

Exploring the Four Gospels

What is a Gospel?

Gospel as a Mode of Communication

Meaning of the term 'gospel' (*euangelion*):

For Paul it denotes the proclamation of the 'good news' about Jesus (cf. *kerygma*), with parallels in secular Greek texts.

Not necessarily a heading, but a term used in a theological sense to denote the coming of God for salvation (Mark 1:1: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'; cf. Isa. 52:7).

What are the Gospels?

- Historically reliable records of the life and teaching of Jesus?
- A selection of events narrated from the perspective of the Christ of faith rather than the Jesus of history (Bultmann)?
- 'Biographies' of Jesus (Talbert, Burridge)?

Greco-Roman Biographies and the Four Gospels

Biography - *bios*

Biographies - *bioi*

Similarities

- Written in prose form (ca. 20,000 words).
- Selection of events (and speeches) not narrated in a strict chronological order.
- Focus on the last days of the central figure (e.g. biographies by Plutarch and Tacitus).

Plutarch on “Biography”

Plutarch (45-125 CE) wrote fifty biographies of Greek and Roman figures. In the first chapter of *Alexander* he writes about his approach as follows:

In writing for this book the life of Alexander the king...I have before me such an abundance of materials that I shall make no other preface but to beg my readers not to complain of me if I do not relate all of his celebrated exploits or even any one in full detail, but in most instances abridge the story. I am writing not histories but lives, and a man's most conspicuous achievements do not always reveal best his strength or his weakness. Often a trifling incident, a word or a jest, shows more of his character than the battles where he slays thousands, his grandest mustering of armies, and his sieges of cities. Therefore, a portrait painters work to get their likenesses from the face and the look of the eyes, in which the character appears, and pay little attention to other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to dwell especially on things that express the souls of these men, and through them portray their lives, leaving it to others to describe their mighty deeds and battles.

Biographies and Gospels: Differences

- No emphasis on the Jewish roots of the Gospels or on Jesus as the fulfilment of OT prophecies and messianic hopes.
- Gospels are the product of at least forty years of *theological* reflection on Jesus as the fulfilment of the divine plan of salvation.
- Nothing to prepare for the Gospels' emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus.