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## Changing Perceptions of Genre in Biblical Studies

One of the major accomplishments of modern biblical scholarship has been the clarification of the conventions that shape biblical literature and the expectations that are appropriate to it. To a great degree, this is a matter of clarifying the *genre* of the biblical text.<sup>1</sup> On the most obvious level, popular reading of the Bible has often suffered from excessive literalism, and a failure to appreciate signals in the text that a story is fanciful or symbolic – the garden of Eden with its talking snake, and Jonah’s adventures in the belly of the whale are obvious examples. The study of forms and genres is associated especially with the movement of form-criticism pioneered by Hermann Gunkel.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars would now agree that form-criticism was taken to an extreme by Gunkel’s successors, who tried to assign every pericope to a specific form.<sup>3</sup> But the recognition of different kinds of literature, and the distinction of major categories of biblical literature is a fundamental part of biblical interpretation.

In recent years, however, there has been growing resistance to generic classification. The most highly publicized case has involved the wisdom literature, which has been the subject of an obituary,<sup>4</sup> but the tendency was also in evidence in a recent conference on apocalypticism.<sup>5</sup> This resistance is not peculiar to biblical studies; on the contrary, biblical studies is somewhat belatedly affected by a broader cultur-

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<sup>1</sup> J. BARTON, *Reading the Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study*, Louisville, KY 1984, 16-19.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. K. KOCH, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method*, New York 1969; G.M. TUCKER, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia, PA 1971.

<sup>3</sup> The series *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, edited by R.P. KNIERIM, G.M. TUCKER and M.A. SWEENEY, Grand Rapids, MI 1981– was designed to provide a form-critical analysis of every unit in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>4</sup> W. KYNES, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”. The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus*, Oxford 2019; M. SNEED (ed.), *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, Atlanta, GA 2015.

<sup>5</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Enoch Seminar/LMU Munich Congress on Apocalypticism in Antiquity, organized by L.T. Stuckenbruck, May 23-27, 2021 (on-line).

al phenomenon. Already 200 years ago Friedrich Schlegel dramatized the issues on his *Dialogue on Poetry*, where a character called Markus defended the concept of literary genre against one Amalia, who argued that categorization kills the spirit and imagination.<sup>6</sup> For much of the twentieth century the regnant approach to genre was taxonomic. Texts were classified and assigned to genres on the basis of identifying characteristics. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, there was growing dissatisfaction with this kind of approach, due in part to the rise of post-structuralism and reader-response approaches, which emphasize the role of readers in assigning genres to texts. As Carol Newsom put it, «classificatory systems are by their nature static, whereas genres are dynamic».<sup>7</sup> Alistair Fowler famously remarked that genres are more like pigeons than pigeonholes; texts do not always fit neatly into a single category.<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida granted that «a text cannot belong to no genre», but would rather «speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part of without having membership in a set».<sup>9</sup> In popular culture, it has become fashionable to speak of «the death of genre», whether the topic is music, art, or literature.

## Two views of genre

In an essay on *The Idea of Biblical Genre* published in 2012 Hindy Najman proposed two ways of thinking about genre, not necessarily the only ones.<sup>10</sup> In the first way, texts are governed by generic norms in their production, in the manner of ancient Greek drama. In the second, «genre is primarily an idea to be used in the *reader's* classification of texts, and no claim is made that this classification was known to

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<sup>6</sup> F. SCHLEGEL, «Gespräch über die Poesie», in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. H. EICHNER, Zurich 1967, vol. 2, part 1; trans. «Dialogue on Poetry», in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, translated by E. BEHLER and R. STRUČ, University Park, PA 1968, 53-105. See T.O. BEEBEE, *The Ideology of Genre. A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*, University Park, PA 1994, 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> C.A. NEWSOM, «Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genealogy», in R. BOER (ed.), *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Atlanta, GA 2007, 21.

<sup>8</sup> A. FOWLER, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Cambridge, MA 1982, 36.

<sup>9</sup> J. DERRIDA, «The Law of Genre», in D. DUFF (ed.), *Modern Genre Theory*, Harlow, UK 2000, 230.

<sup>10</sup> H. NAJMAN, «The Idea of Biblical Genre», in J. PENNER – K.M. PENNER – C. WASSEN (edd.), *Prayer and Poetry in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature. Essays in Honor of Eileen Schuller on the Occasion of Her 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (STDJ 98), Leiden 2012, 309.

those involved in the production of the texts».<sup>11</sup> The first way was institutionalized in Greek drama, and given classic expression by Aristotle, although poets had long been aware of generic norms before he wrote. There is no parallel for Aristotle's *Poetics* in ancient Judaism. Najman allows that there are partial analogies in Jewish literary production. The peshet style of commentary found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, follows typical conventions. There are many other examples of the role of convention in literary production in Jewish texts, but the conventions are not rigid and were not enforced by any authority. The great majority of the genres and categories identified by modern biblical scholarship arise from Najman's second way of thinking about genre: they constructed by readers, without any necessary claim that ancient authors were aware of them. Such reader-identified genres may be quite valid, and based on accurate observation, but they are not as objective or stable as genres that were composed in conformity with explicit norms.

«The most important insight of modern genre theory as it relates to the study of genre in early Judaism», writes Molly Zahn, «is that genres are flexible and dynamic. While genres once were seen as a sort of timeless essence, some fixed ideal that existed independently of any particular exemplar of that genre (sort of like a Platonic Form), most theorists have come to regard genre as inherently historically and culturally conditioned – as a subset of the broader human activity of categorization, by which we make sense of the world around us. The perception of genre ultimately depends on the reader or audience's ability to group certain texts together, depending on some perceived likeness».<sup>12</sup>

Literary theorists have responded to this shift in perception in various ways. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously articulated the idea of «family resemblance» to explain why things can belong to a category without necessarily having any one thing in common. Taking «games» as an example, he wrote: «if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships and a whole series of them at that . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”».<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> NAJMAN, «The Idea of Biblical Genre», 309.

<sup>12</sup> M.M. ZAHN, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism. Scribal Composition and Transmission*, Cambridge 2020, 57.

<sup>13</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, Oxford 1958, 31-32.

Alistair Fowler adapted the idea of «family to the study of genre»: «Literary genre seems to be just the sort of concept with blurred edges that is suited to such an approach. Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a possible class whose septs [clans or classes] and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all».<sup>14</sup>

Many critics, however, have found this approach unsatisfactory. As John Swales put it: «a family resemblance theory can make anything resemble anything».<sup>15</sup> This is not to deny that the concept can be useful: it is quite possible to identify texts that are loosely related to each other, but not so closely that we would wish to assign them to the same genre. Moreover, the discussion of family resemblance highlighted a persistent problem with genre classification: the difficulty of drawing a clean line between a genre and closely related works.

A more satisfactory way of accounting for blurry edges is provided by prototype theory, developed in cognitive psychology. The idea here is that we recognize some examples of a category as more typical than others – a robin is more typical of the category «bird» than an ostrich, and a kitchen chair is more typical of the category «chair» than a piano stool.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, some texts are typical of their genre while others are ambiguous border-line examples. Prototype theory has been hailed as providing a middle course between the rigidity of fixed definitions and the indefiniteness of family resemblance theory. It was introduced into biblical studies by Carol Newsom and has been widely accepted.<sup>17</sup>

Both family resemblance theories and prototype theory still allow for generic realism; it is still possible to identify definite structures, even if they have fuzzy edges. Some critics go farther, adapting Walter Benjamin's maxim that «ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars».<sup>18</sup> Constellations are perceived patterns, based on observation, but the stars can also be configured in other ways. The literary critic Thomas Beebe argued that constellations provide an apt analogy for genres in three respects.<sup>19</sup> As constellations are used to subdivide the

<sup>14</sup> FOWLER, *Kinds of Literature*, 41-42.

<sup>15</sup> J. SWALES, *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings*, Cambridge 1990, 51.

<sup>16</sup> J. FROW, *Genre*, London 2006, 54.

<sup>17</sup> NEWSOM, «Spying Out the Land».

<sup>18</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York-London 1998, 34.

<sup>19</sup> BEEBEE, *The Ideology of Biblical Genre*, 282.

sky, genres mark off «zones of reading» in the expanse of literature. Both genres and constellations are imaginary ways of representing real relationships. Finally, a constellation, like a genre, is more than simply a list of the items it contains but demonstrates a pattern of relationships. Constellations are objectively there, but they are configured by analogy with familiar earthly images and could also be configured in other ways.

Najman also adapted Benjamin's constellation analogy to biblical and early Jewish literature in her essay on *The Idea of Biblical Genre*, but she restricted the constellation analogy to «non-generic» texts, characterized by «a constellation of features or elements», patterns that may appear in texts of different genre.<sup>20</sup> She gives as an example «the constellation which represents the trauma of the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile, along with the attempt to work through this trauma».<sup>21</sup> She stops short, however, of applying the constellation analogy to genres, although it would seem to fit her second way of speaking of genres quite well. She seems to reserve the term «genre» for texts that were self-consciously produced, whether in accordance with strict rules, as in the case of Greek tragedy, or more loosely, as in the case of Jewish apocalypses or Mosaic discourse. She writes: «Of course we could just decide to use the term “genre” for any classification of texts formed on any basis and for any purpose [...] But this would stretch the term so far that I fear it would lose its specific tie to the history of text-production».<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, the constellation analogy is applied to genre in the context of biblical literature by Will Kynes. For Kynes «a genre should be understood as simply a group of texts gathered together due to some perceived significant affinity between them».<sup>23</sup> That definition is perhaps too broad; many scholars would require that the affinity include literary form on some level. It is clear, however, that Kynes is thinking of genre in the second way proposed by Najman, as a reader's classification of texts. It is not necessarily excluded that some texts may be composed in accordance with generic norms, but the great bulk of modern scholarly classifications are constructs or construals by readers. In the terminology proposed by Kenton Sparks, this is generic

<sup>20</sup> NAJMAN, «The Idea of Biblical Genre», 316.

<sup>21</sup> NAJMAN, «The Idea of Biblical Genre», 317.

<sup>22</sup> NAJMAN, «The Idea of Biblical Genre», 116.

<sup>23</sup> KYNES, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”*, 108.

nominalism rather than generic realism. Generic realism «posits that texts are uniquely and intrinsically related to the generic categories in which we place them». Generic nominalism, in contrast, assumes that «there is a flexible and partially arbitrary character to all classifications [...]. Generic categories are essentially taxonomic inventions».<sup>24</sup>

All of this suggests that genres are not as objective or stable as they are often assumed to be. This raises the question whether a work can ever be said to be a wisdom text or an apocalypse, or whether we can only say that they can be viewed and read as such and allow for the possibility that they can also be viewed in other ways. But the fact that genres are configurations rather than fixed entities does not necessarily make them less useful or even necessary. As Beebee said of constellations, genres still need to reflect real relationships. Genres can provide guidance as to the types of meaning that are more relevant and appropriate and create a «horizon of expectations» to orient the reader's understanding.<sup>25</sup> As John Barton has commented, the significance of genre is often shown most clearly by genre mistakes – such as missing a joke or taking a fable, or a symbolic vision, as historical fact.<sup>26</sup> This does not require that every text is properly assigned to a single genre, but it shows that genre identification is not arbitrary and must be grounded in real features of texts.

## The case of wisdom literature

The validity or usefulness of the category «wisdom literature» has been challenged several times. Mark Sneed asks, «Is the “Wisdom Tradition” a Tradition?».<sup>27</sup> Stuart Weeks questions whether «Wisdom Literature» is a useful category.<sup>28</sup> Will Kynes even announces an obituary for the category.<sup>29</sup> Even before the recent spate of publications, the distinction between wisdom and apocalypticism was questioned

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<sup>24</sup> K.I. SPARKS, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible. A Guide to the Background Literature*, Peabody, MA 2005, 6.

<sup>25</sup> FROW, *Genre*, 110; H.R. JAUSS, «Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature», in D. DUFF (ed.), *Modern Genre Theory*, London 2000, 131; KYNES, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> BARTON, *Reading the Old Testament*, 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> M. SNEED, «Is the Wisdom Tradition a Tradition?», in *CBQ* 73(2011), 50-71.

<sup>28</sup> WEEKS, «Is ‘Wisdom Literature’ a Useful Category?», in H. NAJMAN – J.-S. REY – E. TIGCHELAAR (edd.), *Tracing Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism* (JSJ.S 174), Leiden 2016, 3-23.

<sup>29</sup> KYNES, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”*.

by Richard A. Horsley in the SBL Wisdom and Apocalypticism seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>30</sup>

In this case, the issue is not necessarily formulated in terms of literary genre, but simply of categorization. Many scholars have been reluctant to speak of wisdom as a genre. In the volume on wisdom literature in the *Forms of Old Testament Literature* series, Roland Murphy wrote that «Wisdom Literature is not a form-critical term; it is merely a term of convenience, derived apparently from ecclesiastical usage».<sup>31</sup> I myself wrote twenty years ago that «there is universal agreement that wisdom does not constitute a literary genre, and that it can find expression in various literary forms».<sup>32</sup> Ben Wright, however, has argued that we can talk about wisdom as a genre: «scholars have identified a group of texts that they almost universally agree can be called wisdom books».<sup>33</sup> Molly Zahn has recently argued that genres may be constituted by many considerations, not just literary form.<sup>34</sup> In part, the problem here is the lack of agreement as to what we mean by a genre. At the most basic level, a genre is a group of texts that are deemed to constitute the same kind of literature. Scholars use the term in different ways. Murphy, for example, speaks of sayings and of commands and prohibitions as «basic wisdom genres».<sup>35</sup> Other scholars might speak of these as «forms» and reserve «genre» for larger units or macrogenres. It is clear enough that wisdom books can include different literary forms. Whether this means that they include different literary genres depends on how we use the term.

The arguments brought against wisdom as a category are of various kinds. Kynes argues that the identification of the category depends on circular reasoning.<sup>36</sup> But discussions of wisdom are no more circular

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<sup>30</sup> R.A. HORSLEY, *Scribes, Visionaries and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, Louisville, KY 2007, 3-6; R.A. HORSLEY – P.A. TILLER, *After Apocalyptic and Wisdom: Rethinking Texts in Context*, Eugene, OR 2012, 163-167.

<sup>31</sup> R.E. MURPHY, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (FOTL 13), Grand Rapids, MI 1981, 3. It should be noted that Ruth and Esther were grouped here with the wisdom books simply as a matter of convenience.

<sup>32</sup> J.J. COLLINS, «Wisdom Reconsidered, in Light of the Scrolls», in *DSD* 4(1997), 265.

<sup>33</sup> B.G. WRIGHT, «Joining the Club: A Suggestion about Genre in Early Jewish Texts», in *DSD* 17(2010), 269.

<sup>34</sup> ZAHN, *Genres of Rewriting*, 56-73.

<sup>35</sup> MURPHY, *Wisdom Literature*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> W. KYNES, «The Modern Scholarly Wisdom Tradition and the Threat of Pan-Sapientialism: A Case Report», in SNEED (ed.), *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?*, 11-38.

than any other line of argument in the humanities. It is simply a matter of checking a hypothesis against the evidence. This does not require an *a priori* commitment to the *status quo*. It is quite possible to argue that the conventional view of the core sapiential texts requires revision, e.g., that Job does not qualify,<sup>37</sup> or that the proposed points of coherence do not hold. Kynes seems to assume that the traditional identification of the wisdom books was arbitrary. Similarly, he notes that Egyptologists and Assyriologists adopted the category «wisdom literature» from biblical studies and argues that «this means that appeals to ancient Near Eastern parallels to justify the category run into significant problems of circularity».<sup>38</sup> He does not stop to consider *why* Egyptologists adopted the category, or whether the similarity between the Egyptian and biblical corpora is compelling. The issue here is not whether one starts from the consensus, but whether the consensus holds up when it is checked against the evidence. To «reach back before the wisdom category became a fact» is to reach back to an era of pre-critical scholarship, which had its own biases and assumptions.

The main objections, however, are rooted in the variations between individual texts and the fact that a text may have important affinities with several genres. Leong Seow has written that there is «no precise parallel anywhere» for Job. It is «one of a kind in form, though it employs a rich variety of genres, which together contribute to the theological conversation».<sup>39</sup> Likewise, James Crenshaw, who certainly regards Job as wisdom literature, acknowledges that «no single genre can explain all the facets of the book, and several have certainly contributed to it».<sup>40</sup> Qoheleth, too is distinctive in its form, insofar as it is presented as a personal memoir.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, like Job, it takes issue with some of the basic tenets of wisdom literature as it is presented in the Book of Proverbs.<sup>42</sup> Traditional wisdom was grounded in the chain of act and consequence, the belief that a rational order pervades crea-

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<sup>37</sup> So K.J. DELL, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW 147), Berlin 1991); EAD., «Deciding the Boundaries of ‘Wisdom.’ Applying the Concept of Family Resemblances», in SNEED (ed.), *Was There a Wisdom Tradition?*, 154-155.

<sup>38</sup> W. KYNES, «The Nineteenth-Century Beginnings of ‘Wisdom Literature,’ and its Twenty-First Century End?», in J. JARICK (ed.) *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of an Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (LHB/OTS 618), London 2016, 85.

<sup>39</sup> C.-L. SEOW, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI 2013, 61.

<sup>40</sup> J.L. CRENSHAW, «Wisdom», in J. HAYES (ed.), *Old Testament Form Criticism*, San Antonio, TX 1974, 253.

<sup>41</sup> KYNES, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”*, 179-217.

<sup>42</sup> S. WEEKS, *Ecclesiastes and Skepticism* (LHB/OTS 541), New York 2012.



tion. Both Job and Qoheleth challenge that belief severely. If we extend our view to include Ben Sira, 4QInstruction, or the Wisdom of Solomon, the variety is increased. Ben Sira departs from Proverbs and Job by giving a special place to the history of Israel and the Law of Moses. 4QInstruction and Wisdom of Solomon look for retribution in an afterlife, in sharp contrast to the this-worldly emphasis of Job and Qoheleth. Despite the famous dictum of James Crenshaw that «where a marriage between form and content exists, there is wisdom»,<sup>43</sup> wisdom instructions do not always share the same worldview but draw on whatever worldview happens to be prevalent.

Nonetheless, the reasons for grouping these texts together as wisdom texts are fairly obvious.<sup>44</sup> Genres are often recognized by the ways in which they differ from other genres.<sup>45</sup> Whatever difficulties scholars may have in identifying a positive essence of wisdom literature, it has never been difficult to say what it is not. It is not narrative, law, prophetic oracle, vision report or hymnody, although it may include some of these genres as subordinate elements. On the positive side, what binds this literature together is that it is instructional literature.<sup>46</sup> Much of Proverbs in chapters 10–30, consists of proverbial sayings. The first nine chapters contain longer discourses. All of this material consists of either direct speech or declarative sentences. This style of presentation is distinctive within the biblical corpus. Narrative elements play a minor role. The prophetic books also use direct address extensively, but the tone is very different from that of Proverbs, and prophetic speech differs in its reliance on divine authority. Even when the sayings in Proverbs are couched as imperatives, they do not have the force of law. Proverbial sayings can, of course, be found in prophetic and narrative books, but they do not determine the character of these other genres. Like Proverbs, Qoheleth consists entirely of declarative sentences and direct address, and mixes longer instructions with collections of sayings. It does not correspond to Proverbs in all

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<sup>43</sup> J.L. CRENSHAW, *Old Testament Wisdom, An Introduction*, Revised edition, Louisville, KY 1998, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Despite his «obituary» for the genre, Kynes does not deny this. His objection is to viewing these texts exclusively as wisdom texts.

<sup>45</sup> J. CULLER, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca, NY 1975, 139; NEWSOM, «Spying Out the Land», 23.

<sup>46</sup> J.J. COLLINS, «Wisdom as Genre and as Tradition in the Book of Sirach», in S.L. ADAMS – G. SCHMIDT GOERING – M. GOFF (edd.), *Sirach and Its Contexts. The Pursuit of Wisdom and Human Flourishing* (JSJ.S 196), Leiden 2021, 19–20.

details. There is no counterpart to the speech of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 or the reflection on the capable wife in Proverbs 31. But Qoheleth is clearly closer to Proverbs in its style and manner of presentation than to any other book in the biblical corpus. While there are only two examples of the genre in the Hebrew Bible, they stand in continuity with a long line of Near Eastern, especially Egyptian, wisdom instructions, and the tradition is continued in Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The continuity between Egyptian instructional literature and Proverbs also rests primarily on the manner of presentation, although more specific points of contact may also be noted. So, for example, Nili Shupak writes that Egyptian wisdom consists of two subgenres, didactic and speculative.<sup>47</sup> Other elements, such as the reign of a future ideal king, play a subordinate role. Insofar as the book of Job is a dialogue with a narrative framework, it is more distant from Proverbs, but the speeches of Job's friends are essentially wisdom instructions. We can recognize generic affinity while also recognizing divergence, and affinities with other genres such as the lament, in the case of some of the speeches of Job.

To a great degree, the variation between the individual wisdom books can be appreciated through the lens of prototype theory. The prototypical text is Proverbs, and other texts are identified as sapiential because of their resemblance to it. Books that resemble it in some respects but deviate in others can be located on the fuzzy edges of the genre, or recognized as works of mixed genre, especially in the case of Job. It is also possible to categorize some of this literature differently, by using a particular lens, such as the view of death, which may yield a different constellation of relevant texts, or of patterns within texts. We can readily agree with Stuart Weeks that it is «impossible to insist that genres are mutually exclusive, let alone that any given text must belong to a single genre».<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, the categorization as wisdom literature yields considerable insight into the books in question. The wisdom genre so conceived is a *kind* of writing, characterized by observation and advice. It grounds its authority in the inherited human wisdom of fathers and teachers, even if the distillation of that wisdom sometimes hardens in-

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<sup>47</sup> N. SHUPAK, «The Contribution of Egyptian Wisdom to the Study of Biblical Wisdom Literature», in SNEED (ed.), *Was There a Wisdom Tradition*, 265-304.

<sup>48</sup> WEEKS, «Wisdom, Form and Genre», in SNEED (ed.), *Was There a Wisdom Tradition*, 163.

to dogma, and even if it sometimes incorporates wisdom that is derived ultimately from revelation. This is true even of a skeptical book like Qoheleth that questions received wisdom; that wisdom still provides the framework for discussion. The relationships between these texts could be regarded as constituting a tradition as well as a genre, but in any case they are texts that can profitably be grouped together and viewed through the lens of instructional literature. Moreover, it seems very likely that the tradition was self-aware and self-reflective. The authors of Proverbs were surely aware of their debt to Egyptian wisdom literature and Ben Sira and the sage of 4QInstruction were quite self-consciously in the tradition of Proverbs.

Wisdom instructions may still be related to texts that are not cast as instructions in manifold ways. A good test case is provided by the relation of Proverbs to Deuteronomy. Stuart Weeks argues that «it is difficult to read Prov 1–9 [...] without rapidly becoming aware of its strong affinities with the language of Deuteronomy».<sup>49</sup> These affinities are undeniable. Prov 6,20 refers to the commandment of the father and the *torah* («teaching») of the mother, and similar echoes of Deuteronomy can be found in the wisdom instructions in Proverbs 3 and 7. Weeks continues, «early readers clearly believed that the instruction commended in Prov 1–9 should be identified with the Deuteronomic Torah, and it is very likely [...] that the work itself intended such an identification».<sup>50</sup> But in fact, Proverbs never refers to the Torah of Moses, or of YHWH, but to the teaching and instructions of the parents and/or the sage. Its authority derives from human teachers. That authority may be enhanced by association with the Torah of Deuteronomy, but it does not derive from it.<sup>51</sup> To read Proverbs through the lens of Deuteronomy, taking its *torah* as covenantal law rather than parental instruction, is a genre mistake. Equally, to characterize Proverbs «along with prophecy as inspired instruction for righteous living», one of the options that Kynes suggests, is a genre mistake.<sup>52</sup> Proverbs does

<sup>49</sup> WEEKS, «Is Wisdom Literature a Useful Category?», 14.

<sup>50</sup> WEEKS, «Is Wisdom Literature a Useful Category?», 14. Compare B.U. SCHIPPER, «When Wisdom is Not Enough! The Discourse on Wisdom and Torah and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs», in B.U. SCHIPPER –D.A. TEETER (edd.), *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period* (JSJ.S 163), Leiden 2013, 60.

<sup>51</sup> See further J.J. COLLINS, *The Invention of Judaism. Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul*, Oakland, CA 2017, 66-68.

<sup>52</sup> KYNES, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature"*, 238.

not claim inspiration. It is not the same kind of text as Amos or Ezekiel, even though the prophets can also use proverbs for their purposes.

Weeks and Kynes object that assigning a text to a wisdom genre unduly restricts the literary context in which it is read. «The danger in this sort of analysis», writes Weeks, «lies in its capacity to squeeze out other ways of reading the material».<sup>53</sup> The speeches of Job may have more in common with Psalms than with Proverbs, and Ben Sira's discourse on nature may be profitably compared with that of the *Book of the Watchers*. But no one ever said that texts should only be compared with texts of the same genre, and the fact that a text may have a significant parallel with another text does not mean that it is the same kind of text, viewed as a whole. Kynes denies that rejecting genre categorization means that we have to interpret texts in isolation.<sup>54</sup> But it does mean that we lose our sense of proportion and fail to distinguish between incidental resemblance and a common *Gestalt*, between similarity in detail and similarity in kind. This, I submit, is regression in the scholarly enterprise of interpreting texts.

## A Genre Apocalypse?

As in the case of wisdom literature, the category «apocalyptic», and genre «apocalypse» were unknown before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> As also in the case of wisdom literature, recognition of «apocalyptic» as a category was triggered by the discovery of non-biblical material, in this case by the publication of the Ethiopic text of 1 Enoch and the subsequent discovery of several «apocalypses» that were attributed pseudonymously to such figures as Abraham, Baruch and Ezra.<sup>56</sup>

The apocalyptic literature has in fact been configured in quite different ways. For much of the twentieth century it was viewed as an extension of prophecy, and several prophetic texts of the Second Temple period were regarded as «apocalyptic» (e.g. Isaiah 24–27, Isaiah 56–66,

<sup>53</sup> WEEKS, «Wisdom, Form and Genre», 172.

<sup>54</sup> KYNES, «The Nineteenth-Century Beginnings», 103.

<sup>55</sup> The identification of the genre is usually credited to F. LÜCKE, *Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in die Offenbarung Johannis und die gesamte apokalyptische Literatur*, Bonn 1832.

<sup>56</sup> See J.J. COLLINS, «Beyond the Canon. The Recovery of the Pseudepigrapha», in J.J. COLLINS – C.A. EVANS – L.M. McDONALD, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Scriptures. New Developments in Canon Controversy*, Louisville, KY 2020, 21-34; J.M. SCHMIDT, *Die jüdische Apokalypik*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1969.

parts of Ezekiel and Jeremiah).<sup>57</sup> A systematic study of apocalyptic literature published in *Semeia* 14 in 1979, however, defined the genre as a product of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, of which the earliest exemplars were parts of 1 Enoch and Daniel.<sup>58</sup> To a great degree, the different configurations reflected the interests of the scholars in question. Scholars who specialized in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, classified 1 Enoch and Daniel with the prophetic literature that was familiar to them. Students of the Pseudepigrapha grouped them rather with the later, non-canonical material. It was always clear that the early apocalypses (sections of 1 Enoch and Daniel) were not based on a normative understanding of the genre apocalypse. Daniel is classified as prophecy in the Christian Bible, and also in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus, but his prophetic status was disputed by the rabbis.<sup>59</sup> Some sections of 1 Enoch (the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Astronomical book*) defy easy categorization, and remain *sui generis*, as has been said of Job.<sup>60</sup> The genre as constructed in *Semeia* 14 was quite explicitly from the perspective of the modern reader, described in the preface of the volume as “a heuristic device”.<sup>61</sup> Carol Newsom astutely observed that it was nonetheless assumed to correspond to the tacit assumptions of the ancient texts.<sup>62</sup> As was said above about constellations, the constructed genre was held to reflect real relationships. It remains possible, however, to configure the relationships in different ways.

Hindy Najman has rightly emphasized the continuity of Daniel with prophecy, without disputing that it exhibits the generic features of an apocalypse and served as a prototype for later apocalyptic texts.<sup>63</sup> It is also important to appreciate what is gained by viewing it as an apocalypse. To a great degree, genres are recognized by the things that

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<sup>57</sup> H.H. ROWLEY, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, London 1944, famously saw «apocalyptic» as a child of prophecy. P.D. HANSON, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia, PA 1975, was a study of prophetic texts of the Persian period.

<sup>58</sup> J.J. COLLINS (ed.), *Apocalypse. The Morphology of a Genre. Semeia* 14, Missoula, MT 1979.

<sup>59</sup> H. NAJMAN, «The Inheritance of Prophecy in Apocalypse», in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, New York-Oxford 2014, 41.

<sup>60</sup> See the reflections of A.Y. REED, «The Origins of the Book of the Watchers as ‘Apocalypse’ and Its Reception as ‘Apocryphon’», in *Henoch* 30(2008), 55-60; EAD., «Categorization, Collection, and the Construction of Continuity: 1 Enoch and 3 Enoch in and beyond ‘Apocalypticism’ and ‘Mysticism’», in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 28(2017), 268-311.

<sup>61</sup> J.J. COLLINS, «Preface», in *Semeia* 14, iv.

<sup>62</sup> NEWSOM, «Spying Out the Land», 22.

<sup>63</sup> NAJMAN, «The Inheritance of Prophecy», 42.

distinguish them from closely related genres. One of the features that distinguishes works like Daniel and 1 Enoch from earlier prophecy is the expectation of judgment of the dead and the hope for a beatific afterlife with the angels. Unlike the wisdom instruction, which is adaptable to different worldviews, the genre apocalypse is closely bound to a particular worldview, which involves the revelation of another world.<sup>64</sup> Of course, belief in a world of divine beings was pervasive in antiquity. The novelty in the apocalypses is the belief that human beings can be exalted to it permanently, after death, not just in exceptional cases like Enoch and Elijah. The belief in access to a transcendent world is also expressed in other genres in the Hellenistic age (e.g. wisdom texts like 4QInstruction and Wisdom of Solomon, and Thanksgiving Hymns from Qumran)<sup>65</sup> but it marks a decisive shift in relation to the Hebrew prophetic tradition.

The belief in a transcendent world, and human access to it, is also of pivotal importance in Fourth Ezra, an apocalypse from the late first century CE which is clearly characterized by formal diversity.<sup>66</sup> In some respects, the work is *sui generis*. The first half of the book is taken up with dialogues between Ezra and the angel Uriel. These are followed by a series of visions. The book concludes with an account of the inspiration of Ezra to dictate a restored Torah, but also a much larger collection of inspired books. Hindy Najman declares that «the book as a whole does not fit into any single genre, and it can appear to be a strange hybrid of dialogues concerning the limits of wisdom, apocalyptic visions and an epilogue portraying the regiving of the Torah».<sup>67</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the formal diversity of the book gave rise to a spate of source critical theories, by such scholars as R. Kabisch,<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> J.J. COLLINS, «Apocalypticism as a Worldview in Ancient Judaism and Christianity», in C. McALLISTER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, Cambridge 2020, 19-35.

<sup>65</sup> H. NAJMAN, «Imitatio Dei and the Formation of the Subject in Ancient Judaism», in *JBL* 140(2021), 309-323, discusses some of this material from the perspective of the formation of the self and becoming like God.

<sup>66</sup> J.J. COLLINS, «The Genre of 4 Ezra», in E. NORELLI (ed.), *Apocalisse come genere. Un dibattito ancora attuale?* Special issue of *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 17(2020), 59-71.

<sup>67</sup> H. NAJMAN, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future. An Analysis of 4 Ezra*, Cambridge 2014, 20.

<sup>68</sup> R. KABISCH, *Das vierte Buch Esra auf seine Quellen untersucht*, Göttingen 1889.

G.H. Box<sup>69</sup> and R.H. Charles.<sup>70</sup> These theories persisted in moderate form in more recent times in the work of Wolfgang Harnisch<sup>71</sup> and Egon Brandenburger,<sup>72</sup> who regarded the visions in chapters 11–13 as secondary. Even the source critics recognized that the work as it stands is clearly structured in seven units: three dialogues (3,1–5,19; 5,20–6,34; and 6,35–9,25), three visions (9,26–10,59; 10,60–12,51; and 13,1–58) and an epilogue (14,1–48). This structure is too nicely balanced to be the product of incremental growth. Accordingly, the source-critical theories have fallen out of favor. Even Najman agrees with «what is now the consensus, that 4 Ezra is not divisible into sources».<sup>73</sup> She argues, however, that «a generic approach is well-suited to the study of distinct parts of the text, but something else is required if we are to gain an understanding of the work as a whole».<sup>74</sup> I argue, to the contrary, that it is precisely a generic approach that is needed if we are to gain an understanding of the work as a whole. Genre is not only a matter of literary forms in the form-critical sense but of the *Gestalt* that gives a work its coherence.

The features that give 4 Ezra its inner coherence are precisely the features that align it with the apocalyptic genre.<sup>75</sup> The dialogues are subordinated to revelation, first in the angelic discourses and then more effectively in the visions. The content is focused on eschatological salvation, involving a messianic age followed by resurrection and judgment. The messianic age is not the end. Ezra is told explicit-

<sup>69</sup> G.H. BOX, «IV Ezra», in R.H. CHARLES (ed.), *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. Volume 2. Pseudepigrapha*, Oxford 1913, 542–624.

