



Review: Genre and the Gospels

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

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# Review Articles

## Genre and the Gospels\*

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The genre of the Gospels has been a disputed issue in biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment, beginning with the studies of Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (see Detlev Dormeyer, *Evangelium als literarische und theologische Gattung* [Darmstadt, 1989]). The debate is perennial because the issue is not merely a question of labeling but of interpretation as well. The decision to define the Gospels as representing an original Christian genre, a type of biblical or Jewish historiography, or a kind of Hellenistic biography has enormous implications for the choice of the primary cultural context in which to interpret the texts, as well as the perception of the purpose of these documents.

The purpose of Richard Burridge's book was either to give the biographical hypothesis a scholarly footing or to expose it as a false trail. His starting point is twentieth-century genre criticism and literary theory. He agrees with René Wellek and Austin Warren (*Theory of Literature* [1963; reprint, Harmondsworth, 1982]) that genre should be conceived as a regulative concept, an underlying pattern or convention that is effective in molding the writing of concrete works. He agrees further with Alastair Fowler (*Kinds of Literature* [Oxford, 1982]) that genre should be taken, not as an instrument of classification or prescription, but as one of meaning. In considering how this convention functions, he follows E. D. Hirsch (*Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven, Conn., 1967]) and Jonathan Culler (*Structuralist Poetics* [London, 1975]) in speaking of a system or sets of expectations and Heather Dubrow (*Genre* [London, 1982]) in positing a generic contract between author and reader. Burridge defines genre as "a group of literary works sharing certain 'family resemblances' operating at a level between Universals [Aristotle's genres of epic, lyric, and drama] and actual texts and between modes and specific subgroups, and functioning as a set of expectations to guide interpretation" (p. 42).

In his discussion of genre analysis among classicists, Burridge concludes that the last centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E. constitute a

\* Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiii+292 pp.

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period of flexible genres. Referring to Joseph Geiger (*Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* [Stuttgart, 1985]), he notes that the genres of prose were never as clearly fixed as those of poetry (p. 62; cf. p. 58). This conclusion is related to his criticism of Charles Talbert (*What Is a Gospel?* [Philadelphia, 1978]), who divided Greco-Roman biography into five types based on their social functions. BurrIDGE argues that Talbert's approach is too rigid and that many *bioi* actually had several purposes (p. 85).

BurrIDGE acknowledges the lack of clear ancient criteria for defining a *bios* by attempting to define the genre inductively, using a list of generic features derived from modern literary criticism. He has chosen generic features that are likely to reveal the particular pattern for each genre that constitutes the "contract" between author and reader. These include opening features (title, opening words, prologue, or preface), subject (i.e., subject matter or content), external features (mode of representation, meter, size or length, structure or sequence, scale, sources, methods of characterization), and internal features (setting, topics, style, tone, mood, attitude, values, quality of characterization, social setting, occasion of writing, author's intention or purpose) (p. 111). Then he applies this model to groups of ancient *bioi*, one of which predates the Gospels, the other being later. The first group includes the *Evagoras* by Isocrates, the *Agesilaus* of Xenophon (these are encomia, but it is generally agreed that they overlap with the genre *bios*), the fragmentary *Euripides* by Satyrus, the *Atticus* by Nepos, and Philo's *Moses* (p. 128). The second group includes Tacitus's *Agricola*, Plutarch's *Cato Minor*, Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, Lucian's *Demonax*, and Philostratus's *Apollonius of Tyana* (pp. 155–60). He concludes that these works exhibit a similar range of generic features within a flexible pattern.

The final step involves the analysis of the four canonical Gospels according to the same model. BurrIDGE concludes that there is a high degree of correlation between the Greco-Roman *bioi* and the Gospels and that therefore the genre of the Gospels is *bios*. They may constitute their own subgenre because of their shared content, but the *bioi* comprise the "family" to which they belong (pp. 218–19, 238–39). The differences are not sufficiently marked or significant to prevent the Gospels from belonging to the genre *bios* (p. 243).

BurrIDGE is surely correct in taking the position that the last centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E. was a time of flexible genres. But if our goal is the interpretation of texts, it is not helpful to stay at that level of generality. Although it is a necessary corrective to an unrealistically rigid notion of genre as a set of pigeonholes, an emphasis on flexible boundaries and "crossings" between genres and overlapping circles of *genera proxima* does not illuminate what is distinctive about particular genres.

