

¹Christian Cartography: Mapping Biblical Literature and Theology with Kevin Vanhoozer

Antony Billington

‘Theology is a species of Biblical cartography, a study of the ways in which the various verbal maps of the Bible refer to, and render, reality.’²

LEANING OVER SHOULDERS

When those interested in literary theory and those interested in theology gather together, Kevin Vanhoozer is an important guest to have along. His published works to date have combined elements of critical theory, philosophy, Biblical hermeneutics, and Christian theology, and they anticipate further constructive theological work. The reflections that follow can’t even claim to be carried out from the vantage of standing on his shoulders. The scene is rather of someone *leaning over* shoulders (not too rudely, one hopes), seeing a little of what is going on, enjoying it, and wanting to pass it on to others for their own consideration.

We will begin by setting a context with a summary outline of Vanhoozer’s fullest volume so far, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*. We will then set a still larger context by highlighting current interest in the relationship between Biblical studies and theology, to which Vanhoozer has contributed. Since we want to focus particularly on his proposals regarding the speech-act significance of Biblical genres for theology, we will move to consider these areas before reflecting, finally, on some possible significances for theology. Juggling these diverse topics will not be easy, but the request is to see what can be learned from one who *does* put on a good performance, and to encourage yet further dialogue between the areas.

ORIENTATION

The Big Picture: Is There a Meaning in This Text?³

The bulk of Vanhoozer’s volume is divided into two parts. Part One – ‘Undoing Interpretation: Authority, Allegory, Anarchy’ – sets up the discussion in its three chapters (1) Undoing the Author: Authority and Intentionality; (2) Undoing the Book: Textuality and Indeterminacy; (3) Undoing the Reader: Contextuality and Ideology. Part Two – ‘Redoing Interpretation: Agency, Action, Affect’ – answers to Part One in its three chapters: (1) Resurrecting the Author: Meaning as Communicative Action; (2) Redeeming the Text: the Rationality of Literary Acts; (3) Reforming the Reader: Interpretive Virtue, Spirituality, and Communicative Efficacy.

The literary relationship between author, text, and reader thus dominates the discussion, and the answer to the question posed in the title is (a carefully qualified) ‘yes’. Vanhoozer seeks ‘to articulate and defend the possibility . . . that readers can legitimately and

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² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Mapping Evangelical Theology in a Post-modern World’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22, 1 (1998), pp. 5-27, here p. 16.

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Leicester, Apollos, 1998. All references to the volume will be placed in parentheses in the main text. Briefer ways in to Vanhoozer’s concerns can be found in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology: What’s Theological about a Theological Dictionary?’, in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1997, pp. 15-50, and ‘Exegesis and Hermeneutics’, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, Leicester, IVP, 2000, pp. 52-64.

responsibly attain literary knowledge of the Bible . . . that there *is* meaning in the text, that it can be known' (24). Even so, 'reading is never straightforward', and 'the kind of literary knowledge that emerges at the end of this study . . . will be one that is chastened, not absolute' (25).

With regard to the *author*, Vanhoozer argues for 'hermeneutic realism'. Authorial intention is based on the notion of the author as a communicative agent; to describe meaning is to describe the author's intended action. With regard to the *text*, Vanhoozer argues for 'hermeneutic rationality'. Texts are communicative acts, not dumb objects, or mirrors in which I see only myself or my community. The 'literal sense' of the text requires a 'thick description', in which we seek to do justice to the dimensions of linguistics, genre, and canon. With regard to the *reader*, Vanhoozer argues for 'hermeneutic responsibility'. In reading, we are called not to play or create, but to cultivate 'interpretive virtues', to encounter an 'other' that calls us to respond to and 'follow' the text.

Vanhoozer contends that the current crisis in hermeneutics is *theological*, and he seeks to expose the theological presuppositions which underlie debates about interpretation. His exploration of 'meaning' begins with the triune God, with the creation of human beings in his image, and with language as his gift for communion in covenant relationship. Throughout, he dialogues with philosophers and critical theorists, and he takes in current topics of discussion in Biblical interpretation along the way – always stimulating and helpful.

