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What is a 'Gospel'? Recent Studies in the Gospel Genre

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Judith A. Diehl
Denver Seminary

Abstract
This article is a brief review of two main paths of biblical scholarship with respect to the 'gospel' genre. The NT Gospels appear to be similar to other ancient literature in some ways, yet distinctive enough in content, form, theology and purpose to set them apart from other literature. The analogical approach shows how the Gospels were written in a form similar to other written documents of that time and culture. In contrast, the derivational approach attempts to show that the Gospels are unique and exclusive in all of literature. While the search for the 'historical Jesus' is not over, literary criticism has now set the Gospels within the concept of 'story', with all its literary implications. Scholars have suggested that the 'Gospel of Mark' is the first of its kind, becoming the foundational paradigm of the Gospel genre. Further, the discovery of ancient 'apocryphal gospels' has encouraged scholars to compare the NT Gospels to the non-canonical documents. The challenge of clearly identifying the 'Gospel genre' continues, as scholars try to understand the nature of both canonical and non-canonical stories of Jesus.

Keywords
Gospel genre, Historical Jesus, Jesus Seminar, Literary genres, NT Gospels

Introduction

Not too long ago, a film was produced called *To End all Wars*. It is presented as a true story of an American soldier who gave his life to save the other men imprisoned with him in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. In the film, he is nailed to a cross and burned in front of the terror-filled eyes of his fellow prisoners; but it is the Japanese soldiers who seem to be the most affected by this man's unbelievable actions. The film is visually vivid and emotionally charged; it graphically portrays an incredible human love and self-sacrifice. In many ways, it parallels the story of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament, so many viewers

Corresponding author:
Judith A. Diehl, Denver Seminary, Denver, Colorado, USA
Email: drjdiehl@comcast.net

think of it as a 'modern-day Gospel' story. The pertinent question is, could this film be a 'Gospel'? Does such a film fit the literary genre of a 'Gospel'?

In view of such questions, this article is a review of the biblical scholarship that has contended with the question of the Gospel genre. The word 'Gospel' is attached to four books in the Christian New Testament, and many scholars have observed over the years that they appear to be unique forms of literature. If the Gospel genre is a definable literary category, what characteristics define it as such? Where did the genre originate? How do the four canonical Gospels differ literarily from other so-called 'non-canonical gospel' documents, if, indeed, they do? While we may be able to define their literary nature and characteristics, we must consider whether or not the canonical Gospels are exclusive in literature, or patterned after other written documents that were created during a similar time period. Recent scholarship has examined the Gospel genre, in an attempt to better understand the nature, purpose and function of the canonical Gospels.

1. Background of the Gospel Genre

a. Function of Genre

Within the broader topic of literary genres, the distinction of 'genre' (or, a kind or type of written literature) had a 'normative function' that was established to set up appropriate boundaries for the creative author. Guelich writes that in more modern times, a literary genre is more 'descriptive', and more flexible in nature. Unfortunately, this tends to add to the confusion of the type of literature that we read in the NT Gospels. Guelich adds that we are now observing that genre has an 'interpretive' function, aiding and affecting the reader's interpretation and comprehension of a literary text (1991a: 173). The genre of a piece of literature, then, takes on a very critical role to help determine meaning and understanding for the reader. In terms of the NT Gospels, Guelich uses the term 'genre' in the 'descriptive' sense; that is, as readers, we understand the term to be describing a certain type of literature. We can categorize the literature of the Gospels as we place other literary works into their appropriate genres. By definition, 'genre' is used as a broad literary term that encompasses an entire literary work, which may be a compilation of individual parts, or 'forms' or 'sub-genres' (1991a: 174). Hence, current scholarship continues to search for various solutions to the questions concerning the genre of the NT Gospels. We have recognized the importance of 'seeing the big picture', and of understanding the literary genre of a complete biblical document; yet, such a task is not as easy as it may seem. Concerning the genre of the NT Gospels, Blomberg queries,

> Are they unadorned works of history or biography? Are they extended myths? historical fiction? In short, how do we assess the genre or literary form of an entire 'gospel'? (1997: 107).

b. Etymology of Gospel

For the purposes of this article, it is worth explaining how we use the English word 'gospel'. If the word 'Gospel' (capitalized) is the title of a written document, then 'gospel' (lower case) is used in reference to the *kerygma*, or the proclaimed message. Horbury outlines how the use of the Greek verb *euangelizo* (εὐαγγελίζω 'to announce', or 'to bring good news') and the noun form, *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον 'a message or proclamation') developed from the OT concept of a 'messenger', or one that is sent 'to tell the good news' (2005: 12). He concludes that the OT concept of a 'messenger of good news' moved into the NT concept, 'in the sense of the good news of God's reign', and thus, into our English word 'gospel' (2005: 12). Thus, he sees a clear OT foundation of divinely appointed messengers who 'bear tidings' or specific messages given by God for the benefit of his people.

