

1. The Tradition of Rhetorical Practice and Study

Indeed, if the study of rhetoric appears innovative to modern biblical interpreters, then that is surely symptomatic of 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 are themselves exquisite testimonies of the bard's own oratorical craft. By the fifth century BCE the Sicilian teachers Corax and Tisias, among others, had compiled technical handbooks on rhetoric for the use of ordinary Greek citizens in political assemblies and courts of law. Gorgias (ca. 480-375 BCE) and Isocrates (ca. 436-338 BCE) refined the sophistic approach to rhetoric, that is, 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 is evident in some dialogues of Plato (ca. 429-347 BCE; see, in particular, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*); 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 and sciences and to dialectical logic in particular.

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 the essence of secondary education, which prepared Roman citizens for advancement in public life.² Although it is impossible (and needless) to demonstrate that Jesus, the earliest apostles, or the authors of the Gospels received formal education in rhetoric, undeniably they were born into a culture whose everyday modes of oral and written discourse were saturated with a rhetorical tradition, which was 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 evident and easier to document during the patristic period, conspicuously in the Greek sermons of John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) and of the great Cappadocians (Gregory of Nazianzus [ca. 329-389], Basil of Caesarea [ca. 330-379], and Gregory of Nyssa [ca. 330-395]). Of the eight most notable Latin fathers of the church, three (Hilary of Poitiers [ca. 315-367], Ambrose [ca. 337-397], and Jerome [ca. 342-420]) were thoroughly schooled in rhetoric, while five (Tertullian [ca. 160-225],

2. See Donald L. Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York: Columbia University, 1957).

Notice: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

13. Rhetorical Criticism

C. CLIFTON BLACK

As prophesied some years ago by Wilhelm Wuellner,¹ a tidal wave of rhetorical studies is pounding NT journals, conferences, and bibliographies. Its force is tsunamic and shows no signs of imminent ebb. For the uninitiated this must surely seem bizarre, since the "rhetoric" to which our television and newspapers commonly alert us is, in the words of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (2d ed., 1987), "the undue use of exaggeration or display; bombast." If this is what NT exegetes 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, in speech or in writing, to persuade others — whether from the pulpit or the Op-Ed page, in a term paper or around the kitchen table — there you will find rhetoric employed. As we will be using the term here, therefore, rhetoric generally bears on those distinctive properties of human discourse, especially its artistry and argument, by which the authors of biblical literature have endeavored to convince others of the truth of their beliefs.

Notice: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

1. Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" *CBQ* 49 (1987) 448-63, esp. 452-53.

Cyprian [d. ca. 258], Arnobius [d. ca. 330], Lactantius [ca. 240-320], and Augustine [354-430]) had been professional rhetoricians before their conversion to Christianity.³

Not only did the study of rhetoric pervade the early Christian tradition; it also enriched the medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment academic legacy of which modern theological students are beneficiaries. As barbarism fell like night on Italy, Cassiodorus Senator (ca. 490-585) helped to keep aflame the study of rhetoric and the other six liberal arts (grammar, dialectic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music) from his monastery at Vivarium.⁴ During the European Renaissance and Reformation the renewal of biblical criticism and the recovery of Ciceronian rhetoric fit hand-in-glove in the work of such humanists as Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406-1457), Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536), Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560), and John Calvin (1509-1564). 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, albeit fitfully, into the early twentieth century, as illustrated by the dissertation of the young Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)⁵ and the grammar of NT Greek created by Friedrich Wilhelm Blass (1843-1907), which remains the standard work in its field.⁶ Indisputably, the exercise and conceptualization of classical rhetoric has exerted profound impact, not only on the writings of the NT, but also on successive centuries of NT study.

3. As noted by George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980) 146. To Augustine belongs the credit for first drawing the implications of rhetorical theory for Christian belief and practice, hermeneutics, and homiletics. See *On Christian Doctrine*, The Library of the Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

4. Cassiodorus Senator, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*, ed. and trans. Leslie Webber Jones (New York: W. W. Norton, 1946, 1969). See also James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974).

5. Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*, FRLANT 13 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1910). Bultmann's study has been refined by Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBLDS 57 (Missoula: Scholars, 1981).

6. Friedrich Wilhelm Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961 [first German edition, 1896]).

2. Major Currents in Rhetorical Criticism

As suggested by the preceding differentiation of its technical, sophistic, and philosophical varieties, orators and their analysts have never completely agreed on how rhetoric should be defined. A similar multiformity, if not confusion, characterizes current rhetorical analyses of the Bible. Much as "literary criticism" has been applied to so broad a field of interpretive strategies that the label arguably deserves retirement from overwork,⁷ "rhetorical criticism" is a sometimes cumbersome expression that describes a range of kindred yet distinguishable approaches to biblical exegesis.

2.1 Rhetorical Analysis as Study of the Bible's Literary Artistry

Among both OT and NT scholars the term "rhetorical criticism" is almost indissolubly 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 and issued 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 the life of Israel, Muilenburg argued for the 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 paid to the author's intention, historical context, and distinctive blending of form and content.⁸

In NT research the writings of Amos Niven Wilder (1895-1993) approximate Muilenburg's understanding of biblical rhetoric. Like Muilenburg's, Wilder's approach to biblical texts was historically grounded, regard-

7. During the past forty years alone, "literary criticism" has been used to refer to reconstruction of sources; analysis of poetic structure; study of a narrative's genre, plot, or characters; psycho-anthropological decoding of a text's "deep structure"; post-modernist deconstruction of a text by an individual or community of readers; and a great many other things besides. Richard Coggins, "Keeping Up with Recent Studies X: The Literary Approach to the Bible," *ExpTim* 96 (1984) 9-14, offers help in unraveling this methodological tangle.

8. James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 4-8.

ing the study of their modes of discourse as complementary to historical criticism of biblical traditions. Also like Muilenburg, Wilder abjured separations between 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 are governed by specific social and religious patterns.⁹ More than Muilenburg, Wilder probed the phenomenological dimensions of biblical rhetoric, the ways in which human existence is experienced and interpreted through religious discourse.¹⁰

Whether Muilenburg and Wilder were the progenitors of a definable school of rhetorical interpretation is debatable. It is easier to assess the degree to which they reopened some convergent avenues of research into biblical rhetoric that have ended up veering appreciably from their own approaches. Typical of much scholarship 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 attention paid to its metaphorical, stylistic, and structural features.¹¹ This mode of rhetorical criticism frequently melts into so-called New Criticism, the method of choice among North American literary critics of the 1940s and 1950s.¹² At the point where it prescind from considering the historical and social location of biblical texts and their authors' intent, rhetorical criticism of this kind diverges from Muilenburg's or Wilder's own interpretive inclinations.

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

It may be that Muilenburg's and Wilder's historical interests are more deliberately fulfilled in the work of the North American classicist George A.

9. Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1964) 25-26.

10. Among other works, see Wilder's *The New Voice: Religion, Literature, Hermeneutics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), and compare Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen but Unobserved Relationship," *QJS* 65 (1979) 347-63.

11. See, for instance, Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6*, SBLDS 48 (Chico: Scholars, 1980).

12. Thus Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2d ed., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983). David Rhoads and Donald Michie are among the many biblical interpreters who mine this vein of biblical rhetoric; see their *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). Consult also, in the present volume, the discussion of narrative criticism by Mark Allan Powell.

Kennedy (1928-). For Kennedy, rhetoric refers not so much to "literary artistry" as 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 NT exegesis, his accessible presentation of classical concepts has probably been the most influential among English-speaking scholars.¹³

Kennedy's method of rhetorical criticism can 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. An attempt is made, second, to define the rhetorical situation, that is, 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, the primary rhetorical problem addressed by the discourse is identified. Kennedy suggests two classical frameworks within which this identification can be made: One may pinpoint the *stasis* or specific question at issue (which, as Kennedy argues, 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 the audience of the discourse is asked to render: whether it is a *judicial* assessment of past circumstances (for instance, the character of Paul's early ministry in Corinth, to which much of 2 Corinthians refers), a *deliberative* reckoning of actions that might be expedient or beneficial for the listeners' future performance (thus the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7), or the *epideictic* instillation and enhancement of particular beliefs or values in the present (for example, Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in John 14-16).