The Bigger Picture:

Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Meaning in Texts

One of the ongoing frustrations of undergraduate students studying theology in some institutions is the way lecturers 'pass the buck' ('pass the baton' might be a more sympathetic turn of phrase!) when it comes to relating the various disciplines in the curriculum. So, when questioned how some aspect of Old Testament theology relates to New Testament concerns, students are sometimes told: 'That's the job of the New Testament department. . . .' The New Testament department, in their turn, when questioned about the move from 'what it meant (then)' to 'what it means (now)' invite students to ask the systematic theologians ('Haven't you covered that in your Christology module?' or some such thing). By the same token, lectures in doctrine or ethics or pastoral theology rarely touch base with what goes on in Biblical studies modules. To be fair, it's not always the fault of the lecturers; it's more the constraints of a curriculum which for several hundred years, aided by Enlightenment thinking, has separated out Biblical studies and systematic theology, producing a gap between 'Scripture' and 'doctrine', with few attempts made by one camp to dialogue with the other.

But there have been signs of an awakening. A significant and growing number of scholars are actively working on ways of 'spanning New Testament studies and Systematic Theology' – as the subtitle of one recent collection of essays indicates.⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer has contributed to this discussion, but his work here has gone largely unnoticed – which is a shame, since his approach has much to commend it and arguably fills an important gap in some formulations. He contends:

'The gulf currently separating Biblical from systematic theology can be bridged by better appreciating the contribution of the diverse Biblical genres, and a focus on literary genre could do much to relieve the ills currently plaguing both their houses.'⁵

⁴ Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept: "Same" and "Other" in the Relation Between Biblical and Systematic Theology', in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, 2 (1994), pp. 96-124, here p. 96.

Any who seek to base Christian theology on the Bible, and endeavour to integrate theology into a system of some sort, run the risk of overlooking the fact that Scripture comes to us in different literary genres. Furthermore, from speech act theory comes the insight that texts do more than convey truth; they rebuke, lament, praise, sing, complain, instruct, make a promise, pronounce forgiveness, tell a story, and so on. Vanhoozer undertakes a 'Biblical poetics' in which the theology of the Bible is described not in terms of etymology or history or experience, but in terms of its *literature*, its 'word views', where Biblical texts are described not merely at the linguistic level but also at the *literary* level.

Before we come to this, however, it will be helpful to set his treatments of genre and speech acts against wider discussion.

GENRE: CLASSIFICATION, COMMUNICATION, CONTEXT

'How one approaches an object of study depends, in large part, on the nature of the object to be known. . . . One does not study the moon with a microscope or Monet's 'Water Lilies' with a stopwatch' (336).

A recent 'Longman Critical Reader' provides an overview of the changing fortunes of genre theory from romanticism through to the most recent developments.⁶ Space forbids a rehearsal here, but we may caricature the interlinked concerns as embracing *classification*, *communication*, and *context*.

Vanhoozer briefly defines 'genre' as a 'species of literature' (336) and, acknowledging the few dissenting voices, an interest in genre as classification can be traced from Aristotle to Northrop Frye. Alastair Fowler, however, writes that 'there is no doubt that genre primarily has to do with communication', that it is 'an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning'.⁷ E.D. Hirsch is perhaps most well known for expounding the claim that 'all understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound',⁸ and evangelical scholars have drawn on Hirsch in Biblical hermeneutics. In line with much of this, Vanhoozer describes genre as a 'rule-governed form of social behavior', with meaning located 'in rule-governed interpersonal interaction' (337).

Since the 1980s, a number of theorists, working from different perspectives, have exploited the notion of genre for understanding the social and functional dimensions of language use *in context*. Genre is here seen as a 'social strategy' embodied in a discourse for use in a particular rhetorical situation – an insight which has arguably become *de rigueur* in the disciplines of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cultural studies, gender studies, film theory, and pedagogy, to name a few. Among other things, the focus is on social *action* – what texts *do* first and foremost, rather than what they *say*. A letter, a joke, an advertisement, or a memo is seen as a rhetorical *action* which takes place in a particular context. Similar concerns regarding the performance of texts in particular contexts are at stake in discussions of speech act theory, to which we now turn.

