

## CHAPTER 26

# GOSPELS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It might be thought that a basic question such as what the gospels actually are from a literary point of view would have been one of the first things for biblical scholars to sort out and agree about. Yet the history of the last century or more of critical study is one in which the pendulum has swung back and forth—from a biographical approach to the gospels to considering them to be unique, and then back to biography again.

In order to answer the question of the genre of the gospels properly, it is necessary to understand two key areas: the critical theory of genre and the kinds of literature contemporary with the gospels within the Graeco-Roman and Jewish worlds around the first century. Therefore, we shall look first at genre theory and then sketch a brief historical overview of scholarly approaches to the gospels; this will lead to the recently developing consensus that the gospels are a form of ancient biography and some current issues of debate and future directions of research.

### 2. GENRE AS THE KEY TO INTERPRETATION

A proper understanding of genre is central to the interpretation of any text—or indeed, any communication. Communication theory looks at the three main aspects of transmitter, communication, and receiver, or encoder, message, and

decoder. In written works, this becomes author or producer(s), text, and audience or reader(s). Immediately the importance of discerning the kind of communication becomes clear. If the sender is transmitting Morse code, but the receiver can only understand semaphore, there will be problems in communication! Both parties must use the same code or language, and so correct interpretation depends on a correct identification of the kind of communication or genre. One does not listen to a fairy-story in the same way as to a news broadcast; each has its own conventions, expectations, and rules.

Thus genre is a key convention guiding both the composition and the interpretation of writings. Genre forms a 'contract', or agreement, often unspoken or unwritten, or even unconscious, between an author and a reader, by which the author writes according to a set of expectations and conventions, and we agree to interpret the work using the same conventions, providing an initial idea of what we might expect. Genre is identified through a wide range of 'generic features', which may be signalled in advance through a notice or preface; however, they are also embedded within the work's formal and structural composition (often called 'external features') and its content, style, mood, and character ('internal features'). When taken all together, such generic features communicate the 'family resemblance' of a group of works and thus enable us to identify the genre of a given text and interpret it accordingly.

### 3. APPROACHES TO READING THE GOSPELS

Therefore, before we can read or interpret the gospels, we have to discover what kind of books they might be and how they compare with other texts from the same time period and location. Differing understandings of their genre will have differing implications for the interpretation of the gospels. Clearly, we will approach a text differently if we consider it to be history rather than legend; similarly, drama needs to be received differently from, say, myth.

#### a. Readings through History

For much of the ancient and medieval periods, the gospels, like the rest of the Bible, could be interpreted on several levels: the literal meaning would provide facts about what actually happened, while an allegorical interpretation could apply any text to the story of redemption; the use of Scripture for moral purposes would provide

direct instruction for behaviour, and an anagogical or mystical reading would relate the text to the reader's own spiritual pilgrimage. This can be summed up in Nicholas of Lyra's rhyme:

littera gesta docet  
quid credas allegoria  
moralis quid agas  
quo tendas anagogia

('The literal teaches what was done, the allegorical what you should believe, the moral what you should do, and the anagogical where you are headed'.)

The Reformers rejected all levels of reading except for the literal, and on this basis the gospels were interpreted as history—the stories of Jesus, even sometimes being seen in terms of biographies. This led later to their being used as a basis for the production of romantic 'Lives' such as Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863). However, during the nineteenth century, biographies began to explain the character of a great person by considering his or her upbringing, formative years, schooling, psychological development, and so on; furthermore, the subject would be set within the context of the main events of their time. With their relatively shorter length and narrower focus, the gospels began to look unlike such biographies.

