structure of reality; (3) arguments that seek to establish the structure of reality by extrapolating general principles from particular cases; and (4) arguments that, by dissociating concepts, attempt to reformulate reality and to provoke new understanding.⁵⁰ If we view the conversation presented in John 4:7–26 through this analytical prism, two things become clear. First, *both* Jesus *and* the woman are engaged in rhetorical performance. She is no mute pupil, nor is he the imperious lecturer who entertains no questions from the audience. Here we have *two* interlocutors, the one attempting to persuade the other.⁵¹

49. Okure (*Johannine Approach to Mission*) probes the conjunction of John's rhetoric and missionary interests.

50. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 187–92.

51. So also Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 189, 191, 194.

Second, the woman is inclined toward the first and more deductive set of strategies: use of common sense and cause and effect; Jesus tends toward the second and more inductive pair of techniques: use of general principles and conceptual dissociation. Her comments tend to move in the realm of the obvious (AT: “Mister, you haven’t got a bucket and the well’s deep” [4:11]) and long-standing custom (“You’re a Jew, I’m a Samaritan” [4:9]; “Our ancestors worshiped on Gerizim, you people on Zion” [4:20]). Through the use of oblique metaphors (“the gift of God” [4:10], “running/living water” [4:10], “eternal life” [4:14]), Jesus, by contrast, is making a case for the structure of reality. More than that, Jesus’ argument to the woman—and by implication to the reader—proceeds from and instantiates, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca put it, “another outlook and another criterion of reality,”⁵² namely, the tolling of an hour when God is worshiped “in spirit and in truth” (4:23–24). Ultimately, worship is dissociated from the practice of both Samaritans and Jews (4:21) and is reconceived as praise of God that participates in the transforming energy, mediated by Jesus, that offers access to authentic reality.

The transaction that mysteriously propels the encounter at Jacob’s well beyond rhetorical stalemate involves Jesus’ request for the woman’s husband (John 4:16), her response (4:17), and his rejoinder (4:18). Commentators have fulminated over this exchange and whether it should be taken literally or metaphorically (e.g., as a veiled reference to Samaria’s “adulterous” idolatry [2 Kgs. 17:13–34]). One could as easily ask the same about Jesus’ initial request for a drink (4:7): in both cases the question is a red herring. The central issue is no more the woman’s sexual history than the Samaritans’ alleged apostasy, neither of which the conversation develops. As this story unfolds, the crux is whether Jesus may be trusted as the revealer of the truth about human life and the life of God. That is the concern intimated by the woman’s common-sense and therefore truncated acknowledgment of Jesus as a prophet (4:19), perhaps the Messiah (4:29), “who told me everything I have ever done!” (4:29, 39). The same concern is indicated by the city’s more expansive response to Jesus (4:39–40) and by their conviction, based on unmediated access to his word, “that this is truly the Savior of the world” (4:41–42).

If we accept Wuellner’s proposition that rhetorical analysis entails the critic’s personal and social identification, even transformation, in what such directions does the rhetoric of John 4 lead us? Clearly Jesus is no more disqualified from interaction with the woman because he is a Jew (contrary to her assumption in 4:9) than she is disqualified from conversation with him because she is a woman (contrary to the disciples’ prejudice in 4:27). The egalitarian force of this analysis is inadequately realized by those who have seized Jesus’ statements in John 4:17–18 to castigate the woman’s moral turpitude—about which the text says nothing. And the christological force of this analysis is insufficiently appreciated by others,

52. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 436.

who have claimed the woman's evangelism (4:28–29) to extol her womanhood as such—about which the text is equally silent. If rhetorical interpretation of John 4 exposes our foreshortened presuppositions about race or sex and instead invites us as readers to faith in Jesus Christ as “the Savior of the world,” then such analysis is not only political but also theological in its critical bearing.

SOME RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Is There a Rhetorical-Critical Method?

As described and illustrated here, *how coherent are the different expressions of rhetorical criticism?* Are we dealing with a unified method or with three disparate approaches, each of which styles itself as “rhetorically critical”? No unanimity exists among rhetorical critics themselves. Although the various forms of rhetorical study are reconcilable for some, for others the attempt to blend, say, the classical tradition with a modern, praxis-oriented understanding of rhetoric courts hermeneutical confusion.⁵³

While granting that particular formulations of rhetorical criticism may be philosophically at odds with others, we can conceive the enterprise in a way that coordinates the several approaches we have observed. Heuristically drawing on classical theory, one may consider rhetorical interpretation as a three-legged stool on which many different critics may sit, with each applying more weight to one leg than to the others. Muilenburg's approach leans on *logos*, the structure and style of a biblical text. Kennedy's version, emphasizing authorial intent and technique, inclines toward the text's underlying *ēthos*. Perelman's stress on a text's reception by its audience recalls the rhetorical dimension that the ancients characterized as *pathos*. I see no reason, in principle, why biblical interpreters may not tilt the critical stool in whichever direction their interests dispose them. One could radically theorize the stool's redesign by sawing off any two of its legs that seem nonsupportive of one's particular interests. The result would then be a wobbly stool, on which a reader would find it hard to maintain interpretive balance. For that reason the current multiformity of NT rhetorical criticism is a healthy development, whose effect overall is to equilibrate its various tendencies, restraining the potential of each for exegetical distortion.

