



Review

Reviewed Work(s): What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography
by Richard A. Burridge

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What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography, by Richard A. Burridge. SNTSMS 70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xiv + 292. \$54.95.

This volume by the Lazenby Chaplain and part-time Lecturer in Theology and Classics at the University of Exeter, originally a 1989 dissertation under P. Maurice Casey at the University of Nottingham, contends that the view that the Gospels are literarily unique is false and that a first-century reader would have seen the Gospels as biographies. It falls into two parts: (1) the problem (chapters 1–4), and (2) the proposed solution (chapters 5–10). It concludes with an appendix (analysis charts of verb subjects), a select bibliography, and indices of passages and of names and subjects. It is written by one with a classics background who began with the assumption of the literary uniqueness of the Gospels and wound up contending for their inclusion in the biographical genre of antiquity.

Part One consists of four chapters. The first is a historical survey tracing the full circle of scholarly opinion from the nineteenth century's assumption of the biographical genre of the Gospels through the denial of such a thesis at the beginning of this century to the present reaffirmation of the Gospels' biographical character. The second focuses on genre criticism in modern literary theory and concludes that genres are conventions which assist readers by providing a set of expectations to guide their understanding. The third chapter is concerned with how classicists view genre criticism and Graeco-Roman biography. It concludes that classicists' views on genre are similar to those of modern literary theorists and that Graeco-Roman biography is an extremely flexible genre, admitting works of very different patterns. Chapter four is an evaluation of the recent debate. Most prior attempts to demonstrate the biographical character of the Gospels failed because of either an insufficient grasp of critical literary theory or an inadequate understanding of the nature of Graeco-Roman biography or both.

Part Two consists of six chapters. Chapter five focuses on generic features. They include opening features (e.g., title, preface), subject, external features (e.g., mode, meter, size and length, structure, scale, use of sources, methods of characterization), and internal features (e.g., setting, topics, style, tone, quality of characterization, social setting, authorial intention). Chapter six treats the generic features of five early Graeco-Roman lives (Isocrates, *Evagoras*; Xenophon, *Agesilaus*; Satyrus, *Euripides*; Nepos, *Atticus*; Philo, *Moses*). Each of the five is examined in terms of the generic features of chapter five. The primary similarity derives from their subject—an account of a person, portraying the subject's character through the indirect means of narrating his deeds and words. On the other features there is a high degree of flexibility. Chapter seven treats the generic features of five later Graeco-Roman lives (Tacitus, *Agricola*; Plutarch, *Cato Minor*; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*; Lucian, *Demonax*; Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*). Again, each of the five is examined in terms of the generic features discussed in chapter five. Again, the major determining feature is the subject; all of the works concentrate on one individual. Regarding the other features there is great flexibility.

Chapter eight turns to the Synoptic Gospels. When they are examined in terms of the generic features discussed in chapter five, one can conclude that there is a high degree of correlation between the generic features of Graeco-Roman lives and those of the Synoptic Gospels. In fact the Gospels exhibit more of the features than are shown by works on the edge of the genre, such as those of Isocrates, Xenophon, and Philostratus. The Synoptic Gospels, therefore, belong to the overall genre of *bioi*. Chapter nine focuses

on the Fourth Gospel. Its investigation concludes that John is clearly in the same genre as the Synoptic Gospels, namely, *bioi*. All four canonical Gospels share a common biographical genre.

Chapter ten offers the author's conclusions. As a result of an interdisciplinary study involving literary theory, Graeco-Roman literature and Gospel studies, the author concludes that the four canonical Gospels have as many features in common with *bioi* as *bioi* tend to have in common with each other. These gospels are all *bioi*, Luke as well as the other three. Acts may belong to another genre (but not novel) or it may belong to the biographical genre, either as a list of the lives of the main subject's followers or as a *bios* of the church, in the manner of Dicaearchus' biographical work on Greece, *Peri tou tes Hellados biou*. Many possible genres proposed for the Gospels are actually modal relationships: thus the dramatic, tragic or tragi-comic elements (mode) do not make the Gospels into drama or tragedy (genre), any more than parabolic concepts make them parables. The biographical genre was developed by Christians from Mark, through Matthew and Luke who bring Mark closer to other Graeco-Roman *bioi* and John who pushes the *bios* toward other genres such as philosophical dialogues, to the apocryphal gospels some of which were *bioi* and others different genres altogether.

This volume ought to end any legitimate denials of the canonical Gospels' biographical character. It has made its case. At the same time, it is far from the final word. For example, three questions come immediately to mind!

(1) Why choose just these ten biographies to examine? What difference would it have made if the author had substituted from the early period Nicolaus of Damascus's *Life of Augustus* (which ends with Augustus' entry into the Civil War) and added more of Cornelius Nepos's lives, e.g., "Miltiades"; "Aristides"; "Pausanias" (which begin in mid-career)? One thing it would have done is to lay to rest the oft repeated claim that an ancient biography is an account of a person's life from birth to death. What difference would it have made if he had included among the later biographies Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Epicurus* (which includes within itself a brief narrative of Epicurus's successors and selected other disciples) and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (which stands as the introduction to his *Enneads*)? It would have avoided the claim that a biography focuses on one individual only and would have expanded the scope of possible purposes of *bioi* in antiquity.

(2) What difference would it have made if early Christian biographies had been included in this interdisciplinary study? Instead of an evolutionary model for viewing Christian use of the *bios* genre which sees Mark as a rough appropriation that is improved by Matthew and Luke on the one hand and stretched by John on the other and that is eventually fragmented by some of the apocryphal gospels, one might regard ancient *bioi* as being written in four forms (encomia, prose narrative, dialogue, and collections of sayings), all of which had roots in ancient Greece and which continued into the early Christian biographical tradition. Only consideration of Christian lives avoids distortions due to a narrowed perspective.

(3) What criteria are used to determine subgenres of *bios*? Why are the subgenres, political *bioi*, literary *bioi*, *bioi* of philosophers, etc., more appropriate than those based on social function (what Burridge would call purpose)? I submit that the contention that the gospels are *bioi* is of limited help to interpretation without the further move to subgenres based on social function.

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