It is appropriate to recognize that *bios* overlaps with moral philosophy, religious or philosophical teaching, encomium, the novel, political beliefs, polemic, and history (although only some of these qualify as genres). Yet it is equally important to define what constitutes the heart of the circle labeled “*bios*” in a genre map, but Burridge does not attempt to do so.

Among the generic features investigated by Burridge, the ones that are most promising for defining the heart of that circle are “subject” and “purpose.” He begins by defining “subject” in terms of subject matter or tone but then redefines it as the grammatical subject of a sentence or verbal form. This shift from broad literary categories to linguistic ones has the apparent advantage of objectivity, but the latter is not guaranteed. While counting the number of times a person’s name appears in a text or constitutes the explicit or implied subject of a verb clarifies in a striking way the focus of a text, linguistic focus may not exhaust the significance of the broader literary notion of subject matter. Text-linguistic procedures must be complemented by inferences based on sensitivity to literary and historical context. The point is not just how often an individual is named, but to what effect; for example, one must ask whether the focus is on the character or achievement of this person for its own sake or as a model to be imitated or on his or her role in a larger historical context. This is a serious issue since Burridge concludes from his survey of ten ancient biographical works that the major determining feature is the subject: all these works concentrate on one individual, and this is the major thing that they have in common. Although he admits that this feature alone cannot “prove” that a text is a biography, he uses it to distinguish *bios* from historical monograph, arguing that *bios* differs from monograph in that it focuses on one person, whereas monograph concentrates on a particular situation, war, or period. He does not address the question of whether a historical monograph necessarily has more than one main actor.

Like the argument about the overlapping of *genera proxima*, the case for the conclusion that ancient *bioi* and the four canonical Gospels had numerous purposes is persuasive, but not especially helpful. It would be more helpful to attempt to distinguish a primary purpose, related to the definition of the genre, which may need to be stated at a high level of generality, from secondary, particular purposes of specific works.

Burridge’s case for defining the Gospels as *bioi* appears strong in large part because he did not seriously consider any alternative. The very brief review of scholarship under the heading “The Jewish Background” on pages 19–21 does not constitute a serious consideration of the relevant genres of Jewish literature. It is certainly essential to interpret the Gospels in light of Greek and Roman literature. But it is equally essential to interpret them in light of Jewish literature. The fact that the Dead Sea

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Scrolls and rabbinic literature pay far less attention to individuals does not free us from that responsibility. Philo's *Life of Moses* is included by Burridge as an example of a Jewish *bios*, but biblical and postbiblical Jewish historiography is not taken seriously as a possible generic model for the Gospels. Whether it is necessary to take the latter genre into account depends in large part on one's answer to the question of whether there was a pre-Hellenistic biblical or Jewish genre that could be labeled "*bios*" or "biography."

The book of Nehemiah has an autobiographical character and may have been inspired by Persian models, as Arnaldo Momigliano (*The Development of Greek Biography* [Cambridge, Mass., 1971], pp. 35–37) has suggested. But there was a much older biographical and autobiographical tradition in the ancient Near East. For example, the oldest type of Egyptian autobiographical text is a kind of funerary inscription, consisting primarily of a catalog of virtues practiced and wrongs not committed, which Egyptologists call the "ideal biography." It is ideal in the sense that the shortcomings of the subject and the ephemera of his life are not recorded; in fact, the same catalog may be used for many individuals. This genre took shape in the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom. In the Sixth Dynasty, truly autobiographical inscriptions were created, in the sense that they recorded specific information about a person's life that applied only to that person. Egyptian autobiographical fiction emerged already in the Middle Kingdom with the Story of Sinuhe. Both genres continued to flourish in the New Kingdom. As Eberhard Otto has shown, the tradition of autobiographical inscriptions flourished throughout the Late Period and on into the Greek and Roman periods of Egyptian history.<sup>1</sup>

With reference to this Egyptian material, Klaus Baltzer argued that there are now materials in the Hebrew Bible that can be called "biographies," that these once had an independent existence apart from their present contexts, and that they have been secondarily incorporated into larger contexts, often as source-material for historiography.<sup>2</sup> Although Burridge does not discuss Baltzer's work in detail, he cites it approvingly, and it has influenced other New Testament scholars as well. Baltzer takes "The Last Words of David" in 2 Samuel 23 as an example of an "ideal

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Edward Wente of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago for guidance in approaching the Egyptian material. For the texts in English translation with introductions and notes, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, vols. 1–2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 1976). For the Late Period, see Eberhard Otto, *Die biographischen Inschriften der ägyptischen Spätzeit: Ihre geistesgeschichtliche und literarische Bedeutung* (Leiden: Brill, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Die Biographie der Propheten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975).

biography.” Unlike the Egyptologists, he does not use this term to designate a text that could apply to various subjects. Rather, it signifies a summary of a life as opposed to the recounting of particular events and the instructional or exemplary character of the summary. David is presented as an example for those who come after, that is, the kings who succeed him.