For the early Jewish readers of the NT Gospels, the concept of the 'good news of God', or the 'gospel', would have been a continuation of the OT messages; the new 'gospel' is an extension of the old message of God's redemption and reign on earth. This message is uniquely expressed in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Snodgrass speaks of a distinction between 'the gospel *of* Jesus' and the 'gospel *about* Jesus'. The 'gospel *of* Jesus' is the distinct message and ministry of Jesus; the 'gospel *about* Jesus' is the 'good news' preached by the early Christian church. The 'gospel' message preached by Jesus on earth is the basis for and the backbone of the 'gospel' message that was expounded by the church after his death and resurrection (Snodgrass 2005: 31).

c. Critical Approaches: History, Forms and Sources

While the word 'gospel' appears to be rather straightforward by definition, modern critics have questioned the historical reliability and the literary manner in which the written 'gospel' message has been passed down over the centuries. That is to say, for some people, the authenticity of the man Jesus, his actions and his message is dependent upon the authenticity of the preserved documents that have been labeled 'Gospels'. The analysis of the biblical texts as they relate to the historical man Jesus began in the early twentieth century. Scholars began a search for the 'historical Jesus', and the sources that lay behind the creation of the four NT Gospels (Guelich 1991b: xiii). The scholarly search for the 'historical Jesus' affected the manner in which the canonical Gospels were read and interpreted. For example, Schweitzer's book in 1903 concluded that the message of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels was created out of 'apocalyptic strands within first-century Judaism' (see Guelich 1991b: xiv).

Later in the twentieth century, the findings of the Jesus Seminar (which began in 1985) renewed scholarly interest in discovering the 'historical Jesus'. The Seminar included more than 150 scholars who participated in discussions

concerning the 'authentic deeds' of the 'historical' Jesus. One aspect of their conclusions, which is concerned with the type of literature found in the NT Gospels, is worth noting in full:

> Scholars theorize that the NT Gospels were composed during the last quarter of the first century by third-generation authors on the basis of folk memories preserved in stories that had circulated by word of mouth for decades. The oral stories the four evangelists recorded had been shaped, reshaped, augmented and edited by numerous storytellers for a half century or more before achieving their final written forms. As they retrace the trail that leads backward from the earliest surviving papyrus records to the earliest written gospels, to the first storytellers and collectors of Jesus lore, scholars hope to isolate some traces of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. It is a long and faint trail often obscured by myth and legend. The quest for the historical Jesus is a subtle, often frustrating, but not entirely hopeless enterprise that requires an open mind and a reservoir of patience (Funk 1998: 2).

In addition to the historical methods, scholars in the twentieth century employed more tools of research: source criticism, form criticism, redaction activity, and literary methods of study. This was a period of 'rigorous historicism, guided by a purely historical concern' about the Gospels and about the life and message of Jesus (Guelich 1991b: xiii). The nature and content of the NT Gospels were torn into numerous pieces and regarded 'under the microscope' to find the true nature of Jesus and the content of his message. Identification of an over-arching, specific 'gospel genre' did little to aid scholars in their search for original material and editing activity; more emphasis was placed on 'dismantling the written Gospels' than seeing the whole entity and placing it within a category of known or unique literature (Funk 1998: 8).

In fact, Kloppenborg comments that the 'logical extension' of form criticism would be an investigation of the larger 'compositional units' such as a 'gospel'. He further notes that form criticism did not regard the literary larger units. He admits, 'the result is that the study of literary genres employed in Christian writing was for a long period largely ignored' (Kloppenborg 1987: 1).

The German intellectual schools of the twentieth century suggested that the written canonical Gospels were preceded by a significant period of oral transmission of what has been called the 'Jesus-material'. Form critics broke the texts into pericopes, anecdotes, parables, story units, or forms, and they discovered what appears to be editorial 'seams'. Accordingly, the NT Gospels reflect individual units of material, woven together by the Gospel authors or editors (Funk 1998: xii, 9). A broad array of familiar material, 'miracle stories, pronouncement stories, *chreia,* parables, aphorisms, other types of discourse', were collected from all around the Greco-Roman world, and became the 'building blocks' of the canonical Gospels (Funk 1998: 9). The fundamental assumptions of form criticism led Gospel research into two different directions: first, the isolation of literary forms or units contributed to the deconstruction of the texts; second, redaction criticism

responded to strict form criticism by giving more credit to the authors of the Gospels, who wove the pieces together to create the document (Guelich 1991b: xv).

More research employing an historical-critical approach led scholars to uncover the early 'facts' associated with the four Gospels. Scholars attempted to determine who the original authors were, the identity of the original recipients, and the particular intentions, purposes and occasions of each Gospel. With the historical-critical approach, the Gospels were seen as 'windows onto the historical Jesus' and 'windows onto the historical early church' (Burridge 2005: 102). Finally, the redaction critics recognized that the Gospel writers participated in the formation of the Gospel form by using existing sources, oral and written, as well as other known forms of literature that existed at the time of their writings. As creators and editors of the texts, the NT Gospel writers revealed their own theological perspectives on the Jesus-story. The redaction-critical approach suggested the possible 'authorship by committee', where layers of editions and additions were added to a Gospel text. This approach also complicated the theories of the original recipients by introducing the concept of 'communities'; it was recommended that a specific group or church lay behind each Gospel, with its own set of issues and conflicts (Burridge 2005: 102).