## b. Unique Works?—Form-critical Approaches

During the 1920s, scholars like Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1923) and Rudolf Bultmann (1921) rejected any notion that the gospels were biographies: the gospels have no interest in Jesus's human personality, appearance, or character; nor do they tell us anything about the rest of his life, other than his brief public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Furthermore, the extended concentration on his death was thought to overbalance any attempt to depict his life. Instead, the gospels were seen as popular folk literature, collections of short stories ('pericopae') handed down orally over time. Far from being biographies of Jesus, the gospels were described as 'unique' forms of literature, *sui generis* (see Bultmann 1972: 371–4). For Bultmann and Schmidt, this unique genre had theological implications about God's unique revelation of his Word in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, such development of 'form-critical' approaches to the gospels meant that they were no longer interpreted as whole narratives. Instead, they concentrated on each individual pericope, and the focus for interpretation moved more to the passage's *Sitz im Leben* in the early church. Meanwhile, the author was regarded as little more than a mere stenographer, recording the stories at the end of the oral tunnel. Questions about both the literary form and genre of the work and about the author's intentions were thus not possible.

### c. Gospel Communities and Redaction Critics

The rise of 'redaction criticism' half a century later led to more interpretation of each gospel's theological interests. Careful study of how Matthew and Luke edited Mark reveals something of their theology, purposes, and methods. *Redaktor* is German for 'editor' (often used of newspaper editors), and the classic redaction studies were undertaken by Bornkamm (1948), on Matthew's revision of Mark for use within the new religious community of the church, and Conzelmann (1954), on Luke's understanding of the events of Jesus taking place 'in the middle of time' between Israel and the church.

Such redaction-critical approaches led to the development of theories about the sorts of communities which produced the gospels. The gospels were seen as a type of 'community' document, within which the story of the community is overlaid upon the story of Jesus and the first disciples, giving a 'two-tier' approach to reading them. Therefore, interpretation began to focus upon the development of groups like the Matthean community (through the work of K. Stendahl (1968)) or the Johannine community (see e.g. the writings of R. E. Brown (1979) and J. L. Martyn (1979)).

However, the fact that redaction critics saw the writers of the gospels as individual theologians with particular purposes brought back questions about authorial intention and literary aspirations. The development of new literary approaches to the gospels viewed their authors as conscious writers or artists, and attention began to be given to their techniques of composition and narrative skills, such as plot, irony, and characterization, through the work of D. Rhoads and D. Michie (1982), J. D. Kingsbury (1988) and R. C. Tannehill (1986, 1990). This made it possible once again to consider the question of the genre of the gospels and their place within the context of first-century literature, and scholars like Stanton (1974), Talbert (1977), and Aune (1987) began to treat the gospels as ancient biographies.

## 4. THE GOSPELS AND ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY

### a. Ancient Lives

In order to determine whether the gospels are a form of ancient biography, it is necessary to examine the generic features shared by ancient 'lives', or *bioi*—the word *biographia* does not appear until the ninth-century writer Photius of

Constantinople (*Bibliotheca*, 181 and 242; see Momigliano 1971: 12). From the formal or structural perspective, they are written in continuous prose narrative, between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length—the amount on a typical scroll of about 30–35 feet in length. Unlike modern biographies, Graeco-Roman lives do not cover a person's whole life in chronological sequence, and have no psychological analysis of the subject's character. They may begin with a brief mention of the hero's ancestry, family, or city, his birth and an occasional anecdote about his upbringing; but usually the narrative moves rapidly on to his public début later in life. Accounts of generals, politicians, or statesmen are ordered more chronologically, recounting their great deeds and virtues, while lives of philosophers, writers, or thinkers tend to be more anecdotal, arranged topically around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings. While the author may claim to provide information about his subject, often his underlying aims include apologetic, polemic, or didactic. Many ancient biographies cover the subject's death in great detail, since here he reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching, or does his greatest deed. Finally, detailed analysis of the verbal structure of ancient biographies reveals another generic feature. While most narratives have a wide variety of subjects, it is characteristic of biography that attention stays focused on one particular person, with a quarter to a third of the verbs dominated by the subject, while another 15 to 30 per cent occur in sayings, speeches, or quotations from the person (see Burridge 1992: 261–74; 2004: 308–21).

