

## Chapter 2



# *From Titles to Stories: A Narrative Approach to the Dynamic Christologies of the New Testament<sup>1</sup>*

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It is commonplace within literary theory to talk of texts as windows and mirrors. To read a text as a 'window' is to look through it to that which lies 'beyond', 'behind' or 'on the other side' of the text. With regard to the New Testament, especially the gospels, this approach uses the text to gain access back behind the period when they were written in order to reconstruct the historical Jesus, or to test out hypotheses about the early Church communities. It is a method that has dominated tradition-historical critical study of the New Testament over the last century or more. From a doctrinal point of view, such an approach can also be used to reconstruct early New Testament Christologies lying behind the text, such as early belief in Jesus as Son of Man or a prophet.

The problem is that we just do not know anything about what lies 'on the other side' of the gospels. At least with St Paul's letters, we know who wrote them and usually those to whom they were addressed – except, of course, that both authorship and recipients of many epistles are disputed and the dates of all of them are open to debate. With the gospels, we know

<sup>1</sup> Having first met Colin Gunton at the Society for the Study of Theology in 1994, when I gave a paper on the Christology of the gospels, I am glad to offer this paper as a tribute at the RIST (Research Institute in Systematic Theology) conference dedicated to his memory.

even less about the authors, methods of production and delivery, original audiences and so forth. Thus, while we may think we are looking *through* the text as a 'window' to what lies 'behind it', in fact we may be catching a reflection *in* the text as a 'mirror' of what lies 'in front of it' – namely our own presuppositions or prejudices. Thus exegesis becomes eisegesis and the hermeneutical circle collapses into a vicious circle. It is not surprising therefore that many literary theorists have given up an authorial intention and moved instead to reader-response approaches, concentrating on the meaning found in a text by its audience or reader today. If this is using the text as a 'mirror', at least it is an honest attempt to recognize that this is what we are doing. Systematic theologians and doctrine specialists have always used the New Testament texts to enable them to 'reflect' upon Christian doctrines, especially Christology – and this is another example of such 'mirror' approaches.

Neither treating texts as windows nor mirrors really does justice to the nature of the New Testament books, since they fail to ask questions about the nature of the texts themselves. What kind of glass do we have here? How is it meant to be used? Increasingly, narrative approaches have been adopted by biblical critics over the last decade or two, and these may provide a better direction for the use of the New Testament in Christology in general. Furthermore, such narrative approaches demonstrate that there are a wide variety of differing Christologies within the books of the New Testament which may be more use to systematic theologians and doctrine specialists than more usual 'synthetic' approaches. This essay will explore traditional approaches to the New Testament as a 'window' through titles and historical reconstructions, followed by a consideration of recent alternative approaches, especially those arising from the interpretation of the gospels as biographical narrative.

### Christology through Titles

The History of Religions approach to the New Testament, *die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* – from its early German proponents, particularly from the University of Göttingen, through to Bultmann and others – tended to see an evolutionary development in early Christology, beginning with Jesus as a wandering Palestinian teacher or Jewish rabbi, going through various stages such as healer and prophet within the early Jewish church; and then increasingly he was seen as a divine man or saviour figure within a Hellenistic context, until finally he becomes the Lord of a mystery

cult, otherwise known as the early Christian church. This is, of course, best laid out in Bousset's magisterial treatment, *Kyrios Christos*.<sup>2</sup>

Oscar Cullmann stressed that early Christian theology is Christology. God is identified as the 'Father of Jesus Christ'.<sup>3</sup> He also pointed out that the later Christological controversies were all about the 'person of Christ' or his 'nature', in terms of his relationship to God and within the Godhead, or in terms of his divine and human natures. However, the New Testament 'hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work' (p. 3); the concern is not so much about the nature of Jesus, as about his function. Cullmann was cautious about the comparative religions approach, suggesting that 'Christology had necessarily to conform to the conceptual scheme already present in Judaism or Hellenism' (p. 5). Rather, he saw Christological debate as arising, even during Jesus' lifetime, with the questioning at Caesarea Philippi, 'Who do people say that I am?' (Mk 8.27–29). Since the response includes theological titles such as 'prophet' and 'messiah', Cullmann sets out to examine all the various possible titles in turn. He divides them into titles that refer to Jesus' earthly work (prophet, suffering servant, high priest), to his future work (messiah and Son of Man), and to his present work (Lord and Saviour), before finally considering those that refer to his pre-existence (Word and Son of God). In each case, he looks first at the meaning of the title within Judaism, then at whether Jesus saw himself in terms of this title, and what it might have meant in his life, before going on to analyse the New Testament material about each title. As a result, he argues that New Testament Christology did not arise out of a contemporary mythology, but out of the facts and events about Jesus and through the reflection of the early Church upon *Heilsgeschichte* (pp. 315–28).

Hahn followed a similar approach of concentrating on the titles of Jesus, though he linked them to the evolutionary history of religions concept and contended that the highest ideas of pre-existence and divinity came out of a Hellenistic background.<sup>4</sup>

Moule protested against all of this.<sup>5</sup> He compared the history of religions approach to an evolutionary process, such as the evolution of *homo*

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (ET; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970); German original, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913.

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET; London: SCM Press, 1959); German original, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969); German original, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

*sapiens* from a lemur or ape (p. 2), with a radical change between the early stages of Jesus being seen as a revered master within a Jewish Palestinian setting and then being worshipped as divine Lord by Hellenistic Christians. Rejecting this schema, Moule argued instead for a 'developmental approach' in which the later stages are construed not as new additions but rather as a 'drawing out' of what is already there, analogous not to the evolution of a new species but rather to the unfolding of the flower from a bud, or the growth of fruit from the flower (p. 3). He also criticized as too clear-cut a chronological sequence from early Palestinian Jewish Christianity, through the diaspora into Pauline and later Hellenistic Gentile communities. Nonetheless, Moule still follows the same basic approach by studying titles – first Son of Man, Son of God, Christ and Kyrios – and other descriptions such as corporate phrases or concepts like the Body and the Temple. Further consideration of Paul, the rest of the New Testament, the scope of the death of Christ and the theme of fulfilment, lead him to conclude that his developmental model is a better approach, and he finishes by arguing that all the later Christological ideas are rooted in Jesus' own understanding.