DOING THINGS WITH TEXTS

Speech acts and literary genres

Even a cursory overview of Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* indicates the prominence of speech act theory; his chapter on 'resurrecting the author' (201-80) draws

⁶ David Duff (ed.), *Modern Genre Theory*, Longman Critical Readers, London, Longman, 2000.

⁷ Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1982, p. 22.

⁸ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967, p. 76.

especially on the work of J.L. Austin and John Searle. Texts are speech acts performed by authors, which have locution, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect.

Vanhoozer notes that Austin and Searle focus mainly on spoken sentences, but that others have applied speech act theory to literature (210). It's hardly surprising, then, that he returns to speech act theory in his discussion of genre (335-50). He points out how some approaches (such as New Criticism) focus on the locutionary aspect of genre (its form and structure), while others (such as reader-response critics) focus on its perlocutionary effects on readers. He argues, however, that 'a true description of a literary act must focus on what the author is doing with a genre', and 'that means specifying illocutions' (340).

'The concept of genre, I suggest, describes the illocutionary act *at the level of the whole*, placing the parts within an overall unity that serves a meaningful purpose. It follows that genre is the key to interpreting communicative action. It is not enough to know the meaning of words; one must have some sense of the illocutionary point of the whole utterance' (341).

Vanhoozer argues for a correlation between a text's genre and a text's illocutionary force, which suggests we should think not only about how things are done with words, but how things are done with large chunks of discourse!

This a contentious move, of course, not least because Austin himself excluded literature from his range of enquiry; but a number have sought to define literature from a speech-act perspective, and Vanhoozer highlights the potential significance of their work.⁹ More recently, along such lines, Michael Kearns considers 'the dominant role played by context in every linguistic interaction'.

'To my knowledge there is no theory . . . that draws on narratology's tools for analyzing texts and rhetoric's tools for analyzing the interplay between texts and contexts in order better to understand how audiences experience narratives. To fill this gap I'm proposing a rhetorical narratology that is grounded in speech-act theory and thus considers narrative from the perspective of the socially constituted actions it performs: narrative as "doing" as well as "saying."' ¹⁰

Speech acts and Biblical genres

A relatively small, but significant, number of writers has approached Biblical books from this perspective. Dietmar Neufeld offers a reading of the Christological confessions and ethical exhortations in 1 John, describing the illocutionary force of 1 John as 'confessing Christ'. Ronald Thiemann's study on Matthew's gospel as 'narrated promise' concludes it has the illocutionary force of making a promise of salvation through Jesus Christ. Derek Tovey has also applied insights from Lanser to John's gospel, seeking to establish the intent of the gospel – that the reader will have life in the name of Jesus.¹¹

Vanhoozer has applied speech act theory to areas of theology (notably to the doctrine of Scripture, but also to personhood, testimony, and the relation between God and the world).

⁹ He refers (p. 268, n. 45) to Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981; Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, London, Routledge, 1990; Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977.

¹⁰ Michael Kearns, *Rhetorical Narratology*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, pp. ix and 2.

¹¹ Dietmar Neufeld, *Reconceiving Texts as Speech Acts: An Analysis of 1 John*, Biblical Interpretation Series 7, Leiden, Brill, 1994; Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1985; Derek Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel*, JSNTS 151, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, esp. pp. 69-115.

But it is to Biblical theology that he has made a potentially crucial contribution. He only suggests this in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*

‘[L]iterary forms may have their own characteristic illocutionary forces: wisdom (“commending a way”), apocalyptic (“displaying the *end* of the world,” “exhorting”), psalm (“celebrating a created world,” “addressing God”). And the various literary forms, taken together as Scripture, may on the canonical level have yet another illocutionary force: “proclaiming God’s salvation”; “testifying to Christ.” These are only approximations, for genres too have rough edges. Much work needs to be done on this level of discourse, a level that, I believe, has great potential in aiding the recovery of Biblical theology’ (342).

And he adds in a note that a study of literary genre ‘best mediates the concerns of Biblical and systematic theology’ (364, n. 310). But it is in an earlier essay that he more fully explores Biblical theology as a ‘poetics of revelation’, based on literary genres, and forming a bridge between ‘canon’ (Biblical theology) and ‘concept’ (systematic theology).¹² It is these considerations to which we now turn.

BIBLICAL GENRES AND THEOLOGY: SOME REFLECTIONS

It’s not that genre isn’t familiar territory in the broader theological curriculum. The application of genre considerations to *Biblical interpretation*, for instance, has been considerable at a semi-popular level.¹³ Genre has also been exploited in the area of *preaching*, where the form of Biblical texts is seen as carrying implications for how they are to be preached.¹⁴ Similarly, some have sought to show how methods of *counselling* can be shaped by Biblical genres.¹⁵ Genre recognition has perhaps been particularly fruitful in the area of *Biblical ethics*, where narrative and poetic texts have been increasingly considered alongside passages considered to have explicit moral content.¹⁶

When it comes to the significance of genre for *theology*, however, material is conspicuous by its relative absence. And it is here that Vanhoozer’s work promises to fill a significant gap. He offers the analogy of maps:

‘Think of the various Biblical genres – prophecy, apocalyptic, hymn, narrative, law, etc. – as different kinds of maps. Each map highlights certain features of the world more than others and accomplishes different tasks: informing, warning, encouraging, commanding, assuring, etc. Each genre has its own ‘key’ and ‘scale.’ The ‘key’ explains what a text is about. Just as different maps highlight different aspects of reality (e.g., roads, geological characteristics, historical events), so different literary genres select and attend to some aspects of reality more than others. Similarly, each genre has its own ‘scale,’ that is, its own conventions for thinking and its own manner of fitting words to the world’ (343).

Some theologians, he claims, have not taken sufficient account of Scripture’s ‘modes of expression’, seeing them as ‘wrapping paper to be torn off in one’s haste to get to the proposition inside the package’. But we should be ‘instructed on the way language is used in various language games or literary genres’, and note that ‘the canon contains a number of such “games” wherein we learn to use concepts such as “God”, “sin”, and “salvation”

¹² Vanhoozer, ‘From Canon to Concept’, pp. 111-12.

¹³ E.g. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, London, Scripture Union, 1993 2nd edn.

¹⁴ E.g. Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1989.

¹⁵ E.g. Donald Capps, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counselling*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1981.

¹⁶ E.g. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996.

correctly'.¹⁷ 'The Biblical narrative maps out divine action in history; Biblical law maps out God's will for human behavior; Biblical prophecy maps out the privileges and responsibilities of God's covenant people; Biblical wisdom maps out how persons are to fit into God's created order, etc.'¹⁸

So, the different genres are compared to different maps, and theology is likened to cartography, knowing how to work with maps – a study of the ways in which the various maps of the Bible refer to and render the reality of God. Biblical theologians seek to coordinate the Biblical maps with one another, while systematic theologians seek to coordinate the Biblical maps with the contemporary world, 'in a conceptual framework that will be intelligible for people today'.¹⁹ In doing so, conceptual forms will necessarily be used (e.g., in formulating a doctrine of the Trinity), but theology must attempt to do justice to the *Biblical* terrain. Thus, 'Biblical theology is seen as a poetics of Biblical revelation whose task it is to . . . [describe] the grammars of Biblical literature; systematic theology relates the canonical language games with one another on a deeper, conceptual level . . . to coordinate these different perspectives on reality with one another and to bring them to bear on ourselves and our world'.²⁰

Such an approach suggests possible significances for the task of theology, and we conclude by outlining just four for further reflection.