Consideration of the arrangement (*taxis*) of the parts into a unified

13. George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina, 1984) 10. Kennedy's approach is based on ancient rhetorical handbooks that are all available, with English translation, in the LCL: Aristotle's *The "Art" of Rhetoric*; Cicero's *De inventione*; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (of disputed authorship); and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.

discourse is the fourth of Kennedy's critical steps. Compared with the structure of deliberative and epideictic address, judicial oratory displays the most elaborate conventional arrangement: an introductory *proem*, followed by the *narration* of background information, the *proposition* to be proved, the *proof*, a *refutation* of contrary views, and a concluding *epilogue*. The fifth step is analysis of the invention and style of the discourse. Invention (*heurēsis*) pertains to the crafting of arguments based on proofs: *ēthos*, the persuasive power of the speaker's authoritative character (cf. Mark 1:22); *pathos*, the emotional responses generated among the 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 "figures of thought." Sixth, reviewing the whole analysis, the critic evaluates the unit's rhetorical effectiveness.

To date, rhetorical criticism in this classical mode has stimulated so much NT research that this research defies easy summary. Nevertheless, some basic avenues are discernible. One, notably pursued by Duane F. Watson,¹⁴ is the intensive application of Kennedy's six-stage method to various canonical documents (usually epistles). Second, and perhaps most fruitful to date for interpreting the Gospels, is the study of *chreiai*, that is, didactic anecdotes, the nonbiblical counterparts of which were developed by Hermogenes of Tarsus (late second century CE) and other rhetoricians for training pupils in composition and orations.¹⁵ Third, as exemplified by Margaret M. Mitchell's constructive argument for the unity of 1 Corinthians,¹⁶ classical rhetoric has been employed to throw fresh light on some longstanding questions of NT exegesis. Fourth, classical rhetoric has been adopted by theorists who aim to reformulate tradition-historical forms of interpretation like form criticism.¹⁷ Fifth, and perhaps most provocatively,

14. Representative of Watson's several investigations is his *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter*, SBLDS 104 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

15. Consult Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels*, FF: Literary Facets (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989). Generations of North American children have been schooled in honesty through a modern *chreia* popularized by Parson Weems: young George Washington's confession that he had chopped down a cherry tree.

16. Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

17. Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1984).

ancient rhetorical precepts and practices are used by some scholars as a springboard for revising the concepts of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis themselves. And with that, we are led into yet another mode of rhetorical criticism.

2.3 Rhetoric Appraised as an Instrument for the Consolidation of Power and Cohesion within Communities of Readers

Another rhetorical strain of NT interpretation concentrates neither on ancient poetics nor on classical modes of persuasion. Indeed, for some engaged in "the reinvention of rhetoric," diachronic pursuit of the intentions of biblical authors 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.¹⁸ Similarly, narrow preoccupation with biblical stylistics is viewed as "the [academic] ghetto," "the Babylonian captivity" from which rhetorical study must be liberated.¹⁹ 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 right*. Rhetoric seeks to instigate a change of attitudes and motivations, 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.²⁰

For proponents of so-called New Rhetoric, the seminal work is surely that of Chaim Perelman (1912-1984) and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. In the view of these two theorists, ancient rhetoric offers the modern critic not so much interpretive norms to be repristinated 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

18. Jan Botha, "On the 'Reinvention' of Rhetoric," *Scriptura* 31 (1989) 14-31, here 27; Lauri Thüren, *The Rhetorical Strategy of 1 Peter, with Special Regard to Ambiguous Expressions* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis, 1990).

19. Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" 457, 462.

20. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 33 (1987) 386-403, here 387.

social aspect of language, which is an instrument of communication and influence on others."²¹ Thus there is an irreducibly *practical* and *social* thrust to rhetorical criticism: A text's arguments are to be evaluated 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, though in treatises less systematic and more allusive, 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.²²

Of all the currents in rhetorical analysis, the New Rhetoric of Burke, Perelman, and others may be the 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 such areas as 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 may resemble an ahistorical, reader-response interpretation.²³ Nevertheless, other New Rhetorical analyses of the NT exhibit a greater measure of historical interest.

Wilhelm Wuellner (1927-) is known for a body of work produced over many years and may be considered an exponent of the New Rhetorical approach. While his analyses of NT texts typically intersect with the tradition of classical rhetoric, increasingly his musings on rhetoric seem impatient with historical questions, instead emphasizing the intrinsically rhetorical constitution of human beings and the role of discourse as a practical exercise of power.²⁴ In Wuellner's own words, "Rhetorical criticism is taking

21. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969) 513.

22. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950); *idem*, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970).

23. See, e.g., Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel*, SBLDS 82 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). Consult also, in this volume, the chapters on discourse theory and theories of reading by Joel Green and Kevin Vanhoozer.

24. See, e.g., his "Hermeneutics and Rhetorics: From 'Truth and Method' to 'Truth and Power,'" *Scriptura Special Issue* 3 (1989) 1-54.

us beyond hermeneutics and structuralism to poststructuralism and post-hermeneutics."²⁵

3. Rhetorical Criticism Applied: Three Trips to a Samaritan Well

Let us put this variegated rhetorical criticism to the test in reading John 4:1-42. A full-scale analysis of this material is obviously out of the question. Fortunately, for our purposes so complete an examination is unnecessary. All that can and need be accomplished here are some appreciative tastings of the current vintage and different varieties of rhetorical analysis.

3.1 *In a Manner of Speaking*

Jesus' comments in John 4 are exchanges in a dialogue with a Samaritan woman, not an uninterrupted oration. To subject this discourse to all six of Kennedy's rhetorical-critical questions would probably be unwise, even if such interrogation could be accommodated in this essay. Still, we can profitably touch on some aspects of a traditional approach to rhetorical analysis.

Kennedy's understanding of "*the rhetorical situation*" (which, as such, is not a classical notion but a modern abstraction)²⁶ offers us a useful way of positioning John 4:1-42 in its literary context. So if we ask what conditions have created pressure for Jesus' declarations at this point in the Fourth Gospel, we might recall such things as (1) his departure from Judea and return to Galilee, in the wake of controversy (2:13-21) and incomprehension (3:1-21); (2) the (divine?) necessity of his passing through Samaria (4:4; cf. 3:14); (3) attestations of Jesus' importance from John the baptizer (1:19-35; 3:25-36), Jesus' own disciples (1:36-51), and the Gospel's narrator (1:1-18); and (4) 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. Jesus is forthcoming about his identity (4:26) and initiates and sustains with her a theologically serious and educational dialogue (4:7-26). For her part, she proves to be a quick study: Markedly responsive to "the gift of God" (4:10; cf. 3:3-4), she ad-

25. Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" 449.

26. For this concept Kennedy is indebted to Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968) 1-14.

vances 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* or issue 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 religious matters of fundamental importance (see especially 4:10, 21-24, 26). The force of Jesus' discourse is, therefore, 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). On Jesus' lips seemingly innocent turns of phrase in John can be galvanized with double entendre. For instance, ὑδὼρ ζῶν (*hydōr zōn*, 4:10) can mean "running water" (as the woman takes Jesus' comment, v. 11) but is surely intended to suggest "living water" (see also 6:35; cf. Jer 2:13; Zech 14:8; Sir 24:21).²⁷ 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 ch. 4, as throughout the Gospel, Jesus' speech displays the other-worldly discernment of one who does not originate from this world but transcends it (cf. 3:31-32; 6:31-59; 7:35, 46; 8:22-23).