Dunn also follows this method of studying titles.<sup>6</sup> He looks at Son of God, Son of Man, the last Adam, spirit or angel, the Wisdom of God and the Word of God. It is probably the most thorough treatment of the title-based approach and it still repays careful study, especially in the second edition with Dunn's extended response to his critics in a new foreword (pp. xi–xxxix). Dunn's conclusions go against the history of religions approach by arguing that there was nothing in the Jewish or Hellenistic worlds that would have given rise to the idea of the incarnation; while we cannot claim that Jesus believed himself to be the incarnate Son of God, this later development was 'an appropriate reflection on and elaboration of Jesus' own sense of sonship and eschatological mission' (pp. 253–54). It was the resurrection that was the real catalyst, followed by the growing 'backward extension of Son of God language', with Paul's use of Wisdom language bringing the process to the crucial point where John then developed the idea of the pre-existent Word. It is important to note that Dunn does see a really significant break and change with the Johannine doctrine of the incarnation – yet nonetheless views this as an 'appropriate reflection'. Therefore Dunn can still refer to this as an 'evolutionary process' (p. 261), though in his later work he prefers to talk of it as 'unfolding'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM Press, 1980; 2nd edn, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, 'The Making of Christology – Evolution or Unfolding?', in J.B. Green and M. Turner (eds.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 437–52.

Whatever term or metaphor is used, we notice that all of these treatments concentrate on the titles and descriptions of Jesus within the New Testament; they try to study each one separately and then relate them to an overall chronological sequence for the evolution, development or unfolding of New Testament Christology. Thus all of them have a concern for an overall process of Christology within the New Testament – whether that is seen against a background of the history of religions, or as a temporal sequence being traced back to Jesus, and down through the history of the early Church. They all imply that one can talk of ‘New Testament Christology’ as a single enterprise, and they use New Testament texts as a ‘window’ onto it. Whether in fact they are merely catching reflections of themselves or their presuppositions in a mirror remains to be seen!

### Christology from Below: Historical Reconstructions

Both historical sequences and a consideration of titles feature in the various Quests for the historical Jesus: the original Quest, which started from Reimarus and progressed through the works of Strauss, Weiss and Schweitzer;<sup>8</sup> secondly the so-called New Quest beginning with Käsemann’s lecture of October 20, 1953 and leading into Bornkamm, Jeremias and Robinson<sup>9</sup> (which is the background for Cullmann’s, Hahn’s and Moule’s treatments) – and now, with what is increasingly seen as the Third Quest, through the work of E.P. Sanders and Tom Wright in their debate with the Californian school of the Jesus Seminar, represented in particular by Robert Funk, Burton Mack and Dominic Crossan.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, the attempt to provide an historical reconstruction of the life and ministry of Jesus must lie at the heart of any such quest – but it usually involves, or leads into consideration of, the extent to which Jesus saw himself as a prophet, teacher, or Messiah and what he considered his relationship to God and his mission to be. Thus E.P. Sanders’s

<sup>8</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1906); ET *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. & C. Black, 1954).

<sup>9</sup> J.M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* J.B. Green and M. Turner (eds.), SBT, 25 (London: SCM Press, 1959).

<sup>10</sup> B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); R.W. Funk, R.W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

reconstruction of *The Historical Figure of Jesus*<sup>11</sup> sets out clearly the Palestinian context of Jesus' life and ministry, depicts him as a miracle-worker and teacher-healer, and calls him a 'charismatic and autonomous prophet' (p. 238); it then goes on to discuss all the Christological titles such as messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, and so on. Sanders concludes, however, that 'we do not learn precisely what Jesus thought of himself and his relationship to God by studying titles' (p. 248). Instead he argues that Jesus saw himself as 'having full authority to speak and act on God's behalf' and coins the new description of 'viceroy'.

Tom Wright's massive treatment, in three volumes so far, follows a similar line of argument.<sup>12</sup> In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, he entitles his main historical reconstruction 'The Profile of a Prophet' (Part II, pp. 145–474), while Part III attempts to reconstruct 'The Aims and Beliefs of Jesus' (475–654). While Wright uses titles such as Prophet and Messiah, he also argues, like Sanders, that Jesus' self-understanding is crucial; that while Jesus did see himself as a prophet and in messianic terms, Wright concludes that we should 'forget the "titles" of Jesus, at least for a moment'. It is through Jesus' 'vocation' and intimacy with God whom he knew as 'father' that his ideas of sonship make sense, as he enacts the return of God to his people, the 'returning and redeeming action of the covenant God' through his ministry and death (p. 653). Wright has put forward similar arguments in his various more accessible and popular books.<sup>13</sup>

Markus Bockmuehl's response to the Jesus debate uses titles in its subtitle: *Martyr, Lord, Messiah*.<sup>14</sup> He too attempts an historical reconstruction of Jesus' life, ministry and death, and his messianic self-understanding, and relates this to later Christological development and the debates of the early Church. He concludes that 'the emergence of Christology can be seen as an authentic and consequential expression of the Apostolic faith in the risen Jesus' (p. 166).

<sup>11</sup> E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1993); this is the most accessible treatment of Sanders's work, using his large monographs such as *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God: I. The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992); II. *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); III. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), leaving two more volumes still to come.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Oxford: Lion, 1996); *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (London: SPCK, 1999); and his debate with Marcus Borg in *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

Perhaps the most thorough book on the historical Jesus is the *Comprehensive Guide* by Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz.<sup>15</sup> After all the detailed background and setting, this too has a titles-based approach for its main sections. It offers studies of Jesus as a Charismatic (pp. 185–239), Prophet (pp. 240–80), Healer (pp. 281–314), Poet (pp. 316–46), Teacher (pp. 347–404), the Founder of a Cult (pp. 405–39) and Martyr (pp. 440–73). The book concludes with sections on the Risen Jesus (pp. 474–511) and discussion of the beginnings of Christology, again looking at titles such as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God and Kyrios (pp. 512–68). In the end, however, Theissen and Merz attempt ‘a short narrative about Jesus’ since ‘narratives form the basis of identity’ ‘The narrative about Jesus is the basis for Christian identity’ (p. 572).

Finally, we return full circle to Bousset and *Kyrios Christos*. Central to the history of religions approach was the development of Christology from a Palestinian setting for Jesus as a rabbi through to his worship as Lord arising from a Gentile, Hellenistic context. Larry Hurtado has been working for many years on this area of devotion to Jesus and worship of him.<sup>16</sup> His enormous and detailed study, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* has recently appeared.<sup>17</sup> The whole book is a careful reappraisal of the history of religions approach and its claims, with detailed study of Jewish monotheism, the earliest forms of Judaeo Jewish Christianity, Pauline groups, the writing of the gospels and other Jesus books, Johannine Christianity, and on to the second century with its radical diversity and proto-orthodox devotion. After some 650 pages of painstaking research and argument, Hurtado concludes that devotion to Jesus as ‘Lord’ is neither a later, nor a Hellenistic development; rather, worship of Jesus as divine ‘erupted suddenly and quickly’ in the earliest Jewish Christian circles (p. 650). It was the struggle to work out this devotion and belief within monotheism that led to the diversity of approaches within the New Testament and in the first centuries of Christian history. Devotion to Jesus was central then – and today the key question remains: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (p. 653).

Thus the consideration of titles, especially ‘Lord’, has dominated Christological studies of the New Testament for over a century, returning

<sup>15</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2nd edn, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

full circle with Hurtado's homage to, but refutation of, Bousset. Yet increasingly, it has become clear that titles alone will not suffice; they always need to be placed within a narrative – both in terms of a reconstruction of the historical narrative of Jesus himself and the early Church, as well as the narratives about Jesus told by the early Church and contained within the New Testament.

### Protests and Different Approaches

One of the first protests against such a traditional approach to New Testament Christology came in Leander Keck's Presidential address to the Society for New Testament Study (SNTS) at Trondheim in August 1985.<sup>18</sup> Keck's interest in Christology is well known and long-standing. Here, he argued that the preoccupation of scholarship with historical analysis of Christological materials and motifs has produced impressive results – but that the time was at hand to take up an explicitly theological approach to New Testament Christology, for only that can renew New Testament Christology. The formal structure, grammar or syntax of Christology consists of three key relationships or correlations – to God (theological); to the created order (cosmological); and to humanity (anthropological). The last links Christology with soteriology: 'soteriology makes Christology necessary; Christology makes soteriology possible' (p. 363) – and the different Christologies within the New Testament reflect different understandings of the human condition and need.

The problem with the early work of Wrede and others culminating in Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* was that the New Testament was replaced by 'early Christian literature' and Christology was supplanted by history – as is evidenced by the concern about titles: 'probably no other factor has contributed more to the current aridity of the discipline than this fascination with the palaeontology of Christological titles. To reconstruct the history of titles as if this were the study of Christology is like trying to understand the windows of Chartres cathedral by studying the history of coloured glass' (p. 368). Concentrating on titles misses 'christologically-important passages in which no title appears', and cannot deal with the plurality within the texts; furthermore such study misses the whole point of the Jesus-event. Because the study of titles bypasses the syntax of Christology, New Testament Christology must be 'liberated from the

<sup>18</sup> Leander E. Keck, 'Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology', *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 362–77.



tyranny of titles' (p. 370). Instead, we must focus on the texts themselves, including giving attention to their genre, and to their subject matter – 'the construal of Jesus' identity and significance' (p. 372). This will involve a different approach to the 'plurality and diversity of the Christologies in the canon' and the way they are juxtaposed, requiring 'a sustained conversation with fundamental and systematic theology' (p. 374).

It is a pity that this important clarion call is not better known – but Keck has himself tried to carry out some of the things for which he was calling. It is significant that his contribution to the 1999 Festschrift for Jack Dean Kingsbury is placed after eleven separate studies of the Christologies of Jesus, and of each of the New Testament books or authors.<sup>19</sup> Keck draws attention to the different understandings of Christology in the New Testament and shows how study over the last century was dominated by the direction set by Wrede and by Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*, especially through the study of titles. Yet 'the Christology of a text cannot be grasped by concentrating on christological titles used in it'. This is especially true of 'extended narratives like the Gospels ... concentrating on the titles tends to rupture the inherent nature of Christology as bipolar discourse, in which the person and work must be thought together' (p. 196). Thus he again concludes with a call for 'interpreters to think as theologians' (p. 198). He has attempted to answer his own call in his book, *Who is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense*.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, R.E. Brown gave a somewhat different direction to his *Introduction to New Testament Christology*.<sup>21</sup> After a brief introduction for his more general readers, he attempts to reconstruct Jesus' own self-understanding as Christ, and then looks at the different 'Christologies of New Testament Christians', grouping those to do with his Second Coming or Parousia, those expressed in terms of his public ministry and those concerned with his pre-ministry. He concludes by taking the story on into the early Church controversies, arguing in the process that Nicaea is 'faithful to a major direction in New Testament Christology' (p. 147). What is significant for our purposes here is the recognition once again of

<sup>19</sup> Leander E. Keck, 'Christology of the New Testament: what, then, is New Testament Christology?', in Mark Allan Powell and David R. Bauer (eds. *Who Do You Say That I Am?, Essays on Christology in honor of Jack Dean Kingsbury* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999), 185–200.

<sup>20</sup> Leander E. Keck, *Who is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).

different Christologies within the New Testament – and the absence of titles, replaced by consideration of different periods of the Jesus narrative.

Other recent treatments have followed similar paths. Christopher Tuckett discusses the traditional approach through titles in his introduction to *Christology and the New Testament*,<sup>22</sup> arguing that the ‘protest against an over-concentration on christological titles has been well made by several scholars in recent debates’ (p. 11). He considers, however, that they still ‘constitute an important part of the evidence for the Christology of the New Testament’, continues to use them, and offers discussion of such titles as Messiah, Lord, Son of God and Son of Man, and also of angels, and divine attributes such as Wisdom and Word. He then considers the titles in the epistles, gospels and Johannine literature, separately, before concluding with a discussion of the earliest material and Jesus’ own self-understanding.

In contrast, Ben Witherington III argues that such title-based approaches are wrong, being ‘synthetic in character and synchronic in assumption’ (p. 6).<sup>23</sup> Instead of synthesizing all the material about any one title together, regardless of its context or date, we need to realize that all Christological ideas are grounded in historical events. Thus Raymond Brown’s attempt to move away from titles to different periods of the Jesus-event ‘is so helpful’. Witherington stresses that ‘there is a narrative character to much of the Christological discussion in the New Testament’ (p. 4). Thus his treatment is diachronic, starting with the earliest Christologies of Jesus himself and the pre-Pauline Jewish churches through the Christologies of Paul and the gospels and the other New Testament books – and concluding with a discussion of how all of this led to the great debates of Nicaea and Chalcedon. He concludes that ‘there are various Christologies in the New Testament and they do not all blend or dove-tail nicely together’. Nor can we construct a ‘history-of-ideas schema’ where one Christology leads naturally into another. Furthermore, there is no simple graph where ‘low’ Christology means an early date, or ‘high’ is later; some of the higher accounts are very early, while some ‘lower’ assessments persist much later. Thus he concludes, ‘perhaps the model of the sun with various beams radiating out from it is more apt than the linear development model’ (p. 227).

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and his Earliest Followers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Many Faces of the Christ: The Christologies of the New Testament and Beyond* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

So, after this extensive survey, we are back to the basic shift in this essay's title – 'From Titles to Stories: A Narrative Approach to the Dynamic Christologies of the New Testament'. The work of biblical critics on Christology within the New Testament has shifted away from concentrating upon the titles to the 'narratives' about Jesus contained in, or presumed by, the various books of the New Testament. Furthermore, the variety of such narratives within the canon means that we should no longer talk of New Testament Christology as a single entity, but look at the diversity of attempts to understand the person of Jesus within these different texts.

### The Gospels as Ancient Biographies

Let us return for a moment to the image of texts as windows and/or mirrors. We suggested above that both approaches tend to view the text merely as an instrument, either through which we can look for historical reconstruction or in which we can reflect upon our various concerns. Neither approach handles the question of what kind of glass we have here – window, mirror, or something else? This raises the crucial issue of genre, which we need to determine with regard to any text.<sup>24</sup>

A proper understanding of genre is central to the interpretation of any communication. Communication theory looks at the three main aspects of transmitter, message and receiver. In written works, this becomes author, text and audience or reader. Immediately the importance of discerning the kind of communication is clear. If the sender is transmitting Morse code, but the receiver can only understand semaphore there will be problems! Both must use the same language and so correct interpretation depends on a correct identification of the genre. One does not listen to a fairy story in the same way as to a news broadcast. Thus genre is a key convention guiding both composition and interpretation. Genre forms a 'contract' or agreement, often unspoken or unwritten, or even unconscious, between author and reader, by which the author writes according to a set of expectations and conventions and we interpret the work using the same conventions. Genre is identified through a wide range of 'generic features' that may be signalled in advance, or embedded in a work's formal,

<sup>24</sup> What follows is a brief summary of my PhD thesis, originally published as Richard A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS, 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); this has now been substantially revised and updated in a new edition, published by Eerdmans, 2004.

structural composition and content. Taken together, such features communicate the 'family resemblance' of a work – its genre.

Therefore, before we can read the gospels we have to discover what kind of books they might be. Differing understandings of their genre will have differing implications for their interpretation. For much of the ancient and mediaeval periods, the gospels were interpreted on several levels: the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical or mystical readings. The Reformers rejected all readings except for the literal, and on this basis the gospels were interpreted as history – the stories of Jesus, even biographies. This led to their being used as a basis for the production of romantic 'Lives' such as Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863). However, during the nineteenth century, biographies began to explain the character of a person by considering his or her upbringing, formative years, schooling, psychological development and so on. The gospels began to look unlike such biographies.

During the 1920s, scholars such as Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann rejected any notion that the gospels were biographies: the gospels have no interest in Jesus' human personality, appearance or character, nor do they tell us anything about the rest of his life, other than his brief public ministry and an extended concentration on his death. Instead, the gospels were seen as popular folk literature, collections of stories handed down orally. Far from being biographies, the gospels were described as 'unique' forms of literature.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the development of form-critical approaches to the gospels meant that they were no longer interpreted as whole narratives. Instead, they concentrated on each individual pericope, and the focus for interpretation moved more to the passage's *Sitz im Leben* in the early Church.

Redaction criticism concentrated on each gospel's theological interests and the development of theories about the communities that produced them. Once the gospels were seen as a type of 'community' document, then their interpretation focused on the development of groups such as the Johannine or Matthean communities (see, for example, the work of R. E. Brown). However, redaction critics also saw the writers of the gospels as theologians and the development of new literary approaches to the gospels viewed them as conscious literary artists. This reopened the question of the genre of the gospels and their place within the context of first-century

<sup>25</sup> R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, rev. edn, 1972), 371–74.

literature, with scholars such as Talbert and Aune beginning to treat the gospels as biographies.<sup>26</sup>

A generic comparison of a group of different works from different authors will illustrate the nature of any genre. I undertook this exercise with ten examples of ancient biography: Isocrates' *Evagoras*, Xenophon's *Agésilas*, 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*. This is a diverse group deliberately chosen to include the origins of biography in fourth-century BC rhetorical encomia through to third-century AD forerunners of the novel and hagiography. These form a diverse and flexible genre, yet still one with a recognizable family resemblance in both form and content. Many of them were known as 'Lives', βίαι or *vitae*; the word 'biography' itself does not appear until the fifth-century work of Damascius, preserved in the ninth-century writer Photius. Bultmann's statement that the gospels are not biography was a result of comparing them with modern examples and ideas of biography. This is a category error; when using the word 'biography' of both the gospels and ancient 'Lives', we must avoid modern connotations, and compare them with one another to ascertain their shared generic features.

From the formal or structural perspective, they are written in continuous prose narrative, between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length – the amount on a typical scroll of about 30–35 feet in length. Unlike modern biographies, Graeco-Roman lives do not cover a person's whole life in chronological sequence, and have no psychological analysis of the subject's character. They may begin with a brief mention of the hero's ancestry, family or city, his birth and an occasional anecdote about his upbringing; but usually the narrative moves rapidly on to his public debut later in life. Accounts of generals, politicians or statesmen are more chronologically ordered, recounting their great deeds and virtues, while lives of philosophers, writers or thinkers tend to be more anecdotal, arranged topically around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings. While the author may claim to provide information about his subject, often his underlying aims may be apologetic, polemic or didactic. Many ancient biographies cover the subject's death in great detail, since

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977; London: SPCK, 1978); David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987; Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988); David E. Aune (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (SBL Sources for Biblical Study, 21; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

here he reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching, or does his greatest deed. Finally, detailed analysis of the verbal structure of ancient biographies reveals another generic feature. While most narratives have a wide variety of subjects, it is characteristic of biography that attention stays focused on one particular person with a quarter to a third of the verbs dominated by the subject, while another 15 per cent to 30 per cent occur in sayings, speeches or quotations from the person.

Like other ancient biographies, the gospels are continuous prose narratives of the length of a single scroll, composed of stories, anecdotes, sayings and speeches. Their concentration on Jesus' public ministry from his baptism to death, and on his teaching and great deeds is not very different from the content of other ancient biographies. Similarly, the amount of space given to the last week of Jesus' life, his death and the resurrection reflects that given to the subject's death and subsequent events in works by Plutarch, Tacitus, Nepos and Philostratus. Verbal analysis demonstrates that Jesus is the subject of a quarter of the verbs in Mark's Gospel, with a further fifth spoken by him in his teaching and parables. About half of the verbs in the other gospels either have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips: like other ancient biographies, Jesus' deeds and words are of vital importance for the evangelists' portraits of Jesus. Therefore these marked similarities of form and content demonstrate that the gospels have the generic features of ancient biographies.

In the decade or so since I published my thesis, quite a lot of debate has taken place about the biographical hypothesis for the genre of the gospels, including discussions at the British New Testament Conference, the international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and at the annual gatherings of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>27</sup> Increasingly, biblical scholars are recognizing a shift of paradigm away from the Bultmannian *sui generis* approach towards understanding the gospels as some form of ancient biography. This is demonstrated by various dictionary articles which draw upon my work to argue for this new consensus,<sup>28</sup> and by other scholars writing about the

<sup>27</sup> For a full analysis of the debate over the last decade, see the revised edition of *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), chapter II.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Henry Wansbrough, 'The Four Gospels in Synopsis', in John Barton and John Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1001–2; Christopher Tuckett, 'Introduction to the Gospels', in J.D.G. Dunn and J.W. Rogerson (eds.), *The Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 989–99, especially 990–93.

biographical genre of the gospels.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, to answer our question about these texts as windows and mirrors, the sort of glass which they most resemble is stained glass: here the crucial issue is not to look *through* them to what lies behind or on the other side, not at what is reflected back at us *from* them – but rather at the picture of the person portrayed *in* the glass through this biographical focus.<sup>30</sup>

### Reading the Gospels as Christological Narratives

Therefore, if the gospels are a form of ancient biography, composed by their authors and received by their first audiences within the conventions of Graeco-Roman *bioi*, then we must study them today with the same biographical concentration upon their subject, to see the particular way each evangelist portrays an understanding of Jesus. This means that the gospels are nothing less than Christology in narrative form and so their entire accounts of Jesus become relevant for our Christological reconstruction, rather than just certain titles or passages.

One implication of the biographical hypothesis is that the gospels are about a person, more than theological ideas. Therefore the hermeneutical key for understanding them is not to be found in presumed problems in their hypothetical communities, but rather in their Christology. Every passage must be interpreted in the light of the biographical genre of the whole: what this story tells us about the author's understanding of Jesus. This Christological approach can be illustrated easily by considering the notorious problem of Mark's depiction of the disciples as lacking in faith. Despite the suggestion that the disciples are given the secret (μυστήριον) of the Kingdom of God (4.11), they fail to understand, and Jesus gets increasingly frustrated with them especially in the three boat scenes (4.40–41; 6.50–52; 8.14–21); James and John want the best seats in heaven (10.35–45), while they all fail to understand the Passion predictions (8.32–33; 9.32; 10.32–41). Eventually, they fall asleep in Gethsemane and desert Jesus, leaving Judas to betray him and Peter to deny him (14.37–50, 66–72). It is not only scholars who find this picture rather

<sup>29</sup> Dirk Frickenschmidt, *Evangelium als Biographie. Die vier Evangelien im Rahmen antiker Erzählkunst* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1997); see also, Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, chapter 5, 259–347, especially 279 (n. 45) and 281–82.

<sup>30</sup> I first used this image of the gospels as stained glass in a paper for the Society for the Study of Theology when Colin Gunton was President of that Society in 1994, so I am glad to repeat it here; see also my chapter 'About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113–45; see especially 124.

harsh; even Matthew and Luke 'improve' it, so that Matthew turns Mark's 'no faith' (Mk 4.40) into 'men of little faith' (Mt. 8.26), while in Luke the disciples ask Jesus to 'increase our faith' (Lk. 17.5).

Form-critical and redaction-critical approaches seek to solve this problem by relating it to certain groups in the early Church. Thus, Weeden's account is actually entitled *Mark: Traditions in Conflict*; he sees the slow-witted disciples as standing for other leaders, particularly those with a *theios aner* Christology, to whom Mark is opposed.<sup>31</sup> Quite apart from the fact that there are problems over the concept of *theios aner*, such an approach does not do justice to the positive material about the disciples in Mark: Jesus continues to explain things to them (e.g. 7.17–23; 8.34–38; 10.23–31; 11.20–25; 13); he has pity on their exhausted sleep (14.38); and Peter has at least followed Jesus into danger after the others fled, as he promised (14.29). If the disciples represent the wrong leaders, why does Jesus promise to meet them in Galilee (14.28; 16.7)?

Once we read the gospels through the genre of ancient biography, then the Christological key can be used to interpret such passages. The point of each passage is not to tell us about the disciples, but about the biography's subject – namely, Jesus of Nazareth – in this case, that he is someone who is hard to understand and tough to follow. Given both the positive and the negative aspects of the disciples' portrayal, the readers should not be surprised if they find discipleship difficult; yet it is such struggling disciples whom Jesus calls and teaches, despite the difficulties. Thus, reading the gospels in their biographical genre has immediate benefit for their interpretation.

Traditional form-critical approaches to the gospels saw them as a collection of individual pericopae, separated or 'cut off' (περι-κόπτω) from their contexts, strung together like beads on a string with little overall coherence. Redaction critics looked at the evangelists' theological treatment of each story, thus bringing back the author, while narrative critics have redirected our attention back to the story as a whole. Studies such as those by Rhoads and Michie on Mark, Kingsbury on Matthew, Tannehill on Luke–Acts and Culpepper on John have analysed the plot lines throughout each gospel, looking at how the characters develop, how repetition and reference back or forward in the narrative can lead to irony, and how the main themes are resolved in a climax.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> T. J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>32</sup> David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986; 2nd edn, 1988); Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative*



The biographical genre for the gospels takes this another step forward, leading us to expect the depiction of one person, the subject, as understood by another person, the author, leading up to the climax of the subject's death. Instead of a form-critical approach to the gospels as Passion narratives preceded by disjointed pericopae strung together, biographical-narratological readings show how each evangelist traces his various themes through the gospel to be resolved at the Passion.

In my book which followed the publication of my doctoral thesis, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, I attempted to provide such a biographical narrative reading of each gospel, using the traditional images found in books such as the Book of Kells, but using them as 'images of the Son of God' (as Irenaeus put it, in *Against the Heresies* III.II.8–9) rather than of the evangelists.<sup>33</sup> Thus Mark depicts Jesus like a lion who appears almost from nowhere (1.9), who then rushes around, being misunderstood by everybody, including his family and friends and the authorities (3.19–35). The descriptions of Jesus as an enigmatic wonder-worker who binds people to secrecy, the eschatological prophet who will suffer and die in Jerusalem as both Son of God and Son of Man, are held together in complementary tension in a biographical narrative, rather than explained as deriving from different historical traditions. Jesus finds Jerusalem and the Temple as barren as the fig-tree and prophesies their destruction 11–13. He suffers and dies alone in dark desolation: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (15.34) as the Passion brings to a climax all Mark's themes. Even the ending is full of enigma, fear and awe (16.1–8).

In Matthew, however, we have Jesus' Jewish background, genealogy and birth (1–2). He is another Moses, who teaches from mountains (5.1) and fulfils the law and the prophets, giving his teaching in five great blocks like the Pentateuch (5–7, 10, 13, 18, 24–25). Unfortunately, this brings him into conflict with the leaders of Israel. In the Passion, the cry of abandonment is answered by an earthquake as *everyone* realizes this was truly the Son of God (27.51–54; cf. Mk 15.39). Finally, the Resurrection continues with further divine earthquakes and a new Israel on a mountain

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*Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation* 2 vols. (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986 and 1990); R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). See also, Mark Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS, 73; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990; London: SPCK, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Richard A. BurrIDGE, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: SPCK, 1994); 2nd revised edn 2005.

commissioned to go to the Gentiles (28.1–20).<sup>34</sup> Again, the climax resolves all the themes of the Gospel.

Luke begins with a Greek periodic Preface (Lk. 1.1–4) and sets Jesus within the history of both Israel and contemporary Roman rule (Lk. 1.5–80; 2.1; 3.1). Jesus is concerned for the poor, the lost, outcasts, women, Samaritans and Gentiles. He is also the man of prayer (11.1–4). At the Passion he cares for women (23.27–31) and prays for the soldiers and the penitent thief (23.34, 43), committing himself in trust to his Father (23.46). After the resurrection, history looks forward from Israel's past to the world's future (24.44–47). The Gospel ends as it began 'in Jerusalem with great joy', with the disciples 'in the Temple blessing God' (24.51–53; cf. 1.5–23). Such a clear balanced biographical narrative reflects a single author and purpose.

John begins before all time, in the beginning, with God (Jn 1.1–18). Jesus is constantly centre stage and he is characterized as the author interweaves 'signs' and discourse, revealing the effect of meditation and theological reflection upon the person of Jesus. Opposition from 'the Jews' develops through the first half (2–12); at the climax, Jesus gathers his disciples, washes their feet and explains what will happen (13–17). The 'hour of glory' is also the Passion: throughout, Jesus is serenely in control, directing events (19.11), organizing his mother and disciple (19.26–27), fulfilling scripture (19.28) until finally 'it is accomplished' (19.30). After the resurrection he appears as he wishes to comfort Mary (20.14), challenge Thomas (20.26) and restore Peter (21.15–19). Once again, we have a clear portrait of the ministry of Jesus culminating in his death and resurrection.

These four individual accounts, each concerned with the resolution of their particular themes, were composed by four writers, each portraying a particular view of Jesus in the manner of ancient biography. The fact that the Fathers chose to keep four separate accounts in the canon, despite the problems of plurality and possible conflict,<sup>35</sup> demonstrates that they recognized these works as coherent single accounts of Jesus – and therefore

<sup>34</sup> For a good comparison of Matthew with Mark, see J.L. Houlden, *Backward into Light: The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus according to Matthew and Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> For the four-fold canon and plurality, see T.C. Skeat, 'Irenaeus and the Four-Fold Gospel Canon', *Novum Testamentum* 34.2 (1992): 194–99 and Oscar Cullmann, 'The Plurality of the Gospels as a Theological Problem in Antiquity', in his collection, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology* ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 37–54, translated from the original German article in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1945): 23–42; see also Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, 25–27, 164–79.

they need to be read in that way today. This also raises interesting theological questions about plurality and diversity within the limits of the canon. Morgan sees this as offering both a 'stimulus' to produce more 'faith images of Jesus' as well as a 'control' upon them.<sup>36</sup> In his arguments for 'the illocutionary stance of biblical narrative', Wolterstorff draws upon my work on biographical genre to argue that 'the gospel narratives are best understood as portraits of Jesus',<sup>37</sup> while Barton similarly uses my material to reflect upon 'Many gospels, one Jesus?'<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates that the biographical focus upon the person of Jesus in interpreting the gospels as Christological narrative is much more productive than just concentrating upon titles alone.

### The Central Christological Claim

Interpreting the gospels as biographical narratives also illustrates the part played by Christological controversy in the parting of the ways between the synagogue and early Church, especially in the light of the absence of any rabbinic biography or parallels to the gospels with Jewish literature.

Individual gospels' pericopae are often compared with rabbinic material. Thus, Rabbi Michael Hilton and Fr Gordian Marshall OP in *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism: A Study Guide* compare Jesus' sayings with rabbinic sources. The Great Commandment (Mk 12.28–34 and the parallels in Mt. 22.34–40 and Lk. 10.25–28) is compared with a *Sifra* passage from Rabbi Akiba on Lev. 19.18, Genesis Rabba 24.7 (on Gen. 5.1), and the famous story from the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31A, of the different reactions from Shammai and Hillel when asked to teach the whole law to a Gentile enquirer standing on one leg: Shammai chased the questioner away, while Hillel repeated the Golden Rule as the sum of the whole Torah, with the rest as commentary, but still to be learned. Hilton concludes that 'Jesus at his most "rabbinic" engaged in lively debate and answering some of the same questions as the rabbis'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Robert Morgan, 'The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels', *Interpretation* 33.4 (1979): 376–88; see especially 386.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 249–60.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen C. Barton, 'Many Gospels, One Jesus?' in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 170–83, especially 178–79.

<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Michael Hilton with Fr Gordian Marshall OP, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism: A Study Guide* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 34.

An international symposium on Hillel and Jesus held in Jerusalem in June 1992 devotes some 170 pages to comparisons of their sayings!<sup>40</sup> Philip Alexander notes that 'the overriding feeling is one of astonishment at the convergence of the two traditions'.<sup>41</sup> Alexander has written extensively on such rabbinic writings, and how New Testament scholars should use this material.<sup>42</sup> He collected together some rabbinic stories to compare 'Rabbinic biography and the biography of Jesus', concluding, 'there are parallels to the individual pericopae, and at this level similarities are very strong. In terms of form, function, setting and motif, the rabbinic anecdotes are very close to the Gospel pericopae, and there can be little doubt that both belong to the same broad Palestinian Jewish tradition of story-telling'.<sup>43</sup>

Since Bultmann and other form critics saw the gospels as strung together like beads on a string, we might expect rabbinic stories to form similar accounts of Hillel, Shammai or others. Yet, this is precisely what we do *not* find, much to everybody's surprise. Thus Philip Alexander concludes his study of 'Rabbinic biography and the biography of Jesus' thus: 'there are no Rabbinic parallels to the Gospels as such. This is by far the most important single conclusion to emerge from this paper ... There is not a trace of an ancient biography of any of the Sages ... This is a profound enigma'.<sup>44</sup>

Jacob Neusner has devoted much study to this question. In his 1984 book, *In Search of Talmudic Biography*, he states that 'there is no composition of tales and stories into a sustained biography'.<sup>45</sup> He followed this with an analysis of *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?* The stories about sages were never compiled into biographical narratives or gospels: they are 'the compositions no one made'.<sup>46</sup> In *The Incarnation of God* again he stresses: 'While the two Talmuds present stories about sages, neither

<sup>40</sup> James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns (eds.), *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> P.S. Alexander, 'Jesus and the Golden Rule', in *Hillel and Jesus*, 363–88; quotation from 388.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Philip S. Alexander, 'Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament', *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 74 (1983): 237–46.

<sup>43</sup> Philip S. Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus: A Survey of the Evidence', in C. M. Tuckett (ed.) *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983* (JSNTSup, 7; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 19–50; quotation from 42.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus', 40.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob Neusner, *In Search of Talmudic Biography: The Problem of the Attributed Saying Brown Judaic Studies*, 70 (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 33–38.

one contains anything we might call a “gospel” of a sage or even a chapter of a gospel. There is no sustained biography of any sage.’<sup>47</sup> Finally, he answered the claim of similarities between the gospels and Jewish material with *Are There Really Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels?*<sup>48</sup>

In the symposium on Hillel and Jesus, Gottstein notes the ‘basic differences between the nature of Talmudic literature and the nature of the Gospels. We have no Talmudic Gospel of any Rabbi.’ He accepts my conclusions: ‘Following Burridge’s discussion, the present discussion assumes Gospel writing to be a form of biography’ and concludes ‘One could therefore ask why we do not have any instances of rabbinic biography’.<sup>49</sup>

One might explore, first, possible literary reasons for this absence. After all, most rabbinic material is comprised of anecdotes, which are more about a rabbi’s teaching than his actions. Many of the stories are dialogues that lead up to the actual saying, without any narrative at the start to set the scene. Thus the rabbinic material is more like Q or the *Gospel of Thomas*; that is, it has the genre of sayings, *logia*, more than biographical narrative. Philip Alexander says that the rabbinic stories have an ‘intensely oral character ... against the more prosy “written” style of the gospels’. They are ‘extremely compressed, allusive, witty, dramatic and learned’; more like bits from a play to be performed than a text to be read, intended for oral circulation, not in written form.<sup>50</sup> In *The Incarnation of God*, Neusner applies a ‘taxonomy of narrative’ to the material and finds ‘five species of the genus narrative’.<sup>51</sup> The problem with this is that ‘narrative’ is neither a genus nor a genre in itself according to most literary theory of genres, and his five ‘species’ are not clearly identified as subgenres.