In Judges 6–8, the story of Gideon, Baltzer finds an example of narrative biography. Following Wolfgang Richter, he argues that this passage is a unified composition, created by editing older, originally independent traditions. Baltzer assumed that this unified composition was also originally independent from its present context, but it is not at all clear that this assumption is justified. It may just as well have been composed precisely for the present context. Similarly, it is not obvious that the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel incorporate originally independent, extended narrative biographies of these prophets. Thus, with the possible exceptions of Nehemiah and the Joseph story, it is not clear that we are justified in speaking of biography as a pre-Hellenistic biblical genre. It seems more appropriate to speak of the use of biographical elements in other biblical genres. For example, the book of Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel may be interpreted as historical fiction or historiography that centers on the activities of certain charismatic leaders. The books of Kings and Chronicles may be seen as annalistic historiography that focuses on the deeds of kings. The genre of the prophetic books is more difficult to articulate, but they should probably not be defined as biographies.

Given the Gospels’ obvious conceptual and literary connection with older Scripture, the fact that it includes no clear example of the genre biography raises a question about the thesis that the Gospels should be defined as *bioi*. If, as Burridge argues, the authors of Matthew and Luke recognized that Mark is a *bios* and, in their own works, brought the Gospel genre closer to Greco-Roman *bioi*, why did they not describe their works as such, as Philo did, rather than as a *biblos* (“book”) in the case of Matthew and a *diēgēsis pragmatōn* (“an account of events”) in the case of Luke? Burridge is right that the Greek titles of the Gospels in the earliest manuscripts show that the Gospels were seen as a literary group together. That this group was connected with the genre *bios*, however, is doubtful, especially since the second-century Christian writer, Justin Martyr, refers to the Gospels as *apomnēmoneumata* (trustworthy notes of speeches and events), and not as *bioi*.

Burridge seems to agree with Dormeyer that the words “[The] beginning of the gospel” in Mark 1:1 refer to the whole account contained in Mark and that this narrative may be called a biography of Jesus. Dormeyer has made a strong case for the literary meaning of *euaggelion* (“gospel” or “good news”) in Mark 1:1 and for the conclusion that it has a rich,

multilayered metaphorical meaning.<sup>3</sup> But alongside his use of the term biography, Dormeyer speaks about the grounding of this metaphor in historical events. In addition, as Hubert Frankemölle has shown, the concept *euaggelion* (the early Christian message as “good news”) is best seen as an early Christian creation, related to the use of the verb *euaggelizesthai* (“to announce good news”) in the book of Isaiah,<sup>4</sup> whose prophecies Mark, like other early Christians, believed were fulfilled in the activity of Jesus and what was done to him.

I would agree with Dormeyer that the author of Mark deliberately chose a narrative genre rather than one like the “sayings of the wise.” But I believe that the genre “historical monograph” has as good a claim as the ancient *bios* to be recognized as the genre chosen by Mark. Albrecht Dihle expressed this alternative well in his remark that each of the Gospels may be regarded as “a decisive segment of a salvation history which began in the remote past and continues in the future.”<sup>5</sup> The “good news” of Mark 1:1 is closely associated with the fulfillment of Scripture and the identification of Jesus as the messiah. The events centering on Jesus, as recounted in Mark, presuppose a larger narrative involving a divine plan for history. This plan was revealed in a prophetic manner in older Scripture and its fulfillment began with the activity of John the Baptist. The final eschatological events are predicted by Jesus in Mark’s narrative, but their actualization is to occur beyond the end of the narrative itself. Thus, the narrative of Mark focuses on the life of Jesus, not because of his exemplary character or cultural achievement, but because of his decisive role in the historical unfolding of the fulfillment of the divine promises.