As a consequence of these studies, literary (or narrative) criticism, including the discussion of literary genre, was over-shadowed by other critical methods of evaluating the canonical Gospels. The literary approach views the text as a whole, in contrast to form and source criticism. Of the literary approach, Guelich writes, 'this approach shifts the perspective from the text perceived as a window through which one views the past to the text itself as the object perceived as a whole' (1991b: xvi). The foundational concept in literary analysis is that literature (or a written text) is produced as communication, transferred from a sender to a receiver (Burridge 2005: 100). The literary approach sets the NT Gospels squarely within the concept of 'story', with all its implications. While narrative and literary approaches depend heavily on form- and source-critical findings, the literary approach also draws attention to artistic forms, such as nativity accounts, farewell discourses, dramatic and judicial forms and construction. There is a conscious effort to see the Gospels as artistic creations, with the features and characteristics of a well-written story (i.e., characterization, plot, imagery, point of view). Thus, the texts became a 'window for the modern reader, not just the ancient communities' (Burridge 2005: 104).

As the twentieth century came to a close, the issue of genre became extremely important for Burridge and other scholars. Burridge insists that the genre of a written document sets the tone, expectations and context between the author(s) of the text and the recipient(s). It is the vehicle that 'guides both the production and the interpretation of the text' (2005: 104). He uses this imagery to picture genre: if the historical-critical approach is a 'window', and if the literary approach is a 'mirror', then 'we need to ascertain what kind of "glass" we have here' (2005: 104). He extends his imagery by saying,

> the gospels are neither a window nor a mirror, but more like stained glass. One can look 'through' them to what lies behind with the historical method, and use them to reflect upon what is 'in front of' them—but the crucial element is the actual portrait of the person 'in' the glass (2005: 113).

d. Two Paths of Debate

Guelich comprehensively sketches a brief history of the scholarly debate concerning the genre of the four NT Gospels. He follows the discussion down two paths: one is *analogical*, and the other is *derivational* (1991a: 175). First, some scholars have attempted to draw an analogy between the NT Gospels and other types of literature. This concept attempts to show how the NT Gospels followed in the footsteps of other forms of Jewish or Greco-Roman literature. Second, and in contrast, other scholars have attempted to show how the Gospels are 'derived *sui generis*'; they are unique, and came into being irrespective of any other literature (1991a: 175). The following discussion of current Gospel genre follows these two paths, which equally demonstrate how scholars have debated the creation of the Gospel genre. In addition to these two paths, there is one other consideration that must be addressed in the current gospel genre debate. While scholars were searching for the 'authentic' words of the 'historical' Jesus, remarkable non-biblical documents (including numerous ancient texts which were labeled 'Gospels') have been discovered which also affect the way scholarship views the genre of the four canonical Gospels.

2. Analogical Approaches

We begin by looking at the analogical approaches to the 'gospel genre' discussion. Scholarship began by assuming that the four canonical Gospels were similar to other known literature at their time of writing. Scholars have attempted to show how the NT Gospels compare to various forms of ancient literature: Jewish (or Semitic) literary forms, and Hellenistic literature.

a. Semitic Literature

First, scholars have suggested that the four canonical Gospels are similar in nature to a variety of Semitic literature. More specifically, the canonical Gospels may have been patterned after Jewish 'historiography' ('history-writing'). Ancient Jewish writers were highly selective and artistic in the narration of the historical events, so it would not have been unusual for the authors of the Gospels to adapt this form of historical writing; they could arrange the story material by topic rather than by chronological sequence (Blomberg 1997: 107).

Some scholars argued that the 'Gospel of Mark' was a composition well within the 'Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic tradition'. It could also fit into the category of a Jewish historical narrative. While this Jewish background helped the author of 'Mark' to form and frame his composition, rarely was his Gospel actually put into that specific genre category (Guelich 1991a: 176). Other scholars have observed the extensive use of the OT in the NT Gospels, and have argued that the individual Gospels constitute a Jewish 'midrash', or commentary on the OT writings. For example the genre of the 'Gospel of Matthew' may not be a biography at all, but a commentary on Mark's Gospel and 'Q' (Blomberg 1992: 47; 1997: 107). It has also been suggested that the 'Gospel of Mark' was written in a form similar to the Jewish 'biography of a righteous person', not unlike the stories of the OT prophets (Guelich 1991a: 176; Evans 2005: 135-36).

For Guelich, however, the comparison to ancient Jewish literature is 'incomplete'. It is difficult to maintain the formal parallelisms in form and material between the NT Gospels and various Jewish forms of literature. In his opinion, the NT Gospels do not 'demonstrate the proper formula and material for such a genre' (1991a: 176).

b. Hellenistic Literature

Second, and more common, scholars found the Gospels to be analogous in form and structure to ancient biographical literature. In this view, the authors of the four canonical Gospels framed their narratives in a similar fashion to familiar Hellenistic literature. Forms of Greco-Roman literature that may have been possible examples for the NT Gospels include dialogues, comedies or tragedies from the ancient theater, *chreia* and *apothegms* (Guelich 1991a: 183; Blomberg 1997: 107). Two suggested forms are the Greco-Roman biography (*bioi*), and the Greco-Roman *aretalogies*, which are exaggerated stories of the feats of a 'divine man' who lived in the past.

One of the most important early works on the genre of the Gospels was written by Votaw. Although his small volume on the NT Gospels was published in 1970, his essays were published very early in the *American Journal of Theology* (vol. 19, 1915). Votaw argues that the four canonical Gospels are biographies of Jesus, in the nature and form of ancient Greek literature. Biographies were prolific in the ancient world from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE; Greek historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Polybuius were biographiers (1970: 6). Two classes of men were the primary subjects of ancient biographies, 'the great political leaders (warriors and statesmen)' and 'the great intellectual leaders (philosophers and teachers)' (1970: 8). In Votaw's opinion, the closest parallels to the Gospels are from books written by Arrian, Xenophon and Philostratus, who reported the lives of well-known and highly respected Greeks: Epictetus, Apollonius, and Socrates (1970: 10). While he sees numerous

parallelisms between the Greek biographies and the Gospel accounts of Jesus, Votaw is also quick to admit that apparent parallelisms cannot be 'pressed', but can be applied in a 'general, slight and superficial way' (1970: 62).

'The Gospels', Votaw points out, 'are not chronicling but dramatic productions' (1970: 5). They were not written to relate chronological events as much as to 'eulogize their subjects, to affect political opinion and action or to teach uprightness and usefulness by example' (1970: 7). Thus, he concludes that the NT Gospels are not exactly 'biographies' in the 'historical sense', but they are biographies in the 'popular sense' (1970: 5). With such a definition in mind, Votaw suggests that the Gospels fit rather neatly into the category of the 'popular Greek biography'.

In 1977, Talbert outlined the similarities between the NT Gospels and Greco-Roman biographies, reminding us of earlier scholars including Votaw and Renan. Renan, in 1863, wrote that the Gospels were 'documents which present themselves as biographies of the founder of Christianity' (Talbert 1977: 1). Talbert defines the ancient biography as a 'prose narration about a person's life'; it is a narration that apparently gives historical facts, which are selected to relate that person's character or 'essence'. The purpose of such a narration is to affect the actions and character of the reader (1977: 17).

Talbert put into a clear question what he considered to be the 'problem': do the canonical Gospels actually fit the category of Greco-Roman biographies and share common characteristics with this genre of literature? (1977: 15). Talbert was not satisfied with Bultmann's critical conclusions concerning the 'problem'. Critics such as Bultmann assumed that the literary genre of the Gospels is defined by its content, function and attitude. Those critics assumed that because the content of the 'gospel message' was unique, then it follows that the Gospels are unique in literary form, function and point of view. Contra Bultmann, Talbert believed that criticism has, indeed, affirmed the fact that the literary form of the NT Gospels emerged out of the gospel message (the *kerygma*) preached in the early church (1977: 7). His volume supports the idea that the canonical Gospels 'do, in fact, belong to antiquity's genre of biography' (1977: 15).

In 1971, Koester attempted to confront the genre issue when he suggested that there are four types of 'primitive Gospels': 'sayings gospels, miracle gospels, revelation gospels and the canonical type of gospel' (1971: 158-204). He observed that the first three types have parallels in the ancient non-Christian world (i.e., there is a collection of Hellenistic miracle stories, and revelations appear in Jewish apocalyptic writings). Koester deemed that the fourth category, the 'canonical type of gospel', was uniquely created by the early church and was centered on the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In addition, the canonical type of gospel included material from the other three observed types. In keeping with his ideas of form criticism, the term 'gospel' was expanded to indicate a variety of types of Jesus-material within the canonical books. Despite extensive form-critical work, Talbert was of the opinion that Koester does not adequately answer

the question concerning analogous literary parallels to the canonical Gospels from the non-Christian world (Talbert 1977: 9). Following the research of Talbert, more specific genre forms were proposed to define more precisely the broad term of 'biography'. For example, the genre of the 'Gospel of Matthew' could be more narrowly defined as 'an encomium or laudatory biography'. This specific genre elevates a person of the past, with an emphasis on his or her character and merit through his or her deeds, sayings and virtues (Guelich 1991a: 180-81). Yet, this narrower genre definition was not quickly adopted for all the NT Gospels. Hence, because there is such a great variety of ancient 'biography' forms, scholars have found it difficult to demonstrate a clear parallel between the NT Gospels (which differ from each other) and one specific type of Hellenistic literature.

c. Responses to the Analogical Approach

That the NT Gospels were derived from analogous literature was not accepted without sharp scholarly arguments. Investigations into the historicity of the Gospels included some doubt concerning the reliability of their suggested 'biographical' literary genre. Bultmann, for example, rejected the idea that the Gospels were 'biographies'. He argued that ancient biographies describe human beings, while the NT Gospels present Jesus in 'mythical' terms as a divine being. Second, Bultmann distinguished the canonical Gospels from other 'cultic legends' because these 'cultic' stories were spread as a result of use in community worship ritual. Third, Bultmann claimed that the NT Gospels reflect the fact that the early Christian believers had removed themselves from actual world history and culture as a result of an 'eschatological' mind-set (that is, they ignored the present world in hopes of a better, future world). Therefore, the NT Gospels must have emerged out of communities that looked at a promising future not of this world. In contrast, the ancient Greek biographies were produced by writers who affirmed the world in which they lived. Talbert deduces that Bultmann is suggesting that the NT Gospels are 'merely the end product of a traditio-historical development or evolution that is unrelated to the generic forms which existed independently of the milieu in which the Jesus tradition moved' (Talbert 1977: 7; Bultmann 1951a: 86).

At the time of his writing, Aune points out that NT scholars generally rejected the analogical approach. There was general agreement that 'the gospel form was the unique creation of early Christianity, without substantive parallels in the literature of the Greco-Roman paganism or early Judaism' (Aune 1981: 9). Aune directly responds to Talbert's attempt to place the NT Gospels in the ancient Greco-Roman biography genre. He suggests that Talbert 'unwittingly misinterpreted the ancient evidence to such an extent that his book is unusable in its present state' (1981: 11). He says his own 'severe judgment' of Talbert is supported by his own research into Greco-Roman traditions concerning myths, heroes and the deification of mortals (1981: 11). While Talbert proposes three arguments to demonstrate the cultic function of some

Greco-Roman biographies, Aune determines that Talbert's arguments are 'based entirely on inference and speculation, not on hard evidence' (1981: 40-42). What is Aune's answer to the genre question? Unfortunately, he side-steps the issue, saying that 'it does not appear that a satisfying solution to the problem of the genre of the gospels can be proposed which could overturn the critical consensus that the gospels are unique' (1981: 44). Finally, at Talbert's expense, Aune concludes that the genre issue is a 'literary problem, not a theological one', and that more research needs to be done in the area of genre (1981: 44, 48).

Because there is no clear choice for one analogous form of Greco-Roman literature, Guelich concludes that all the analogical approaches tend to be 'inadequate'. He contends that these approaches are unable to

> provide comparable literary parallels sufficient to offer an appropriate genre (e.g., biography, apocalypse, aretalogy) or to offer an aetiological basis for explaining the particular form and materials of the Gospels (e.g., narrative history, tragicomedy); one comes again to the possibility that the Gospels stand apart having no precise parallels within literary genres (1991a: 185-86).

In agreement, Blomberg says that none of the analogical connections can account for 'certain dimensions' of the Gospels; no suggested form can account for all the features of the NT Gospels (1997: 107).

3. Derivational Approaches

If the analogical approaches inadequately explain the creation and genre of the NT Gospels, then perhaps they are totally distinctive without any literary parallels or equals. Guelich outlines three possible explanations as to why and how the NT Gospels are unique in all of literature. The first possibility is that the Gospels are a result of an 'evolutionary process of early Christian tradition'. Second, perhaps it was the 'creative genius of Mark who gave rise to a new literary product'. Third, the creation of the Gospel genre may be attributed to an accepted outline used in 'early Christian preaching' (1991: 186, 192). Nevertheless, as appealing as it is to say that the NT Gospels are unique, it is still necessary to account for the foundational shape and content of the documents. On what basis was the new literary form created? Thus, we must examine more closely the three derivational approaches suggested by Guelich.

a. Evolutionary or Constructive Model

The German scholar Dibelius labeled the broad message of the Gospels as a 'sermon', which was used and adapted by various early Christian communities in their different situations to reach new believers. While there was a great deal of oral Jesus-material, the heart of the gospel message was the death and resurrection

of Jesus. The passion narrative was the central 'early mission *kerygma*' while other oral traditions and Jesus-material were added to fill out the story. The other material became illustrations for the central passion narrative 'sermon'. Dibelius arrived at his 'constructive' model because he wanted to 'reconstruct' the process of oral tradition becoming written text. The form of a 'sermon', he believed, allowed for the shape and the content of the gospel message to be transmitted to new communities (Guelich 1991a: 187; Dibelius 1965: 22-27).

However, Güttgemanns questioned the adequacy of Dibelius's 'sermon' concept to account for the Gospels' original shape and content. Güttgemanns theorized that even if there was a commonly accepted message, or a 'unified *kerygma*' that was transmitted orally, it had to be shaped and adapted as it was developed into a written form. A simple 'sermon' presentation does not adequately account for the shape and function of the 'Gospel of Mark', much less the other written accounts (Guelich 1991a: 189; Güttgemanns 1970: 97-100).

b. Mark and Genre

The second approach suggests that the genre of the NT Gospels is a new literary form, created and invented by the writer of the 'Gospel of Mark'. On the one hand, most twentieth-century scholars surmised that the canonical 'Gospel of Mark' was the first gospel document written, so it established a new and unique literary genre. On the other hand, it is difficult to know whether the author of Mark's Gospel simply collected material for his written account, or whether he was a creative, literary genius who invented a whole new type of literature.

In the last century, the historical-critical approach proposed that there were earlier forms of literature, or historical predecessors, which influenced the composition of the canonical Gospels. One interesting example is a theory that assumes that 'Mark' was formed from an earlier Gospel which has been lost to us. In the 1920s, Vannutelli advanced the concept that the three Synoptic Gospels were actually Greek translations from a Hebrew manuscript that he called 'proto-Matthew' (Trocmé 1975: 12). Subsequently, Vannutelli revised his theory and surmised that the 'Gospel of Mark' was written first. It was a record of Peter's sermons, presumably abridged, from an 'Aramaic Matthew' that highly resembled the present, Greek, canonical 'Gospel of Matthew' (Trocmé 1975: 13). Thirty years after Vannutelli's theories, Vaganay agreed that the source of 'Mark' was a 'proto-Matthew' document, translated from Aramaic. Further, he suggested a 'dual source theory' (not unlike the theory of 'Q') to account for the material common only to 'Matthew' and 'Luke' (Trocmé 1975: 14). The author of 'Mark' was a 'compiler', who 'borrowed' from an earlier source, from some kind of 'proto-Gospel' or an Aramaic 'simple gospel' which no longer exists (Trocmé 1975: 27, 31).

If not an evolution from an ancient written predecessor, perhaps the basis for Mark's Gospel was simply units of oral tradition which existed in the early

Christian communities before the *kerygma* was written down. Guelich takes this position by arguing that there cannot be a discussion about the Gospel genre without beginning at the beginning, which is the opening words from Mark's Gospel: 'The beginning of the *gospel* about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1.1; my emphasis) (Guelich 1991a: 194). Mark's written account begins with a message related to the prophet Isaiah, and the ministry of John the Baptist (1.2-8). This implies a connection between the prophetic messages of the OT and Mark's account of Jesus in the NT. Guelich concludes that, 'the explanation of Mark's use of "gospel" may lie in the tradition rather than in the evangelist's creative genius' (1991a: 198). The repeated traditions of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that are found outside of the Gospels (see, for example, 1 Cor. 15.3-5 and Rom. 1.3-4) indicate that the author of Mark's Gospel was writing down an already-accepted message ('gospel') about 'God's Son' (1.1) (1991a: 198).

Moreover, Peter recounts the 'gospel message' in Acts 10.34-43. In his sermon, Peter refers directly to the 'gospel message': 'the message of God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ'. (Acts 10.36). Thus, Guelich states,

> [i]f one takes genre to consist of a work's form and material viewed as a whole, this tradition underlying Acts 10:34-43 anticipates the literary genre of gospel, since Mark's Gospel directly corresponds formally and materially with this tradition (1991a: 201).

The 'Gospel of Mark', then, was created by the author's selection of material, his arrangement and structure of traditional narrative and saying units that were traced to the oral tradition of Acts 10.34-43. 'To the extent that Mark first put the "gospel" in *written* form, he created a new literary genre—the gospel. The literary gospel ultimately represents the Church's gospel in narrative form' (1991a: 202).

c. Primitive Christian Preaching/Proclamation

Dodd suggests a third approach. While recognizing the primacy of the 'Gospel of Mark', Dodd proposed that 'Mark' follows and expands on a basic outline of 'apostolic preaching', similar to that which can be found in Acts 10.34-43 (Guelich 1991a: 192). Dodd indicates that there was a unified, early Christian message, in the form of 'apostolic preaching', which was held in common by Paul, by Peter, by the author of Acts, and by the four Gospel writers. This concept assumes that there was an early preaching outline, common in historical context and tradition, which was the basis for the composition of the 'Gospel of Mark' (Dodd 1951: 46-55).

Along the same lines, Lane determines that Mark's Gospel 'introduced to the Roman world a type of popular literature previously unknown' (Lane 1974: 1). In response to Lane, it seems paradoxical to observe a 'type of popular literature' that is 'previously unknown'. Regardless, Lane contends that it was the 'mission

proclamation of the early Christian community' that shaped the form of Mark's Gospel (Lane 1974: 1). He regards Mark's Gospel as 'a witness document' that was intended to be neither an historical account nor a biography, but simply a 'proclamation'. The opening words of the Gospel emphasize Mark's 'preaching' or 'proclamation' of τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ('the joyful tidings, or the good news'). The text then takes on the form of an 'historical narrative' that culminates at the crisis of Jesus' death (Lane 1974: 1). The proclamation reaches a climax at Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Messiah' (8.29), and the latter half of the Gospel clarifies what that title requires. Lane also notes the lack of reference to the resurrection of Jesus in Mark's narrative. In his opinion, 'Mark' is a passion-story which proclaims Jesus as the Messiah (Lane 1974: 2; Evans 2005: 145-46). As a 'new' proclamation, Mark's Gospel was unique in its content, especially if we assume that it circulated in a non-Jewish, non-Christian, Greco-Roman culture. Following the basic literary foundation set by 'Mark', 'Matthew' also presents the 'gospel' message as a form of proclamation. In agreement, Stanton suggests that the author of 'Matthew',

> is clearly thinking of his account of the words and deeds of Jesus as *εὐαγγελίον* (*euaggelion*). By using the same term *εὐαγγελίον* both for the proclamation of Jesus (4:23; 9:35) and for that of the Church of his own day (24:14; 26:13), he underlines the *continuity* between them (1991: 272; his emphasis).