The rest of this book evinces comparable variety. Chapters 2 and 6 veer in the direction I have associated with Wilder and Booth, adopting a formalist approach for studying literary characterization in the Gospel of Matthew and the Acts of the Apostles. Chapters 4, 5, and 7 address particular questions

53. Contrast, e.g., the procedures of Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 63–87; and Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 1–19.

prompted by Luke, John, and Acts that classical rhetoric seems to me best equipped to answer. Adhering to Kennedy's method, a full-dress analysis of a speech in Mark's Gospel is offered in chapter 3. Four very different voices—those of Jonah, Paul, Luke, and Augustine of Hippo—are assembled in chapter 8 for a conversation on homiletics. Chapter 9 inquires of an ancient theorist, Quintilian, for suggestions in contemporary preaching. In effect, this volume constitutes a colloquy within a kind of New Rhetorical framework, "baptized" into the service of Christian theology and practice. A *modus operandi* so wide ranging may stimulate methodological purists to weep and gnash their teeth. Others, I hope, may find pleasure in rhetorical criticism's flexibility and canonical purview.

Is Rhetorical Criticism Compatible with Historical Criticism?

Theorists also dispute this question. For some, rhetorical criticism complements traditional analyses of the NT. For others, historical research and rhetorical study are impassably divided by a big ugly ditch.⁵⁴

Some expressions of rhetorical criticism may be impossible to harmonize with a historical frame of reference. Nevertheless, I regard historical and rhetorical inquiries as fundamentally cooperative, not contesting. Philosophically, most forms of historical and rhetorical criticism presuppose a shared model of communication that attempts to triangulate (1) the intent of an author (2) in formulating a text (3) that forms or informs a reader.⁵⁵ It should be recognized, moreover, that all interpretive approaches to the Bible are by-products of intellectual traditions and other cultural influences; even the most adamantly ahistorical brands of rhetorical criticism are *themselves* historically conditioned. I cannot imagine a well-rounded rhetorical analysis of a NT text that could altogether ignore its historical characteristics and assumptions. Much of the rhetorical force of John 4 turns on awareness of ancient aversions—of some rabbis toward protracted conversation with women (cf. v. 27) and of Jews and Samaritans toward one another (cf. v. 9)—that are irrecoverable apart from historical reconstruction.⁵⁶

54. Contrast the assessments of Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3–12, 157–60; and Stamps, "Rhetorical Criticism." Controversy now rages over the degree to which rhetorical study of the Bible ought to be historical or ideological in orientation. See Porter and Stamps, *Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture*, 27–151.

55. Compare the analogous conclusion drawn by de Boer, "Narrative Criticism, Historical Criticism."

56. Relevant primary texts are considered in Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*, 232–33, 240.

What Are the Drawbacks of Rhetorical Criticism?

Each type of rhetorical study has its peculiar liabilities. Common to all forms of rhetorical criticism—to all interpretive strategies, for that matter—is a tendency among some practitioners to absolutize the insights of their favored approach and to lose clear sight of the text itself. For rhetorical critics this danger typically manifests itself in the imposition of some ideal construct—be it a chiasmic structure, or classical taxonomies of invention, or a theory of the irreducibly rhetorical character of human behavior—on a particular biblical passage or book that resists such preset patterns. Sensitivity to the multiple dimensions of NT texts and their interpretation, which this volume intends to encourage, remains the best safeguard against all sorts of “cookie-cutter criticism,” rhetorical or otherwise.⁵⁷

What Is Gained by Rhetorical Criticism?

In the academic marketplace of ideas, the study of rhetoric is a proven site for exchange among biblical interpreters of many methodological allegiances: historical critics and literary analysts, linguists and social scientists, philosophers and theologians.⁵⁸ For biblical teachers and preachers, rhetorical criticism offers a lively forum in which the complex dynamics of religious discourse may be considered. From its beginnings Christian proclamation has necessarily availed itself of reasoned argument and stylistic conventions; yet preaching has indulged neither in logic nor in aesthetics for its own sake. The prime movers of the early church were the *ēthos* of Christ and the *pathos* of a Spirit-imbued life. Creatively fusing form and content, the church’s *kerygma* was designed to construe Christian experience, to express its power, and to persuade others of its truth. When rhetorical criticism assists in clarifying these aspects of the NT, it illumines the text to be interpreted as well as the challenge of its modern interpreters.

57. This warning is sounded in Meyer’s trenchant review (1981) of Betz, *Galatians*. In *Ancient Rhetorical Theory* R. D. Anderson argues that Galatians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians do not exhibit, nor do they intend to execute, the kind of argumentation that a hypothetical professor of rhetoric, contemporaneous with Paul, would have reckoned as convincing. Because the apostle’s arguments do not measure up to ancient canons, application of rhetorical theory to his letters is severely limited and in some cases irrelevant (see esp. 28, 144, 166, 205, 238). It seems to me that Anderson is generally correct in what he affirms (a too-hasty assumption, by some, of Paul’s reliance on rhetorical theory) and often wrong in what he denies (a fair degree of rhetorical effectiveness in Paul’s Letters, which ironically surfaces from Anderson’s own treatment). See my review (1997) of Anderson’s study.

58. Beyond biblical studies, rhetorical research continues to stimulate philosophers and theorists of communication: see Herrick, *History and Theory of Rhetoric*, 194–266; S. Foss, K. Foss, and Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*.