

The Implications of the Biographical Genre for the Composition and Reception of the Gospels.

1 THE GOSPELS AS BIOGRAPHIES

a) Genre and interpretation

Genre key convention: a kind of 'contract' between an author and a reader.

b) Genre and the gospels

Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann: the gospels are unique, *sui generis* - and not biographies of Jesus. Rise of redaction criticism. Talbert and Aune – back to biography.

c) The generic features of the gospels compared with biography

Sample: Isocrates' *Evagoras*, Xenophon's *Agesilaus*, Satyrus' *Euripides*, Nepos' *Atticus*, Philo's *Moses*, Tacitus' *Agricola*, Plutarch's *Cato Minor*, Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, Lucian's *Demonax* and Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*.

Formal structure: continuous prose narrative, between 10,000 and 20,000 words bare chronological outline, inserted material about the subject.

Content: ancestry, birth, public debut. Aims include apologetic, polemic or didactic. Concentration on subject's death – detailed treatment at the end.

d) The subject of the gospels

25%-30% of verbs have hero as subject plus another 15% to 30% in sayings, speeches or quotations from the person. Jesus is the subject of 25% of Mark plus 20% spoken by him in his teaching and parables. Matthew and Luke both make Jesus the subject of 18%, while about 40% are spoken by him. About half of John's verbs either have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips.

e) Narrative Christology and biographies of Jesus

Christology in narrative form, the story of Jesus. Only a Jesus-centred reading will suffice.

2 REACTIONS AND RESPONSES

a) Reviews and Conferences

Academic journals, church press, British NT Conference, Dublin Colloquium, SBL, USA

b) Articles and Books

Dictionary articles (from *ABD* through *NIB* to *EBC*), journals, larger treatments; critiques (Wills, Vines, Riches) and welcomes (Bryan, NT Wright, Hurtado, Frickenschmidt).

c) Key Questions

Consistent pattern emerged: questions about Jewish background and social setting, plus further questions about the implications – so what? What difference does it make?

3) CHRISTOLOGICAL READINGS OF GOSPELS - Composition

The four living creatures: Ezekiel 1, Revelation 4; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.8-9.

a) The roar of Mark's lion: vividness and pace; conflict in 1-8: The disciples in Mark. Interlude chapters 8-10 raises identity: what kind of creature is this? Jesus is the enigmatic wonder-worker; the eschatological prophet, the Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man.

Jerusalem and the Temple (chaps 11-13). Jesus becomes passive, suffers and dies in dark desolation: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk. 15.34). Even the ending is full of enigma, fear and awe (Mk. 16.1-8).

b) Matthew's human face: the teacher of Israel. Jewish background; Jesus is another Moses, who teaches from mountains (5.1) and fulfils the law and the prophets. Teaching in five great blocks like the Pentateuch, (5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25). mission to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10.6), opposition leads to a new community of faith (18). Woes to leaders of Israel (23). Passion (27.51-54). Resurrection: the division of Israel; (28.1-20).

c) Luke's burden-bearing ox: the Gospel for Gentiles, women and the lowly poor (1.5-2.52). Opposition from the powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus' concern for the poor, the lost and unacceptable, outcasts, women and Gentiles; Passion: the women of Jerusalem (24.27-31) and praying for forgiveness (23.34, 43). Resurrection: ends 'in Jerusalem with great joy, in the Temple blessing God' (24.51-52).

d) John's high-flying eagle: Old Testament eagles: Job 39.27-29; Exod. 19.4; Deut. 28.49. Prologue (Jn. 1.1-18). Opposition from "the Jews" (2-12); disciples (13-17). Passion: Jesus in control, directing events (19.11), organizing his mother and disciple (19.26-27), fulfilling scripture (19.28) until 'it is accomplished' (19.30). Resurrection to comfort Mary (20.14), challenge Thomas (20.26) and restore Peter (21.15-19).

e) Conclusion: Gospels composed as *bioi*, limited space, concentrating on the person of Jesus and a clear authorial literary and theological intention to provide a portrait of Jesus.

4) THE SOCIAL SETTING OF THE GOSPELS - Reception

a) Publication and Delivery

Reading out loud after dinner; length of scroll = 1-2 hours; taken as wholes.

b) Communities or Audiences?

The development of gospel-community hypotheses. *Lives* in philosophical schools? Mostly written for much wider circulation. Community approach confuses biographies/gospels with letters. Idea of indefinite audience much better. Target market or niche?

c) Social function of these texts

Large variety of purposes – praise/blame, exemplary, didactic, apologetic, polemic.

5) RABBINIC MATERIAL AND THE GOSPELS

a) The absence of Rabbinic biography

Traditio-historical analysis often parallels gospel stories with Rabbinic anecdotes. Yet notable absence of Rabbinic biography: Alexander; Neusner.

b) Literary reasons?

Most are anecdotes, teaching than action. Death of sage stories. Yet enough is there to string together to make a *bios* of e.g. Hillel or Shammai.

c) Theological reasons – a Christological focus

Jesus as the centre v Torah at centre; affects composition (shift to Graeco-Roman literary and social world) and reception (making a key theological claim on audience).

Richard A BurrIDGE *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*
(CUP, 1992/ pbk 1995); new revised edition from Eerdmans, 2004.

Richard A BurrIDGE *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* Eerdmans, 1994.

Richard A Burridge & Graham Gould *Jesus Now and Then*, Eerdmans, 2004
See also my chapter in RJ Bauckham, *Gospels for all Christians* (Eerdmans 1998), pp. 113-45.

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