<sup>70</sup> R.H. CHARLES, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life*, London 1899, 283–297.

<sup>71</sup> W. HARNISCH, «Der Prophet als Widerpart und Zeuge der Offenbarung: Erwägungen zur Interdependenz von Form und Sache im IV Buch Esra», in D. HELLHOLM (ed.) *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979*, Tübingen 1983, 461–493.

<sup>72</sup> E. BRANDENBURGER, *Die Verborgenheit Gottes im Weltgeschehen. Das literarische und theologische Problem des 4. Esrabuches*, Zurich 1981.

<sup>73</sup> NAJMAN, *Losing the Temple*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> NAJMAN, *Losing the Temple*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> On the inner coherence of 4 Ezra see especially M.E. STONE, *Fourth Ezra. A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, (Hermeneia), Minneapolis, MN 1990; ID., «On Reading an Apocalypse», in J.J. COLLINS – J.H. CHARLESWORTH (edd.), *Mysteries and Revelations. Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (JSP.S 9), Sheffield 1991, 65–78. Also, K.M. HOGAN, *Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra: Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution* (JSJ.S130), Leiden 2008, who emphasizes the dialogic character of the work.

ly that «the Most High has made not one world but two» (2 Esdras 7,49), and again that «the present world is not the end» (7,112). Salvation ultimately lies in the next world, in a way that was never the case in the Hebrew prophets. The revelations do not respond directly to Ezra's questions in the dialogue, but they put them in a broader perspective. In the words of Michael Vines, they «afford a divine perspective on human activity».<sup>76</sup> Even the Torah is put in a new perspective. When the Torah is revealed anew to Ezra in the final chapter of the book, he is also given seventy further books that are reserved for the wise among the people, «for in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge» (14:47). Even the Torah is in need of supplementary, higher, revelation.<sup>77</sup>

Different apocalypses provide this perspective in different ways. Some, such as 3 Baruch or 2 Enoch, look to the mysteries of the heavens rather than to denouement of history.<sup>78</sup> But in all cases, apocalypses view the problems of the present *sub specie aeternitatis*, not by means of philosophical reasoning but by imaginative vision. It is this transcendent vision of human destiny that is constitutive of the genre apocalypse, and gives the genre its coherence, even if individual apocalypses can also be classified otherwise for other purposes.

## Conclusion

Claims of «the death of genre», and obituaries for specific genres such as wisdom are premature, or more accurately hyperbolic. The critique has been salutary, to be sure. It serves to remind us that in most cases genres are construed by readers for their purposes, and while they may be valid and helpful, they are not necessarily the only way in which a given corpus of texts can be viewed. Benjamin's metaphor of «constellations» is fruitful, not only for non-generic patterns, as Najman has argued, but for appreciating the nature of genre. Genres, like constellations, are human construals. They are not firmly bounded entities, and they do not preclude other ways of configuring texts. Nonetheless, if they are validly identified they must entail real relationships, and they enable us to find our way in the expanses of literature. Gen-

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<sup>76</sup> M.E. VINES, «The Apocalyptic Chronotope», in BOER (ed.), *Bakhtin and Genre Theory*, 113.

<sup>77</sup> COLLINS, *The Invention of Judaism*, 132.

<sup>78</sup> COLLINS, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 301-314.



res remain important guides for interpretation, by highlighting not only the typical features of different kinds of texts but also the differences that distinguish them from related genres. They shape the expectations with which we approach texts. We dispense with them only to our loss.

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### Parole chiave

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### Summary

Genre analysis has long been a basic tool of biblical scholarship. In recent years, however, there has been growing resistance to categorization. The basic argument is that categorization allegedly restricts the range of literature to which a text is compared. Some of this resistance is exaggerated. The critique is valid insofar as it reminds us that in most cases genres are construed by readers for their purposes, and while they may be valid and helpful, they are not necessarily the only way in which a given corpus of texts can be viewed. Nonetheless, genres remain important guides for interpretation, by highlighting not only the typical features of different kinds of texts but also the differences that distinguish them from related genres.

### Sommario

L'analisi del genere è stata a lungo uno strumento di base dello studio biblico. Negli ultimi anni, tuttavia, c'è stata una crescente resistenza alla categorizzazione. L'argomento di base è che la categorizzazione restringe lo spazio letterario in cui viene collocato un testo. Alcune di queste resistenze sono tuttavia esagerate. La critica è valida in quanto ci ricorda che nella maggior parte dei casi i generi sono interpretati dai lettori per i loro scopi, e mentre possono essere validi e utili, non sono necessariamente l'unico modo in cui un dato *corpus* di testi può essere visualizzato. Tuttavia, i generi rimangono importanti guide per l'interpretazione, perché evidenziano non solo le caratteristiche tipiche di diversi tipi di testi, ma anche le differenze che li distinguono dai generi correlati.