However, the basic point is clear, that the rabbinic anecdotes are directed more towards sayings than actions. Yet, this would not prevent their being compiled into an ancient biography. Lucian’s *Demonax* has a brief preface and account of the philosopher’s life, followed by a large number of anecdotes all strung together, each composed mainly of dialogue leading up to a pronouncement or decision by the great sage – yet

<sup>47</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 213.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Are There Really Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels? A Refutation of Morton Smith* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, 80; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> A. Goshen Gottstein, ‘Jesus and Hillel: Are Comparisons Possible?’ in *Hillel and Jesus*, 31–55; quotations from 34–35.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, ‘Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus’, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Neusner, *The Incarnation of God*, 214.

it is still called a 'life', *bios*. In fact, the *Demonax* is more loosely structured with less integration of teaching and activity than even Mark's Gospel.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, although the rabbinic material is more anecdotal than are the gospels and some ancient lives, it still contains enough biographical elements (through sage stories, narratives, precedents and death scenes) to enable an editor to compile a 'life of Hillel' or whoever. Such an account would have been recognizable as ancient biography and have looked like the *Demonax*. Literary and generic reasons alone are therefore not sufficient to explain this curious absence of rabbinic biography – which brings us back to theological reasons arising from their Christological focus. Since biography directs the audience's attention to the life and character of the subject, the decision to write a biographical account of Jesus has important Christological implications. Equally, the failure to write, or even compile from the anecdotes, any biographies of the rabbis also has significant implications.

Neusner argues that this is because the individual sages are not at the centre of attention. '*Sage-stories turn out not to tell about sages at all; they are stories about the Torah personified*. Sage-stories cannot yield a gospel because they are not about sages anyway. They are about the Torah ... The gospel does just the opposite, with its focus on the uniqueness of the hero.'<sup>53</sup> Alexander makes the same point: 'The obvious answer is that neither Eliezer nor any other Sage held in Rabbinic Judaism the central position that Jesus held in early Christianity. The centre of Rabbinic Judaism was Torah; the centre of Christianity was the person of Jesus, and the existence of the Gospels is, in itself, a testimony to this fact.'<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Michael Hilton says: 'The Gospels can thus be regarded as a kind of commentary on Jesus' life, in much the same way as the Rabbis comment on biblical texts.'<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Gottstein in comparing Jesus and Hillel stresses that 'Gospel writing would be the product of the particular religious understanding of the messianic, and therefore salvific, activity of Jesus. The lack of Gospels in rabbinic literature would then be a less significant issue, since no salvific claim is attached to any particular Rabbi.'<sup>56</sup>

Thus the literary shift from unconnected anecdotes about Jesus, which resemble rabbinic material, to composing them together in the genre of an

<sup>52</sup> See my discussion of the *Demonax* in *What are the Gospels?*, 166, 170–71.

<sup>53</sup> Neusner, *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?*, 52–53; his italics.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus', 41.

<sup>55</sup> Hilton and Marshall, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Gottstein, 'Jesus and Hillel', 35.

ancient biography constitutes an enormous Christological claim. Rabbinic biography is not possible because no rabbi is that unique and is only important as he represents the Torah, which holds the central place. To write a biography is to replace the Torah by putting a human person at centre stage. The literary genre makes a major theological shift that becomes an explicit Christological claim – that Jesus of Nazareth is Torah embodied.<sup>57</sup> So our study of genre puts Jesus at the centre and this itself is a key Christological claim which is much more important than any individual title or theological explanation.

### The Plurality of Dynamic Christologies in the New Testament

In this essay, we have concentrated on the shift from Christological titles to the biographical narratives about Jesus in the four gospels. Space does not permit detailed examination of the rest of the New Testament, but here too there has been a move away from merely considering the various titles and descriptions used about Jesus to looking at the underlying narrative that informs the author's account or is presumed by what he says.

For example, Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road was not just a turning point in his life, but also in his theology. From then on, the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the implications of new life 'in Christ' are crucial for Paul's understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. Furthermore, Paul's Christology is also set in an eschatological framework. Christ is the key pivot of the ages, the means whereby the new age has broken into the present through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus while Paul has little of the biography of Jesus' actual earthly life or ministry, the story of the whole Christ-event has become his dominating Christological narrative. Similarly, the other New Testament books may not be in narrative genres, but they still have underlying narratives which reveal their various understandings of the person of Jesus.

Thus both the history of religions evolutionary approach and the common method of studying Christological titles have proved incorrect or unhelpful, despite the amount of material written on them over the last century. Indeed, the time has come to move away from the singular idea of New Testament Christology, for this essay has demonstrated that there are

<sup>57</sup> Jacobus Schoneveld, 'Torah in the Flesh: A New Reading of the Prologue of the Gospel of John as a Contribution to a Christology without Anti-Semitism', in Malcolm Lowe (ed.), *The New Testament and Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Studies in Honor of David Flusser*, (Emmanuel, 24/25; Jerusalem: Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, 1990), 77–93.

lots of different Christologies within the New Testament. If we go back to the image of text as stained glass, we have a whole gallery of different portraits, each of which needs to be studied in its own right, not for what we can see through it or is reflected by it, but for the picture it contains. Furthermore, these pictures are not static, but dynamic as they move and develop. They should not be combined into an overarching single narrative, still less an amalgam, but allowed to speak each for themselves, bearing in mind Witherington's warning that an early date does not necessarily equal a 'low' Christology, nor need later mean 'high'.<sup>58</sup>

The use of the New Testament, especially by theologians and doctrine specialists must respect this diversity of Christological portraits. This means considering the narrative of each book, taken as a whole, rather than just looking at the titles. If we do this, we will be then be confronted by the central Christological claim in all the New Testament texts, that only in Jesus is God to be understood, and by his Spirit we are able to do that.

<sup>58</sup> Witherington, *The Many Faces of the Christ*, 227 – see note 23 above.