## b. The Gospels as Lives of Jesus

Like other ancient biographies, the gospels are continuous prose narratives of the length of a single scroll, composed of stories, anecdotes, sayings, and speeches; thus they share the same 'external' generic features. Their concentration on Jesus' public ministry, from his baptism to his death, and on his teaching and great deeds is not very different from the content of other ancient biographies. Similarly, the amount of space given to the last week of Jesus' life, his death, and the resurrection reflects that given to the subject's death and subsequent events in works by Plutarch, Tacitus, Nepos, and Philostratus. Verbal analysis demonstrates that Jesus is the subject of a quarter of the verbs in Mark's Gospel, with a further fifth spoken by him in his teaching and parables. About half of the verbs in the other gospels either have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips: like other ancient biographies, Jesus' deeds and words are of vital importance for the evangelists' portraits of Jesus. Therefore, these marked similarities of form and content demonstrate that the gospels have both the external and the internal generic features of ancient biographies.

My comparison (Burridge 1992) of the gospels with Graeco-Roman *bioi* or Lives demonstrated this generic relationship, refuting the previous *sui generis* approach

of the form critics. This has been confirmed subsequently by the similarly detailed work of Frickenschmidt (1997), and the biographical hypothesis has now become the accepted scholarly consensus. It has been queried by Collins (1995), who also rejects the unique approach but prefers to see Mark at least as historical monograph. Wills (1997) and Vines (2002) have compared the gospels with early novels, especially those from a Jewish background, but without great success or acceptance (see Chapter 25 above). Increasingly, gospel scholars and commentators now take the biographical genre of the gospels as their starting-point, while the debate has moved on to the implications of this for their interpretation (see BurrIDGE 2004: 252–88).

## 5. DIRECTIONS FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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### a. Literary Relationships of the Gospels

The first implication of even a brief consideration of the generic features shared by the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography is that all four canonical gospels are examples of the same genre. This is important to stress, given the fact that some gospel scholars stress the differences between them, especially that of the Fourth Gospel. While such variations may be apparent when only these four texts are studied, consideration of other, non-canonical, gospels and wider reading of contemporary literature demonstrates how closely related these four are. Therefore, any suggestions that Matthew is a manual of church discipline or Luke a historical monograph, while John and Mark belong to the same genre as each other betrays a lack of understanding of how genres function. The canonical gospels have as much in common with Graeco-Roman lives as they have with each other, and therefore belong to that genre. However, within their sub-genre, there is development, which may be a further argument for the priority of Mark: in the same way as Matthew and Luke improve Mark's Greek style (see the often quoted example of the shift from *kai* to *de*), so they also conform his genre closer to ancient biography by additions such as the infancy narratives.

One area of continuing debate concerns the genre of Luke–Acts. Aune's stress that 'Luke and Acts *must* be treated as affiliated with *one* genre' leads to his odd conclusion that Luke cannot be the same biographical genre as the other three gospels, but is a form of ancient historiography (Aune 1987: 77–80). Similar arguments are made by Sterling (1989) and Cancik (1997). Alternatively, Talbert

(1977) argued that Luke–Acts forms a biographical succession narrative, with the gospel as the ‘life of the founder’ followed by an account of his successors. I accepted this possibility but also suggested that Acts could be a *bios* of the church in the manner of the *Life of Greece* written in the fourth century BCE by Dicaearchus of Messene; however, the two volumes could belong to the closely related *genera proxima* with Luke as *bios* and Acts as historical monograph (Burrige 1992: 245–6; 2004: 237–9). Talbert has subsequently argued for a combination of these proposals (Talbert 1996: 70).

The fragmentary nature of some non-canonical gospels makes their genre difficult to determine. It is possible that some early Jewish-Christian gospels (such as those of the *Nazarenes*, or *Ebionites*) may have exhibited sufficient of these generic features to be also included within ancient *bioi*. However, sayings gospels like the *Gospel of Thomas* lack any narrative necessary for biography, and thus belong more with *logia* or *memorabilia*; most reconstructions of Q suggest a similar genre. On the other hand, works such as the *Book of Thomas* or the *Dialogue of the Saviour* are more like revelatory discourse after the resurrection than any attempt to recount a life. Thus there may be an argument from genre both for the choice of the four canonical gospels and for the later dating of developments into of other genres like discourse or commentaries.