Thus, Burridge has made a significant contribution to the study of the Gospels, but his book tells only half the story. In his essays on the genre of Mark, Hubert Cancik suggested that we need to address the question of genre from the point of view of different types of readers.<sup>6</sup> Those whose primary point of reference was older Scripture recognized Mark as a prophetic book. Those more oriented toward Greek and Latin litera-

<sup>3</sup> Detlev Dormeyer, “Die Kompositionsmetapher ‘Evangelium Jesu Christi, des Sohnes Gottes’ Mark 1.1: Ihre theologische und literarische Aufgabe in der Jesus-Biographie des Markus,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 452–68.

<sup>4</sup> Hubert Frankemölle, *Evangelium—Begriff und Gattung: Ein Forschungsbericht* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Albrecht Dihle, “The Gospels and Greek Biography,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 361–86; quotation is from p. 380.

<sup>6</sup> Hubert Cancik, “Bios und Logos: Formgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukians ‘Demonax’” and “Die Gattung Evangelium: Das Evangelium des Markus im Rahmen der antiken Historiographie” in *Markus-Philologie: Historische, literargeschichtliche und stilistische Untersuchungen zum zweiten Evangelium*, ed. Hubert Cancik (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1984).



ture perceived it as a *bios*. The current emphasis on the perspective and cultural world of the reader should not lead to the abandonment of the perspective and cultural world of the author. Consideration of the circumstances of the production of a work is as important for interpretation as those of reception. There are numerous indications that the evangelists modeled their works on older Scripture. This perception is all the more significant if doubts can legitimately be raised about the familiarity of these authors with Greek and Latin *bioi*. If they received a normal Hellenistic education, as opposed to an education in a synagogue or Christian school, it is highly likely that they encountered brief literary genres with a biographical character. But such study is not the same thing as acquaintance with extended prose works focusing on the life of an individual and its cultural importance. BurrIDGE concludes that the evangelists would have read some *bioi* because they had reached the upper levels of secondary school education. This conclusion is dubious. As Abraham Malherbe has pointed out, the classical writers were read relatively rarely in their entirety (*Social Aspects of Early Christianity* [Baton Rouge, 1977], p. 43). In secondary schools, handbooks, anthologies, and summaries were used. Although poetry dominated the curriculum, there was a place for prose. The prose authors studied were mainly historians. Rhetorical studies at the third level, and perhaps already in the upper levels of the second, included intensive exercises with the genre encomium. But the genre *bios* does not seem to have been part of the curriculum at any level.<sup>7</sup> If early Christian writers had a conception of Jesus' *bios* and were aware that Greek and Roman *bioi* existed, they may have sought out such works as literary models. But we cannot simply assume that they were well known and available to the evangelists. It should also be noted that familiarity with oral biographical stories is quite different from knowledge and use of written *bioi*.

The evangelists, including the relatively highly educated author of Luke-Acts, are more likely to have been familiar with Greek historiography than with βίοι. It is certainly true that the Gospels eventually came to be read as lives of Jesus, but such readings should be seen as an understandable, but significant, departure from the authors' primary intentions.

The significance of BurrIDGE's conclusion that the Gospels are *bioi* is limited by his admission that "the narrower the genre proposed for the gospels, the harder it is to prove the case, but the more useful the hermeneutical implications; whereas the wider the genre, the easier it is to demonstrate that the gospels belong to it, but the less helpful the result"

<sup>7</sup> On the curricula in the various levels of ancient education, see H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956).



(p. 255). His argument that the Gospels belong to the genre *bios* is relatively strong, but the genre is very wide.

In spite of Burridge's criticisms of Talbert and Dihle (in *Studien zur griechischen Biographie*, 2d ed. [Göttingen, 1970]), it does seem that they were right (or at least more helpful and interesting) in their attempts to articulate a primary or typical function of the genre *bios* (or its subgenres). The exemplary purpose of *bioi* and their focus on character (*ēthos*) as a matter of virtue (*aretē*) and vice (*kakia*) is a significant theme in Burridge's treatment of Greco-Roman biography (pp. 63, 67, 76, 136, 145, 150, 176, 252) and may well qualify as the most distinctive purpose of the genre *bios*. In spite of Burridge's attempt to find something analogous in the Gospels, it is clear that their portrayal of Jesus' "character" and "virtues" belongs to a different cultural context and has a purpose beyond the exemplary. Nevertheless, Burridge has made an important contribution in verifying the intuitive definition of the Gospels as "lives of Jesus." Since this definition tends to obscure the differences between the Gospels and the *bioi* and to mask the similarities between the Gospels and Jewish historical and apocalyptic works, future work should explore the question of whether the Gospels constitute a hybrid or mixed genre, rather than fitting neatly and entirely in the "family" of *bioi*.