Certainly the content was unusual, but the proclamation presentation of the Jesus-story does not fully indicate whether the author of Mark's Gospel used a known literary form as a background for his story, 'borrowed' a recognized literary genre which he adapted, or simply created a brand-new form of literature to communicate his new and unusual 'proclamation'.

d. Responses to the Derivational Approaches

While Mark's Gospel appears to be unique in its literary structure and content, Funk and the Jesus Seminar critics did not believe that it was an exclusive creation. Historically, they could not prove that it was a unique literary document. The Jesus Seminar participants surmised that the 'Gospel of Mark' was probably created out of 'oral stories and clusters of sayings', as well as 'some fragmentary written traditions' (Funk 1998: 17). While the basic framework of 'Mark's' plot may be unique, some of the stories and sayings that are placed within the narrative framework 'do not always or necessarily cohere with that frame' (Funk 1998: 20). They suggested that this implies an insertion of other material into the Markan story. Following 'Mark', 'Matthew' and 'Luke' adopted this framework and overall plot development. Yet, the framework and arrangement of events and sayings in the Fourth Gospel are completely different from those of Mark's Gospel (see also Evans 2005: 143). These scholars point out that the historical

accuracy of both the Synoptics and John's Gospel cannot be true at the same time (Funk 1998: 20). Therefore, they cast great doubt on the theory that the 'Gospel of Mark' was the first of many documents within the same literary genre.

The Jesus Seminar participants concluded that the canonical Gospels, beginning with 'Mark', were composed entirely of known materials, similar to a patchwork quilt: oral reports, written materials, a birth story or an infancy narrative, a common passion narrative, as well as stories of the empty tomb, appearances of the risen Jesus and his ascension, which were all tied together in various ways by the four Gospel authors (Funk 1998: 22). With regard to historical accuracy, the Seminar scholars concluded that,

> [The] passion narrative is actually an appendix to the materials that form the body of the gospel. The passion is regarded as the work of scribes, who were probably not part of the original circle of illiterate peasant followers and believers. The passion was created by scripturally sophisticated apologists sitting at their writing desks creating a narrative largely out of the fact of Jesus' execution coupled with suggestions derived from prophetic texts and the Psalms and inspired by tales of the suffering righteous heroes of Israel. In general, very little on the passion narrative is now believed to be based on historical memory (Funk 1998: 23).

Generally speaking, by the time of the Jesus Seminar in the late twentieth century, scholarship did not acknowledge that Mark's author was the creator of a brand-new literary genre. Though Mark's Gospel was recognized by most as being the first NT Gospel written, it was not considered to be a unique literary production. In fact, Trocmé concludes that,

> the author of Mark was a clumsy writer unworthy of mention in any history of literature. But that is not the real issue. What is important to understand is the real reason for the surprising prestige Mark's Gospel enjoyed among the second generation of Christians (1975: 72).

Evans believes Trocmé is 'much too harsh' and that he regards the view of current scholarship as a 'compositional' approach to 'Mark' (2005: 135). Because of the trend in scholarship was to take apart the text, analyzing sources, forms and layers of redaction, it was seemingly less helpful to investigate the larger context, literary genre parallels and similar types of literature.

4. Current Considerations

We have seen how the discussion of Gospel genre has generally followed two paths of debate, the analogical approach and the derivational approach. If a scholar like Guelich concludes that the analogical approach is 'inadequate', and the derivational approach 'still leaves key questions unanswered' (Guelich 1991a: 194), how are we to regard the literary nature of the canonical Gospels today? The genre debate continues as to the nature and contents of a 'gospel' or 'the Gospels'.

a. Newer Analogical Approaches

Currently, there are those scholars who are taking another look at the analogical approach to the genre of the NT Gospels. Some NT scholars currently maintain the opinion that the Gospels are a blend of historical narrative and literary adaptation. In the footsteps of analogical scholars before him, Burridge considers the NT Gospels as examples of the Greco-Roman *bioi* (singular, the *bios*) form of literature. In agreement with earlier scholars, he notes the fact that ancient biographies were written for a variety of purposes, but their main focus was on one person and how the reader was to understand that person (Burridge 2005: 113).

Not unlike the earlier 'primitive gospels' of Koester, Wright suggests that the canonical Gospels contain numerous 'personal vignettes and anecdotes, almost all about Jesus', which are not the same thing as the 'gospel themselves'. Wright maintains that the canonical Gospels are 'a unique combination of Hellenistic biography and Jewish history' (1992: 418). He supports the form-critics who detect smaller units of material within the longer units within the entire context of a Gospel (1992: 419). This form-critical analysis allows the modern reader to find characteristics of the oral and written forms that were known to and used by the early followers of Jesus. On the one hand, Hellenistic literature had its own distinct forms which may have been familiar to the early Christians. First-century readers, for example, would have recognized an *apophthegm*, also known as *chreia*, which is 'a short story leading up to a pithy saying' (Wright 1992: 428). On the other hand, the Jewish tradition of story-telling is uniquely expressed in the NT Gospels, especially in the general story of God's great acts of redemption of his people. Perhaps early Hellenistic written forms were altered by the early Jewish Christians who had a foundation of Yahweh stories, and who anticipated a 'messianic figure'; thus, the unique Gospels are the end-product of this union (Wright 1992: 435).

