

What is a Gospel?

1. A Gospel as the Medium or Mode of Communication

What were the aims of the evangelists? How did their audiences respond to their message? The way a message is conveyed leads to a particular way of thinking about its content.

The form of writing attributed to the four evangelists is a 'gospel' (Greek: *euangelion*). The earliest known usage of this term in the New Testament is encountered in Paul's letters to denote the proclamation of the 'good news' about Jesus Christ (cf. 'kerygma').

The actual titles of the four Gospels are much later than the writings themselves. Note opening of Mark (1:1): 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah...'. The term 'gospel' is here used in a theological sense to denote the eschatological coming of God for salvation (cf. Isa. 52:7). Cf. the use of the designation 'book' (Matthew 1:1) and also 'narrative' (Luke 1:1).

2. Can the Gospels be viewed as 'Biographies'?

According to earlier NT commentators the four Gospels cannot be defined as biographical representations of Jesus' life, because they offer a selection of key events.

However, New Testament scholars have recently sought to compare the four Gospels with ancient biographies (*bios*, plural: *bioi*), particularly in Greek and Roman cultures.

2.1 Similarities between the Gospels and Ancient Biographies

All are written in prose form as narratives and they are of similar length. Their aim is not to provide a detailed account of the lives of heroes and emperors nor do they adhere to a strict order of events. There is clear emphasis on the hero's words and actions. Ancient biographies also focus on the last days of heroes and emperors (Alexander the Great, Augustus, Nero).

2.2. Differences between the Gospels and Ancient Biographies

Only the Gospels stress the Jewish roots of the life and teaching of Jesus, particularly the significance of Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. The purpose of the Gospels was to evoke faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

The Gospels are the product of sustained theological reflection in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. No classical biography extends beyond the death of the hero.

Bibliography

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