Several stylistic traits are peculiarly associated with religious themes in antiquity: sublimity (*hypsos*, *hypsēgoria*), solemnity (*semnotēs*), and obscurity (*asapheia*, *obscuritas*).²⁸ In the writings of "Longinus" (first

27. Another example of supercharged double meaning occurs in 4:26 with Jesus' acknowledgment of his messiahship: ἐγὼ 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).

28. For the following observations I am indebted to Frank Thielman, "The Style of the Fourth Gospel and Ancient Literary Critical Concepts of Religious Discourse,"

century CE) and others, *sublimity* refers not to refined locution but to an inspired form of human utterance that "contains much food for reflection" (*On the Sublime* 7.3; see also 13.2; 36.1). For Hermogenes (*On Types* 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 (e.g., Aristotle *Rhetoric* 3.3.3), in other contexts (such as pronouncements by the oracle at Delphi) *asapheia* could be considered appropriate to religion's mysterious character (so Demetrius *On Style* 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 *On Types* 246.1-9).

The relationship between these considerations and John's depiction of Jesus should be obvious. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus, while recognizably human (1:14; 4:6-7), speaks in a way suggestive of 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, the divine nuances of which are pitched at a frequency that is inaudible without a boost from God. The exalted tenor of Jesus' remarks is satisfyingly intelligible, however, to one who has read the stylistically similar prologue to the Gospel, since John 1:1-18 affords the reader information about Jesus' transcendent origin, to which the story's characters (except God and Jesus himself) are not privy. As Amos Wilder has observed, 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."²⁹

3.2 Poetics at Noonday

Considering the rhetoric of John 4 in the manner of Muilenburg invites scrutiny of the text's bonds and bounds, its internal arrangement and repetitive features. Viewed under this magnifying glass, John's account of

in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson, JSNTSS 50 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 169-83.

29. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 50-51.

Jesus and the woman at the well exhibits a fuguelike 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)
- C. Jesus' response to her rejection (4:10)
 - i. Were she 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' misunderstanding of 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 what the woman says 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 remains clear. Obviously, the story oscillates between the themes of drink and worship (in 4:4-26) and 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 finally “the Savior of the world” (4:42). The text’s internal unity is tightly stitched with numerous verbal threads: “drink” (πίνεin [*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” (ζωὴν αἰώνιον [*zōēn aiōnion*], 4:14; cf. 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” (πιστεῦειν [*pisteuein*], 4:21, 39, 41, 42), and “truth” (ἀλήθεια [*alētheia*] and its cognates, 4:18, 23, 24, 37, 42).

Muilenburg’s brand of rhetorical criticism, we should recall, intends to recover a text’s unique features, which have been clothed in a traditional form. And so we are reminded that John 4 replicates a familiar type-scene from the OT, 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 from the well and news of his arrival has been hurriedly reported to the woman’s home, the stranger is invited to dinner. Soon thereafter, the couple is betrothed. 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 been gratified by 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.”³⁰

In this light John 4:4-42 dances recognizably and mischievously, even stunningly. All of 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 from the well (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: that the same God who established the rhythm of Israel’s history is the Father of Jesus and of 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). The result is a very different betrothal — not in marriage but in worship (4:21-24) and mission (4:35-42).³¹

3.3 What Is a Reader to Do?

Since the New Rhetoricians have apparently not yet reached a consensus on method, any attempt to offer a representative interpretation of some portion of John 4 from this subdisciplinary point of view is surely hopeless. It is on *general outcome* that the New Rhetoricians tend more evidently to concur: Because the experience of reading is tethered to the socially situated experience of a reader, the fundamental criterion for rhetorical analysis is practical, not aesthetic.

Following the lead of Perelman and Wuellner, we might begin with the proposition that the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is presented in John for essentially 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 is explicitly concerned to induce or to enhance belief in precisely 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 ultimate destination to which Jesus’ discourse is intended to lead not only the Samaritan woman and her fellow citizens (4:10, 14, 26, 36, 41-42) but also the audience of John’s narrative.³²

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

31. For a closer inspection of textual echoes that reverberate between the Testaments, see ch. 11 above.

32. The conjunction of John’s rhetoric and missionary interests is probed by Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42*, WUNT 2/31 (Tübingen: Mohr: 1988).

30. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 47-62, here 52.

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.³³ If we view the conversation described 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 not the speechless pupil, nor he the imperious lecturer who will entertain no questions from the audience. Here we have *two* interlocutors, the one attempting to persuade the other.³⁴

Second, the woman is inclined toward the first, more deductive set of strategies, common sense and cause and effect; Jesus tends toward the second, more inductive pair of techniques, pertaining to general principles and dissociation of concepts. Her comments tend to move in the realm of common sense ("Sir, you haven't got a bucket, and the well's deep" [4:11]) and longstanding 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 is, by contrast, 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,"³⁵ 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). Oceans of ink have been spilled over the question of whether this exchange is to be taken literally or symbolically (for example, 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): The question, in both

cases, may be a red herring. Ultimately the central issue is no more the woman's sexual history than the Samaritans' alleged apostasy (neither of which is developed in the conversation). As the story unfolds, the crux of the matter is whether Jesus may be trusted as the revealer of the truth about human life and the life of God. This is the concern intimated by the woman's common-sense (and therefore contracted) 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 the proposition of Wuellner, among others, that rhetorical criticism entails the personal and social identification, even transformation, of the critic, in what such directions might 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 interchange with him because she is a woman (contrary to the disciples' assumption in 4:27). Arguably, the egalitarian force of this rhetorical analysis has been insufficiently appreciated by those readers who, for instance, have seized on Jesus' statements in John 4:17-18 to castigate the woman's moral turpitude (about which the text is altogether silent). Arguably, as well, the christological force of this rhetorical analysis has been insufficiently appreciated by other commentators who have seized on the woman's evangelism (4:28-29) to extol her womanhood as such (about which the text is equally mute). If rhetorical interpretation of John 4 exposes the lack of faith attaching to our 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.

4. Some Rhetorical Questions

4.1 *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"? At present no unanimity exists among rhetorical critics themselves. Al-

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

34. So also Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 189, 191, 194. See below, ch. 17.

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

though 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.³⁶

While granting that particular formulations of rhetorical criticism may be philosophically at odds with others, we can conceive of the enterprise of rhetorical criticism in a way that responsibly coordinates the several approaches that we have observed. Heuristically drawing on classical theory, one might consider rhetorical interpretation a three-legged stool, one 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 the text's reception by an audience recalls that dimension of rhetoric described by the ancients as *pathos*. I see no reason, in principle, why biblical interpreters may not tilt the critical stool in whichever direction their interests incline them. I suppose that one could go further, in theory, and advocate a radical redesign of the stool by sawing off any two of its legs that seem nonsupportive of one's particular interests. In that case the result would be a very wobbly stool, on which it would be hard for any reader to maintain interpretive equilibrium. For this reason, the current multiformity of NT rhetorical criticism is probably a healthy development, the overall effect of which is to balance its various tendencies and to restrain the potential of each for exegetical distortion.

4.2 Is Rhetorical Criticism Compatible with Historical Criticism?

This question, too, is disputed among theorists. 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.³⁷

Some expressions of rhetorical criticism may indeed be impossible to harmonize philosophically with a historical frame of reference. It seems to

36. Contrast the procedures of Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, FF (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 63-87; and Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 1-19.

37. Contrast the assessments of Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3-12, 157-60; and Dennis L. Stamps, "Rhetorical Criticism and the Rhetoric of New Testament Criticism," *JLT* 6 (1992) 268-79.

me, however, that historical and rhetorical inquiries are, at root, cooperative and not contesting. Philosophically, most forms of historical and rhetorical criticism known to me presuppose a shared model of communication that attempts to triangulate (1) the intent of an author (2) in the formulation of a text (3) that forms or informs a reader.³⁸ It should also be noted that all interpretive approaches to the Bible are byproducts of intellectual traditions and other cultural influences; hence even the most adamantly ahistorical brands of rhetorical criticism are themselves historically conditioned. Practically, it is hard for me to imagine a well-rounded rhetorical analysis of a NT text that could completely 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) — and these are irrecoverable apart from historical reconstruction.³⁹

4.3 What Are the Drawbacks of Rhetorical Criticism?

Each type of rhetorical study has its peculiar liabilities, some of which I have mentioned. Common to all forms of rhetorical criticism (and to all interpretive strategies, for that matter) is a tendency among some practitioners to absolutize the insights of their favored approach and, in the process, to lose clear sight of the text itself. For rhetorical critics this danger often manifests itself in the imposition of some ideal construct — whether it be a chiasmic structure, classical taxonomies of invention, or a theory of the irreducibly rhetorical character of human behavior — on a particular biblical passage or book that resists all such preset patterns. Sensitivity to the multiple dimensions of NT texts and their interpretation, which this volume is intended to encourage, remains the best precaution against all sorts of "cookie-cutter criticism," rhetorical or otherwise.⁴⁰

38. An analogous conclusion has been drawn, in another connection, by M. C. de Boer, "Narrative Criticism, Historical Criticism, and the Gospel of John," *JSNT* 47 (1992) 35-48.

39. Relevant primary texts are discussed by C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 232-33, 240.

40. This warning is sounded in a trenchant review of Hans Dieter Betz's commentary on Galatians by Paul W. Meyer (*RelSRev* 7 [1981] 318-23, esp. 319). Betz's work is referred to in the bibliography below.

4.4 What Is Gained by Rhetorical Criticism?

In the academic marketplace of ideas, the study of rhetoric has proven to be a site for lively exchange among biblical interpreters of many methodological allegiances: historical critics and literary analysts, linguists and social scientists, philosophers and theologians. For biblical teachers and preachers, rhetorical criticism may also offer a forum in which the complex dynamics of religious discourse are considered. From its beginnings Christian proclamation has necessarily availed itself of reasoned argument and stylistic conventions; yet preaching has indulged in neither logic nor 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 the Christian experience, to express its power and to persuade others of its truth. To the degree that rhetorical criticism helps to clarify these aspects of the NT, it illumines the text to be interpreted and challenges its modern interpreters.

5. Suggestions for Further Reading

5.1 Surveys and Theoretical Essays

The history of rhetoric is perceptively summarized by George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980). Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft* (3d ed., Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990), is the standard modern handbook in the field, systematic in presentation and encyclopedic in scope. As a reconsideration of the classical tradition, the monograph by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969), has proved important. Adopting a broad definition of their topic, Duane F. Watson and Alan J. Hauser tabulate thousands of investigations of biblical rhetoric in *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method*, BibIntS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

5.2 Surveys of New Testament Rhetoric

James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1-18, and Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1964), are landmark statements that fostered the twentieth-century renaissance of biblical literary criticism. Some implications of the recovery of classical rhetoric have been explored in George Kennedy's influential introduction, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984). Wilhelm Wuellner, "Hermeneutics and Rhetorics: From 'Truth and Method' to 'Truth and Power,'" *Scriptura Special Issue* 3 (1989) 1-54, is the fullest presentation of that scholar's New Rhetorical approach. A useful survey of the critical landscape, illustrated with brief analyses of biblical texts, is provided by Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

5.3 Rhetorical Analyses of New Testament Writings

As its components have been characterized in this essay, the spectrum of NT rhetorical criticism is represented in three book-length treatments of Paul's letters. Indebted to Wilder's approach is Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), which also considers the parables of Jesus. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), is, to date, the most important recent commentary on a Pauline epistle to have appropriated the tradition of classical rhetoric. Explicitly predicated on the judgments of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca is Antoinette Clark Wire's attempt to infer the activity and theology of women prophets in the Corinthian church: *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).