(1) *A focus on the Biblical-theological implications of genre would compel us to undertake careful generic identification and analysis of Biblical passages and books, with the acknowledgement that all the Biblical 'maps' render the reality of God, the world, and humanity truly – albeit in different ways.*

Most of the work in Biblical studies has centred on the *identification and classification* of Biblical genres and forms, with comparative work being prominent. The assumption in all such studies is that correct genre identification is crucial for the interpretation and appropriation of a text. Thus, while it's conventional to regard Hebrews as a letter, in 13:22, it's called a 'word of exhortation', which appears to have been a designation for a sermon in early Christian circles. Such an identification may carry implications for reading its warnings and encouragements. If the vision of the renewed temple in Ezekiel 40-48 is classified as 'territorial rhetoric' – defining area, communicating boundaries, controlling access, and asserting Yahweh's claim as the only king of Israel – then it is not seeking to offer a blueprint for architects and builders.²¹ The parody and reversals, crownings and uncrownings, along with the sense of play and the relativising of stable structures in the book of Esther have suggested to at least one critic that the book is an early example of 'literary carnivalesque' (à la Bakhtin).²² If we assume Leviticus is merely a collection of commands and prohibitions, our reading strategy will be different from a view which sees the book as a literary masterpiece, *showing* things rather than explaining them.²³

And so the list could go on. The sheer variety of literary genres demands a certain literary sensitivity and competence. And for the theologian, paying attention to literary forms may go some way to preventing arbitrary proof-texting from various parts of Scripture with no thought for the *generic* (not to mention the *canonical*) context.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept', pp. 101-102.

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, 'Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology', p. 49, n. 103.

¹⁹ Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept', p. 114.

²⁰ Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept', pp. 119-20.

²¹ See Kalinda Rose Stevenson, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40-48*, SBLDS 154, Atlanta, Scholars, 1996.

²² Kenneth M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1995.

²³ So Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

But this is not merely a *literary* approach to Scripture, for genres can be reality-depicting; there is a fit ‘between words and the world’:

‘Typically, maps single out only some properties or features of the total object domain. Moreover, the way maps refer to the world varies, sometimes quite radically. We have only to compare a road map, for instance, with a historical atlas or a geological survey to see how maps can differ while still referring to the world. In the same way, texts need not all correspond to reality in a one-to-one fashion’ (348).

Different genres engage readers and render reality in different ways; there may be different expectations from different texts regarding the reader’s role. ‘Open’ texts, such as narrative and poetry, may invite readers to work with the author to render the text meaningful, or to be guided in the filling of ‘gaps’. Given the sorts of texts some other texts are, such as the New Testament letters, themselves rooted in historical contexts, it will be necessary to seek to do justice to extratextual factors. This encourages us, with Vanhoozer, to maintain an emphasis on determinate meaning (however qualified), and take seriously historical reference (where appropriate).

(2) *A focus on the Biblical-theological implications of genre would seek to do justice to the ‘aesthetics’ of Biblical literature, giving place to the role of metaphor and imagination, and not reducing Biblical forms to the merely conceptual.*

What is in mind is not simply a book-by-book treatment of Biblical themes which is not *at the same time* sensitive to the function of different genres. Some studies which offer themselves as ‘theologies’ of the Old and New Testament frequently approach theology as if themes can be read off the text without regard for literary form.

Others are more self-conscious of genre considerations. Generally overlooked in Old Testament theology is the overview by Jesper Høgenhaven who proposes that a summarising description of Old Testament theology be structured around the principal literary genres.²⁴ Rodney Duke, likewise, advocates ‘a type of theological exegesis that attempts to be sensitive to how the genre of historical narrative communicates meaning in accord with . . . its rhetorical functions’. Where theology has been carried out regardless of genre, formulating propositional statements, doing word studies, identifying a centre, etc., Duke urges theological exegesis to be more ‘genre-sensitive than it generally has been, before one seeks a final synthesis of theological meaning’.²⁵ Such an approach seeks to prevent theology from substituting itself in place of the Biblical text – to prevent narrative (in this case) from being translated into some other mode of cognition.

Similarly, commenting on 2 Corinthians and the form of theology, Frances Young and David Ford write:

‘Most theology is discursive – systematic or philosophical or historical theology, doctrinal statements, essays, commentaries and so on. The features of 2 Corinthians . . . are very hard to express effectively in discursive form.’²⁶

They continue:

²⁴ Jesper Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology*, The Biblical Seminar 6, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1987.

²⁵ Rodney K. Duke, ‘A Model for a Theology of Biblical Historical Narratives Proposed and Demonstrated with the Books of Chronicles’, in *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes*, eds. M. Patrick Graham, William P. Brown, and Jeffrey K. Kuan, JSOTS 173, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pp. 65-77, here pp. 66 and 69.

²⁶ Frances M. Young and David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, Biblical Foundations in Theology, London, SPCK, 1987, p. 236.

‘A letter, on the other hand, can embody the relationship and the mutuality. Paul has a close if painful relationship with the Corinthians and the theology of the letter can indicate how God is intrinsic to that relationship and is himself well characterized in relational terms. The genre of the letter proves irreplaceable for theology.’²⁷

Doctrine should not exercise imperialism over literary form. Moreover, the Christian theologian ought to recognise the ‘pluralism of genres’.²⁸ Biblical genres should not be isolated from one another in the task of theology.

(3) *A focus on the Biblical-theological significance of genre would allow (literary) diversity in the canon to stand alongside any (narrative) unity proposed, showing the necessity of utilising the ways all the Biblical genres render reality.*

There can be no doubt that powerful voices in contemporary theology have sought to make narrative the prominent and privileged Biblical genre. And rightly so – in some ways! It should hardly go without saying that the Bible is not made up of timeless commands or abstract theological truths, but is primarily a *story*, stretching from creation to consummation, within which other parts – law, prophecy, wisdom, psalms – find their place in illuminating the significance of the story and showing the direction in which it is moving. Even Paul’s letters have not escaped the ‘narrative’ brush, with a number of scholars arguing that his theological ideas and practical exhortations are grounded in a *story*, much of which has been told in the Old Testament, which comes to a climax in the story of Christ, out of which then flows the story of Christians.²⁹

Such emphases are well and good, but exclusive attention on narrative may result in a ‘canon within the canon’ to the detriment of *other* genre-based ways of construing theology. So, for instance, on the doctrine of revelation, Ronald Thiemann argues that revelation has to do with God’s identity rendered in the Biblical narrative: God is identifiable in and through narrative as the one who raised Jesus from the dead.³⁰ The Christian doctrine of revelation is undoubtedly more comprehensive than his treatment suggests (he says little about creation, history, tradition, natural theology, etc.). But a more important criticism, for our purposes, is that *there is more to the Bible than narrative discourse, and hence more to a Biblical doctrine of revelation than one based on narrative alone*. Thiemann’s theology of revelation, with its central focus on Biblical narrative, effectively marginalises other Biblical genres. By contrast, Paul Ricoeur has explored the significance of the Bible’s diverse genres for reflecting on revelation. Biblical literature does not present a single concept of ‘revelation’; rather, the diverse forms make different claims to revelatory significance, and we see ‘a *variety* of expressions of faith, all modulated by the variety of discourses within which the faith of Israel and then of the early church is inscribed’.³¹

Along similar lines, a number of Biblical scholars have drawn on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to reflect on the polyphonic nature of Biblical discourse. Walter Brueggemann’s recent *Theology of the Old Testament*, for instance, makes much of the plurivocal quality of

²⁷ Young and Ford, *Meaning and Truth*, pp. 236-37.

²⁸ Young and Ford, *Meaning and Truth*, p. 237.

²⁹ See, e.g., Ben Witherington, III, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1994; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, London, SPCK, 1992, pp. 403-409.

³⁰ Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (see n. 10 above).

³¹ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation’, *Harvard Theological Review* 70, 1-2 (1977), reprinted in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge, London, SPCK, 1981, pp. 73-118, here p. 75.

the Scriptures, with their claim and counterclaim, testimony and countertestimony.³² Whilst not in agreement with all the features of this broad movement, Vanhoozer encourages evangelical theologians to capitalise on postmodernity's critique of modernity's propensity to elevate the conceptual form, by recovering the authority and function of *all* the Biblical forms. The literary diversity of the canon needn't be reduced to 'sameness'; we attempt to coordinate the genres with each other – without ignoring their differences. Thus, with regard to sin:

'God's law allows us to recognize instances of sin. The narratives, especially the highly condensed account of early human history in Genesis 4-11, show the rapid spread and universality of sin that spoils human relationships. The Psalms give us insight into the psychological dimensions of sin, for instance the sense of shame and the sense of guilt. They also remind us of the vertical dimension of sin: sin is ultimately against God. The prophets show that nations and peoples can be judged by God's Word as well as individuals, and that God is less interested in external conformity to the law than in heartfelt obedience. The wisdom literature shows sin as foolishness, for nothing is more fruitless than trying to deny the very created order which sustains one's being. Apocalyptic literature depicts sin as a supramundane power that will be ultimately defeated only by God. Lastly, the epistles expose sin as a power and corruption that has been defeated by Christ and which no longer has a hold over those who are in Christ. The canonical forms say more together than they do separately, and systematic theology ignores any one of them to its peril.'³³

Hence, one of the profoundest ways for Christians to do theology and to engage with contemporary issues is to do so from the perspective of thinking which not only embraces and indwells the entire scriptural story, but which does justice to its different voices. A Biblical theology of *suffering* will have to allow for the wisdom reflections in Job and Ecclesiastes, for the anguished cries in Lamentations, for prophetic oracles describing vicarious suffering in Isaiah 40-55, for expressed hopes in the face of persecution in Daniel and Revelation, as well as for the Biblical metanarrative extending from creation (and fall) to consummation (and the eradication of evil and pain). A Biblical theology of *sexuality* will have to do justice to the *celebration* of sexuality in the poetry of Song of Songs, to the *circumscribing* of sexuality in the legislation in Leviticus and the letters, to the *contemplation* of sexuality in Proverbs, and so on – all within the context of the Biblical story stretching from creation (with Adam and Eve) to new creation (with the wedding supper of the lamb and his bride). Only so will we be able to address the needs and aspirations of contemporary culture without assimilating those needs and aspirations to a tamed text.

Whether in regard to sin, suffering, or sexuality, then, it behoves Christian theologians to consider how all the Biblical genres shape the way we view God, the world, and ourselves as his image-bearers.

(4) *A focus on the Biblical-theological implications of genre would seek to encourage the practical 'performance' of the different genres in the life of the Christian community.*

Nicholas Lash, for instance, avers that 'for different kinds of text, different kinds of activity count as the fundamental form of their interpretation', and that 'there are at least some texts that only begin to deliver their meaning in so far as they are "brought into play" through interpretive performance'.³⁴

³² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997.

³³ Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept', pp. 120-21.

³⁴ Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', originally published in 1982 in *The Furrow*, and reprinted in his *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, London, SCM, 1986, pp. 37-46, here pp. 40 and 42.

The privileged genre in this area of consideration is (again!) narrative. N.T. Wright uses the analogy of an unfinished Shakespeare play whose missing fifth act is 'performed' by the church, the actors who immerse themselves in the story of the first four acts (Creation – Fall – Israel – Jesus) and who work out a fifth act for themselves on the basis of what's gone before.³⁵ Similarly, Frances Young makes the point that the relationship between the text and the interpreter can be understood by analogy with the relationship between a musical score and a musician. The variety of literary genres in Scripture can be compared with a classic repertoire in music or drama. Just as interpretation of the repertoire takes account of the *diversity* of musical genres, so interpreters of the Bible need to take notice of the literary genres contained in Scripture, and 'each genre . . . will have its proper mode of performance'.³⁶

Such themes have been a significant part of Vanhoozer's writings. The interpretation that counts most is one's 'performance' of the text.

'It is not enough to be able to read maps, or even to believe that they lead to eternal life. We are called to be not only hearers and readers, but ministers and doers of the Word. A map is useful only when it is followed. Take up your book and walk! . . . Are Christians living according to the intention of the Biblical texts? Are they performing gospel, living as though they had died and risen again with Christ? Are they performing parables, living lives oriented to the kingdom of God? Are they performing law, living lives that conform to God's will?'³⁷

As such, the Christian life is shaped by the Biblical canon – law, wisdom, poetry, apocalyptic, prophecy, gospel, and epistle – literary forms which constitute Christian theology, identity, and practice in the contemporary world.

³⁵ Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, pp. 139-43.

³⁶ Frances M. Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990, p. 27.

³⁷ Vanhoozer, 'Mapping Evangelical Theology', pp. 20, 22.