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Review

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What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography. By RICHARD A. BURRIDGE. Pp. xiii + 292. (Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series, 70.) Cambridge University Press, 1992. ISBN 0 521 41229 3. £35/\$54.95.

Historiography and Self-definition. Josephos, Luke–Acts and Apologetic Historiography. By GREGORY E. STERLING. Pp. xv + 500. (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, 64.) Leiden: Brill, 1992. ISBN 90 04 09501 2. Gld. 220/\$125.75.

VARIEGATED studies of the genres of early Christian literature are now increasingly on offer. These two revised doctoral theses share some common ground. All literary production and all reading depend, they aver, on at least a tacit awareness of genres, which are flexible and adaptable forms, shaped in practice and discerned by investigation, rather than subject to prescriptive rules. Burridge in particular commends the model of 'family resemblances'. Yet despite this common ground our authors move to rather different conclusions.

Sterling proposes a flexible kind of 'oriental apologetic historiography' developing through Berossos, Apion, and others, on to Eupolemos and so to Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*; but also to Luke–Acts. Luke–Acts is here a work planned as a two-part whole, the early life-story of the Christians, albeit with some years separating the publication of the two parts. It was written to give the Church (as a whole, it is presumed, not just Luke's own circle) a sense of identity, a positive self-definition within the Roman Empire, rather than over against it. Josephus had attempted a similar task for the Jewish people, on a much larger scale, in his *Antiquitates*. (Be it noted, conventional Latinized forms of Greek names are largely but not consistently refused: thus, Josephos, but the Latin title for his work.)

Burrige argues for an adaptable but clearly recognisable genre of Graeco-Roman *bios*, of which all four canonical gospels are certainly instances. Acts is not allowed to complicate the picture; the case for its structural continuity with the gospel is dismissed with the curt observation that no manuscript supports the connection. The positive implications of his analysis for a better understanding of the gospels are fairly general. Thus we should not be surprised to find didactic, apologetic and polemical tendencies in them; and, even more, we should accept that their primary concern is the person of Jesus—Jesus, rather than either God or God's rule.

The first half of Sterling's book takes us in careful and lucid detail through other's discussions of the ancient authors by way of whom the development of the posited genre is traced. Conclusions are carefully graded, and (very commendably) 'possible' nowhere turns to 'probable' to 'assured result'. Yet it is clear that when Josephus writes he is aware of and explicitly cites and quotes and reproduces significant elements of forms of the writings of these others who have before him defended the antiquity and value of their own political and cultural inheritance, but in Greek terms in response to Hellenistic cultural and Roman political dominance, as a form of defensive self-definition. That Josephus has not only cited predecessors but has tacitly modelled his work in part in this way seems clear; it may be doubted, however, whether Sterling has quite justified his conclusion that 'Josephos consciously placed himself and his work in the category of Oriental historiography, i.e. apologetic historiography' (p. 308).

Burridge, claiming a background in Classical studies (and an initial scepticism as to the thesis he now argues), devotes more than a third of his text to an account of the history of discussions of and arguments over genre in Mediterranean antiquity and more recently, with especially attention to the Gospels. He then outlines a set of 'generic features' which he finds fairly regularly displayed in a number of writers earlier than the Gospels (Isocrates, Xenophon, Satyrus, Nepos, and Philo Judaeus) and a further five from a little later (Tacitus, Plutarch, Suetonius, Lucian and Philostratus). Most cogently if obviously he analyses the subject(s) of a writing: only in a *bios* (as distinct even from a history) will a single named person predominate as the subject of verbs and in the nominative. Much less cogent is a suggested criterion by length: 'medium' (10–25,000). In fact some of his own examples are admittedly shorter or longer (Lucian's *Demonax* and Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*). We may note that Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* range much more widely still in length (but the *bios* category seems undisputed), and also recall the similar variety among Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, themselves often explicitly dependent on *bioi* from various earlier times, and so generically significant for him. Burridge's set of models is arbitrary, rendering his argument at this point circular.

It is, then, much more significant than Burridge, for instance, allows, that we can find long 'biographical' sequences in histories. Romulus, Numa, Publicola, and Camillus are treated very similarly by Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives* to the ways they are treated in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities*, as are Joseph and Moses in Philo's '*Lives*' of them and in Josephus' *Antiquities*.

It is particularly significant that Josephus refers us to his *Bellum* for his own *Vita*'s continuation (p. 413): if we want, we can 'read' much of the former not only as a history but also as part two of a *bios*. Thus there is, for instance, perhaps no necessary dispute on Luke–Acts between Sterling and Burridge. Yes, one can read the Gospel on its own as a *bios* of Jesus. But one can also read the two volumes together as the apologetic history of the Christian people. Genres have as many inter-connections and family resemblances as Burridge and Sterling allow in theory—but are reluctant to accept in practice, once they have delineated their chosen models.

It is certainly important to demonstrate genres where early Christian writings (the gospels and others) seem at home. They belong in their world. Their apparent genres also give some important if very general clues to their interpretation. But it is then even more important to give full weight to the many formally acknowledged overlaps and family resemblances between genres, and to continue in practice to compare the contents, *topoi*, motifs of our documents with as wide as possible a range of nearly contemporary writings, resisting any temptation to suppose only those closest in the bracket of a discerned genre are interesting or relevant.

F. GERALD DOWNING

Theios Anēr and the Markan Miracle Traditions. By BARRY BLACKBURN Pp. xii + 334. (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2/40) Tübingen: Mohr, 1991 ISBN 3 16 145503 7. DM98.

THIS monograph is a revision of a Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of Aberdeen in 1986. The author's starting point is T. J. Weeden's Marcan study, *Traditions in Conflict* (1971) which, says Blackburn, is dependent on 'the longstanding view that the portrait of Jesus in the miracle narratives employed by Mark was produced—largely *via* the meditation of Hellenistic Judaism—under the influence of the *theios anēr* concept' (p. 2). In the face of questions about the validity of Weeden's conception of the *theios anēr*, scholars continue to push strongly the interpretive significance of the *theios anēr* for what appear to Blackburn as three basic reasons. (a) Since the Jews who formed the early Church in Jerusalem were stringent monotheists, the miracle traditions surrounding Jesus with a *divine* aura can only have origin-