## b. Christological Interpretation

First and foremost, the gospels are portraits of a person, and they must be interpreted in this biographical manner. Given that space is limited to a single scroll—ranging from Mark’s 11,250 words to Luke’s 19,500—every story, pericope, or passage has to contribute to the overall picture of Jesus according to each evangelist. Thus Christology becomes central to the interpretation of the gospels. Each evangelist builds up their account of Jesus through the selection, redaction, and ordering of their material. The key question for the interpretation of any verse or section is what this tells us about Jesus and the writer’s understanding of him. Thus the motif of the failure of the disciples to understand Jesus in Mark is not to be interpreted in terms of polemic against differing groups and leaders, with ‘traditions in conflict’ inside the early church (see Weeden 1971), as often happens as a result of a more form-critical approach to the gospels. Instead, it is part of Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as hard to understand and tough to follow—and therefore readers should not be surprised to find the Christian life difficult sometimes. Interpretation of the gospels thus requires a thorough understanding of the Christology of each of the evangelists, while each section must be exegeted in the context of its place in the developing narrative as a whole. I (Burrige 1994) have attempted to describe the particular Christology of each gospel narrative

through the traditional gospel symbols. Drawing upon Irenaeus's comment that these are 'images of the disposition of the Son of God' (*Adv. Haer.* 3. 11. 8–9), I use the lion to describe Mark's enigmatic 'beast of conflict', while Matthew's account shows the human face of the Teacher of Israel who is rejected; the image of the ox reflects Luke's narrative of the burden-bearing Saviour, and the high-flying, all-seeing eagle symbolizes John's account of the divine incarnation in Jesus.

### c. Plurality and the Fourfold Gospel

The fact that the early church fathers chose to keep four separate accounts in the canon, despite the problems of possible conflict between them, also raises interesting issues, as noted by Cullmann (1956). The decision not to follow Marcion's choice of using only one gospel nor Tatian's so-called harmony of the gospels in the *Diatessaron* demonstrates that the four gospels were recognized as coherent single accounts of Jesus, yet which belong together. Stanton (1997) and Hengel (2000) have provoked renewed interest in the idea of the 'fourfold gospel' and its theological implications for their interpretation. It has even been suggested that the early church's preservation of four gospels together may have stimulated the development of the codex in preference to the use of single scrolls. This fourfold diversity also raises interesting theological questions about plurality within the limits of the canon. Morgan (1979) sees these four canonical portraits as offering both a 'stimulus' to produce more 'faith images of Jesus', as well as acting as a 'control' upon them.

### d. Theological Implications of the Absence of Jewish Biography

Furthermore, it is significant that Jesus seems to have been the only first-century Jewish teacher about whom such *bioi* were written. It is quite common to compare individual gospel pericopae with stories and anecdotes preserved in rabbinic material. Thus the question about the greatest commandment in Mark 12: 28–34 and parallels may be studied in the light of the famous story from the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a, of the differing reactions of Shammai and Hillel when asked to teach the whole law to a Gentile enquirer standing on one leg. If the gospels are seen merely as a collection of such stories strung together like beads on a string, we might expect similar works to be constructed about Hillel, Shammai, or other rabbis. Yet this is precisely what we do not find. Both Neusner

(1984, 1988) and Alexander (1984) have explored various reasons why there is nothing like the gospels in the rabbinic traditions. Although the rabbinic material is more anecdotal than are the gospels and some ancient Lives, it still contains enough biographical elements (through sage stories, narratives, precedents, and death scenes) to enable an editor to compile a 'life of Hillel' or whoever. Such an account would have been recognizable as ancient biography, and could have looked like Lucian's *Demonax*. Literary or generic reasons alone are therefore not sufficient to explain this curious absence of rabbinic biography. I have argued elsewhere that to write a biography is to use a genre which concentrates upon a person centre stage; however, for the rabbis, this is where only the Torah should be (Burridge 2000: 155–6; 2004: 338–40). Therefore the biographical genre of the gospels is making an explicit theological claim about the centrality of Jesus—the Christological statement that God is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of this person.

