

cites. Future analyses will do well to adopt his more precise nomenclature for describing what they find, but they may wish to step back from quite such an over-enthusiastic quest.

H.G.M. WILLIAMSON

Christ Church, Oxford

BURRIDGE, Richard A., *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman biography*. SNTS Monograph Series, 70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. 306. Cl. £35.00. ISBN 0-521-412293.

Richard Burridge's first book (*What are the Gospels?*) is the most comprehensive and lucid discussion of the genre of the Gospels yet undertaken. The opening argument of the book is that "the study of the genre of the gospels appears to have gone round in a full circle over the last century or so of critical scholarship" (p. 3). Burridge explains that the scholarly consensus in the nineteenth century (Renan, Votaw, et al.) was that the Gospels were examples of Graeco-Roman biography. He then shows how perspectives began to change in the twentieth century. With the advent of form criticism (Norden, Dibelius, Schmidt, Bultmann), the idea that the Gospels are *Kleinliteratur* and therefore *unlike* biographies began to assume greater plausibility. Now, however, recent interest in both literary theory and the Graeco-Roman milieu has reopened the case and cast doubt on the form-critical consensus. The older view of the literary and biographical qualities of the Gospels has been revived.

Burridge's argument now proceeds to a discussion of the way genre has been handled by the major literary theorists. He surveys classical, medieval, Renaissance, neo-classical and nineteenth century theories before concentrating at length on the twentieth century contributions. Relying to some extent on Johnathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, Burridge concludes that genres "are conventions which assist the reader by providing a set of expectations to guide his or her understanding" (p. 38). "Genre," he writes, "is made up of a wide range of features, comprising both form and content several of which play an important part in signalling the genre at the start" (p. 45).

In the next stage of the argument, Burridge takes us on a breath-taking tour of Graeco-Roman biographies: he shows that *bioi* were naturally formed among groups of people who had collected around a charismatic leader; that they frequently functioned within the context of polemic and/or conflict; that they were a flexible genre, adapting and growing over the centuries in which we find them. These three discoveries make room for possible analogies with the Gospels—an observation made in recent years by Stanton, Talbert, Shuler, and others. Burridge wonders whether this resurgence of the nineteenth century consensus concerning the biographical

genre of the Gospels should be described as “the new orthodoxy” (p. 96).

In Part 2, BurrIDGE outlines the four major generic features of *bioi*: opening features, subject, external features and internal features. “How all these features are used and combined forms a conventional set of expectations—the contract, albeit unwritten or even unconscious, between author and reader” (p. 111). Using computer word-search technology, BurrIDGE then provides a detailed analysis of the four features indicated above in works by Isocrates, Xenophon, Satyrus, Nepos, Philo (which predate the Gospels), and by Tacitus, Plutarch, Suetonius, Lucian and Philostratus (which postdate the Gospels). BurrIDGE then examines the Synoptic Gospels followed by the Gospel of John. He finds the same four features in all four Gospels. All of them therefore belong within the overall genre of *bioi Iesou*. Some detailed technical drawings in the appendices helpfully support this thesis.

What are we to make of BurrIDGE’s work?

In a book of this scope, one might expect to find quite a few errors but there are very few. I could only spot two: the claim that there are scribes in John’s Gospel (p. 224), and that keywords like *logos* are not mentioned in John after the prologue (p. 222—see John 6.60). These are of minute significance.

One or two larger problems do, however, remain to be tackled. For example, BurrIDGE often speaks of “*the* reader” in his book. However, there really is no such synchronic entity as THE reader. There are readers who live and who die, at different times and in different cultures. In discussions of an evolving organism such as *bioi*, it really isn’t possible to speak of a reader who, like God, is the same yesterday, today and forever. Some interaction with the reader reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss (which is altogether more historically-minded than that of Wolfgang Iser) would have been helpful here.

Having said that, this is a book which students of the Gospels cannot afford to avoid. David Aune has already described it as the most compelling case for arguing that the Gospels are an example of Graeco-Roman biography. It is a truly astonishing tour de force—interdisciplinary biblical scholarship at its very best. BurrIDGE threads his way with Ariadnian dexterity through the complex labyrinths of classical literature, literary theory and Gospel studies. He articulates his findings in clear prose and well structured chapters—all of them prefaced by well selected quotations from the germane, secondary literature.

Even though I personally would have liked some discussion of the analogies *in content* between the Gospels and some Attic tragedies, I did come away persuaded that the most likely scenario is that the Gospels are indeed members of the *bios* family tree. The author should be congratulated.

MARK W.G. STIBBE

The University of Sheffield