
Since the publication of Robert Alter’s work *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, biblical studies have seen an explosion of literature on literary approaches to Scripture. In conjunction with this increased attention to literary concerns has been the appropriation and reapplication of approaches such as form, source, and redaction criticism. Yet another area that has garnered interest is genre study. In *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, David Aune, Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Xavier College, takes up this task of genre study and attempts “to compare the literary genres and forms found in the New Testament with those of the literary cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly Hellenism” (12).

**Summary**

Aune organizes his genre appraisal into seven chapters. He devotes two chapters each to the Gospels (1-2), Luke-Acts (3-4), and epistles (5-6) respectively, and concludes his work in chapter seven with the apocalypse of John. Aune begins in his introduction with a brief explanation of literary genres. He suggests that they are not “neutral containers” that one can use for convenient packaging of material, but rather “they are social conventions that provide contextual meaning for the small units of language and text they enclose” (13). With this understanding in mind, Aune can begin his survey.

In chapter one, Aune argues that the canonical Gospels are ancient biographies of Hellenistic form and Jewish content (22). Aune notes that the biographer has many choices available to him in the task. These choices relate to content, form, and function. With respect to content, one can choose between fact or fiction, serious or comic, praise or blame, didactic or entertaining, and approval or disapproval. Each of these choices reflects a hierarchy, and each
choice present additional options (34). With respect to form, one can choose between continuous or episodic narrative, chronological or topical, elevated or popular diction, and periodic or paratactic style (35). Finally, with respect to function, Aune highlights both conscious and unconscious. The conscious functions are epideictic, deliberative, or forensic, which reflect concerns with present, future, or past action respectively. Unconscious functions include historical legitimation or discrediting of social beliefs or value systems (35). In chapter two, Aune then attempts to legitimize his claim for categorizing the Gospels as ancient biography based on intrinsic and extrinsic evidence (46). He goes on to argue that “the primary vehicles for biographical characterization in the Gospels, as in Greco-Roman biography, are miracle stories, sayings, and anecdotes” (57). The Gospels’ function can then be properly understood as persuasive literature, specifically “Christian literary propaganda” (59).

Chapters three and four deal with Luke-Acts. Chapter three begins by asserting that Luke-Acts is best understood as general history written by a Hellenistic historian with Greek rhetorical training (77). Aune focuses in this chapter on both Hellenistic and ancient Israelite historiography, even adding a section on Hellenistic Jewish historiography (e.g. 1-2 Maccabees) before comparing Luke-Acts to the conclusions in these sections. In chapter four, Aune looks at the literary features and function of Acts and Apocryphal Acts, arguing that Christian tradition was combined with the form and function of fiction “to provide a new vehicle for the entertainment and edification of ordinary Christians in late antiquity” (153).

Chapters five and six then move on to epistolary literature. In chapter five, Aune notes how the letter is both the most popular and the most problematic genre in early Christianity because of its variety and flexibility (159). Most of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of various conventions common to the epistle, namely prescript, formula *valetudinis* (health wish),
proskynema formula (prayer), closing greeting (aspazesthai wish), and closing formulas (163-164). In chapter six, Aune applies formal literary analysis, thematic analysis, rhetorical analysis, and form criticism to the epistolary literature of both the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers (183). The latter part of the chapter is devoted to placing the various epistles into one of the categories discussed earlier in the work (e.g. 1 Thessalonians as paraenetic letter, Galatians as deliberative letter, etc.).

Finally, Aune concludes with a survey of the apocalypse of John and other ancient revelatory literature. Aune structures this chapter according to apocalyptic eschatology, apocalypticism and millennialism, apocalypse, and apocalyptic imagery (227). Aune then concludes with brief looks at the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and various Gnostic apocalypses.

**Critical Evaluation**

Aune has provided a helpful survey of where the New Testament fits in the literary world of the first century A.D. Aune gives adequate support and clear argumentation for most of his points, and he is particularly successful at showing Matthew and Mark as examples of ancient biography and Acts as historiography.