### e. Social Setting and Communities

Furthermore, the biographical genre of the gospels has implications for their function and social setting, which is different from that of other genres, such as letters to particular groups, like Paul's churches. As already noted, form-critical approaches stressed the gospels' *Sitz im Leben*, while redaction criticism led to the development of theories about the communities within which and for which the gospels were produced (e.g. Martyn 1979; Weeden 1971). Further study of the way in which ancient Lives functioned across a wide range of social levels in the ancient world cautions against too limited a view of the gospels' audiences. This has led Bauckham (1998) to argue that such 'community' approaches rest upon a genre mistake and treat the gospels like letters; instead, ancient biographies were written for broader audiences—and the gospels were also intended for such wider circulation around the early churches. Equally, the gospels may well have been read aloud in large sections, or even in their entirety, at meetings or in worship at the eucharist in a manner similar to the public reading of Lives at social gatherings or meal times in Graeco-Roman society. The previous scholarly consensus about the uniqueness of the gospels' genre saw them as a communication produced 'by committees, for communities, about theological ideas'! I have argued instead that their biographical genre means that they must be interpreted as 'by people, for people, about a person' (Burridge 1998: 115, 144). As biographies, they are composed by one person, the evangelist, with a clear understanding of Jesus that he wishes to portray to a wide range of possible readers. Thus, once again, genre is the key to interpretation—and the biographical genre of the gospels has implications for their social function, setting, and delivery.

## f. Using the Gospels in Ethics

The final area to which we want to apply the biographical genre of the gospels concerns New Testament ethics. The biographical-narrative approach to the gospels reminds us that the gospels are not just collections of Jesus' sayings like the *Gospel of Thomas* or Q; nor are they letters containing teaching material, as in Paul. However, many approaches to the ethics of Jesus treat the canonical gospels as though they were like sayings or letters, and just concentrate on his teaching and words. Central to all ancient biography is that the picture of the subject is built up through both their words *and* their deeds. So, to find the heart of Jesus' ethic, we need to consider both his ethical teaching *and* his actual practice. Jesus' ethical teaching is not a separate and discrete set of maxims, but is part of his proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is intended primarily to elicit a response from his hearers to live as disciples within the community of others who also respond and follow. In his appeal for the eschatological restoration of the people of God, Jesus intensified the demands of the Law with his rigorous ethic of renunciation and self-denial in the major human experiences of money, sex, power, violence, and so forth. However, such teachings are set within the context of a biographical narrative about his central stress on love and forgiveness, which opened the community to the very people who had moral difficulties in these areas. Hence he was regularly accused of being 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt. 11: 19; Luke 7: 34).

Ancient biographies held together both words and deeds in portraying their central subject, often for exemplary purposes. Thus Xenophon described Agesilaus as a paradigm for others to follow to become better people (*Agesilaus* 10. 2). Similarly, Plutarch provides examples for the reader to imitate the virtues and avoid the vices described to improve moral character (*Pericles* 1; *Aemilius Paulus* 1). Equally in the gospels, the readers are exhorted to follow Jesus' example in accepting and welcoming others (Mark 1: 17; Luke 6: 36). Paul also stresses the theme of imitation: 'be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1 Cor. 11: 1; Phil. 3: 17; 1 Thess. 1: 6), following the 'example to imitate' (2 Thess. 3: 7, 9). Therefore, as befits a biographical narrative, it is not enough just to outline the main points of Jesus' teaching; New Testament ethics must also include the call to follow his example.

## CONCLUSION

Genre is central to the interpretation of the gospels, as much as to any other form of communication. The scholarly consensus about the unique nature of the gospels which prevailed for much of the twentieth century has come under severe scrutiny

in recent decades, as arguments for the biographical genre of the gospels have become part of a new consensus. Out of these debates, a number of areas for further study have arisen, especially concerning the Christological implications of the biographical genre of the gospels, as well as for their literary relationships, their setting within Graeco-Roman society, and their relationship to Jewish literature, especially the rabbinic material. These areas are now likely to be the focus for further research about the implications and consequences of the biographical genre of the gospels.

### SUGGESTED READING

The standard introduction to Graeco-Roman biography is Momigliano (1971). For a full discussion of the biographical genre of the gospels, see BurrIDGE (2004). The classical texts cited can be found with English translations in the Loeb Classical Library editions.

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