One particularly interesting feature of Aune’s work is the chapter by chapter bibliography. One significant strength of this approach is that the reader is immediately aware of the sources that pertain to that discussion. Even more specifically, Aune provides a bibliography for each of the subtopics in the chapter. For example, the bibliography for chapter one (under the heading of “For Further Study”) includes bibliographies on Greco-Roman biography, genre of the Gospels, Gospels as Greco-Roman biography, and Israelite-Jewish biography. Within each of these shorter bibliographies is yet further delineation, for example giving general sources,
Josephus, and Philo under the heading of Israelite-Jewish biography. This type of breakdown is extremely helpful to the reader who wishes to pursue one of the specific topics Aune discusses. In most works, the bibliography extends page after page at the end of the work and the reader is forced to comb through the names of authors and works to seek aid in further research. However, one drawback of Aune’s approach is that he does not provide footnotes to these sources as he refers to them. Thus, if one is interested in a specific point, he or she will be unsure which source to consult for the information desired.

There are, however, more significant weaknesses that arise in the work. One glaring issue is the way that Aune quickly diverges from his stated goals. For example, Aune writes that “the purpose of this book is to compare the literary genres and forms found in the New Testament with those of the literary cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly Hellenism” (12). Yet only two pages later, Aune suggests “since the content of the canon was determined by ecclesiastical decisions based mainly on theological considerations, any study of the literary character of the New Testament writings cannot reasonably exclude a discussion of early non-canonical Christian literature” (14). Why must this be the case? First, it seems reasonable to base a literary study of the New Testament on the accepted canon of over 1500 years. This does not mean it is necessarily wrong to include non-canonical materials, but it is by no means unreasonable to begin with the accepted canon as a starting point. Additionally, while Aune may have good arguments for his understanding of the formation of the canon, he gives none of them here. Such an absence is problematic because many others have written extensively on the formation of the New Testament canon, many of them concluding that there was a recognized, authoritative group of writings that would later become the canon by as early as 180-200 A.D. Some of the works he discusses, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter*, were written so close to this
date that it is unlikely that it was ever recognized in the same light as the rest of the New Testament Scriptures. It does not seem necessary, then, to include discussion of it since it occurred after the time of the New Testament writings. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with the inclusion of some of these non-canonical works in the discussion, it seems reasonable to be critical of Aune’s decision to include them without any other defense.

Another weakness of Aune’s work is a similar lack of defense for a point about the need to treat Luke-Acts as a single work. He writes, “Luke-Acts must be treated as affiliated with one genre” (80). Though he later defends this point (116-117), he does not do so at this juncture. In waiting for nearly forty pages to defend this point, the reader may question some of his conclusions on account of a disagreement with this necessary conjunction of the two. Related to this issue is the lack of a discussion regarding how Luke, which is so close in content and form to Matthew and Mark, could be of an entirely different genre. While Aune does eventually defend the reasons for reading Luke-Acts as a single genre, one would expect him to anticipate and address the problem of assessing different genres to Luke and the other two synoptic Gospels.

Aune has other weaknesses as well that vary in degree depending on one’s perspective. For example, some would reject the Gospel of Q, though Aune references it without discussion as a certainty. Given the general scholarly acceptance of Q, this is not much of an issue. However, what does seem to be an issue is that he seems to allude to the exhaustive narrative contents of Q when he writes, “Q contains just three narrative units” (52). While it may be legitimate to assume Q for his audience, and it may be possible to argue what is certainly in Q, it does not seem responsible to then argue that one knows that Q only (“just”) contains those three narratives.
Finally, one further issue will demonstrate how Aune leaves many issues underdeveloped. With respect to the authorship of John and Revelation, Aune states that it is not the same John who authored both. His argument is that it is “unlikely stylistically” (240). However, Aune’s entire work is about the different genres the New Testament authors used to convey their message. His association of the Gospel of John with ancient biography and Revelation with apocalypse clearly highlights the problem. His discussion of ancient biography and apocalypse show few similarities on account of the fact that they are vastly different genres. Would one really expect, then, that an author who wrote one work as an ancient biography and another as an apocalypse would use the same style? It seems too weak an argument to base one’s doubts on common authorship on the stylistic differences, given the dramatic genre shift.

**Conclusion**

Aune’s work does present certain strengths that are valuable when doing genre studies on the New Testament. The ways in which New Testament books fit into the categories of ancient biography, general history, various types of epistles, and apocalypse may be helpful for assessing the text from a literary perspective, though Aune lacks any substantive comments on its significance. Despite some of these strengths, Aune’s work has numerous disappointing weaknesses ranging from insufficient defense of points to confusing conclusions. For those who need an introduction to literary genre and some helpful directives toward related literature, this book is helpful. However, for those who are looking for a more convincing appraisal and the significance of genre studies for New Testament scholarship, this book will likely disappoint.