Wright gives great consideration to the so-called 'Q-material', or 'sayings material', which some scholars consider to be key parts of the 'Gospel of Matthew' and the 'Gospel of Luke'. Wright connects this 'sayings material' (from the purported discourse of Jesus) with the non-canonical 'Gospel of Thomas', which has been labeled a 'sayings gospel'. Wright states that both the 'Q-material' and the 'Gospel of Thomas' have 'dramatically changed NT scholarship in the last few years' (1992: 436). Recognition of such 'sayings' sources in early Christian literature outside of the NT Gospels has forced scholarship to separate the Hellenistic (specifically 'Gnostic') material from the historically Jewish material (including, for example, the reference to the 'kingdom of the Father' in the 'Gospel of Thomas') (1992: 440). Nevertheless, Wright outlines his perceived weaknesses in the 'Q-and-Thomas' hypothesis. He says the 'Gospel of Thomas' stands apart from the NT Gospels and represents a 'radical translation, and indeed subversion, of first-century Christianity into a quite different sort of religion'. Thus, the 'Gospel of Thomas', with no traditional Jewish narrative, is neither the 'original text' from which the longer, canonical Gospels are derived, nor are the canonical

texts 'distortions' of an original 'sayings' gospel (1992: 443). Finally, Wright would agree that the NT Gospels were not written in a vacuum; each was written within a time, geographic place and surrounding culture. Though thoroughly distinctive from all other similar literature, all four Gospels reflect aspects of common Greco-Roman biographical literature as well as Hellenistic Jewish literature of their day.

While his 2007 book centers on the Fourth Gospel, Bauckham covers a broad spectrum of Gospel studies. He presents the concept that the Gospels are an interesting blend of history and literary adaptation. 'Historiography can be reliable or unreliable, accurate in some ways, inaccurate in others, written according to various different conventions of literary representation of what happened' (2007: 94). In agreement with Burridge's study of the Gospels and the category of the Greco-Roman biography, Bauckham notes that 'biography is a form of historiography in the general sense of writing about the past' (2007: 94).

Bauckham confirms that the archaic writers made a distinction between what they considered to be 'history' and that which was called 'biography'. Their view of history was concerned with human leaders, actions and national politics. Historical literature placed its emphasis on affairs of the state, written intentionally to glorify the past and the present. Biographies were 'personal stories', about 'eminent individuals' (2007: 94). However, the form of the ancient *bios* was not set in concrete, and the genre developed over years of use. As a result, the line between history and the personal story was blurred. Bauckham argues that John's Gospel is definitely within that part of the 'spectrum of types of ancient biographies where the genre of biography overlapped with that of historiography' (2007: 19). Bauckham believes that there was a literary 'flexibility' that was apparent at the time the NT Gospels were written, and the early Christians adapted both the historical and the biographical aspects of Greco-Roman literature to suit their own culture and their own needs. In terms of his own contribution to the genre discussion, he adds that,

> the contemporaneity of the [Fourth] Gospel with the history it recounts—in the sense that the events were still within the memory of at least one still living witness, the author—must be a decisive factor in the audience's perception of the genre. In the view of the ancients, history could really only be written within the period in which the author could, if not himself an eyewitness, at least interview still living eyewitnesses (2007: 19).

Beyond the scope of Burridge's study, Bauckham asks the pertinent question, 'where should the Gospels be placed in relation to the whole variety of works that comprise this generic category?' [that is, the ancient *bios*] (2007: 95). This is where he lets us down. Bauckham stops short of answering that question, confessing that scholarship 'still lacks an adequate typology of the Greco-Roman bios' (2007: 95). He is certain that some ancient biographies are more historical than others; we should therefore evaluate the canonical Gospels as to the extent to which they reflect both the requirements of a biography genre and those of a

historiography genre. Interestingly, he concludes that, rather than being the least historical of the four Gospels, the 'Gospel of John' is the closest to meeting the requirements for an 'ancient historiography' (2007: 95).

Lincoln also focuses on the veracity of the Fourth Gospel. More generally, Lincoln's main point is that the genre of a Greco-Roman biography did not guarantee total accuracy in reporting, as we modern readers expect from our biographical literature (2007: 185). He quotes Miller, and her words are worth repeating here:

> In antiquity, biography…had its own unique characteristics and sustained historical veracity was not one of them. To impugn the integrity of a Greco-Roman biography on the basis of factual discrepancy is to misconceive the literary tradition of the genre to which it belongs (1983: 5).

Lincoln relates that, for the ancient readers, a biography contained important events which had taken place in their past, and were then shaped and interpreted for present training and guidance. Such stories may have received 'embellishments' and may have even contained what we would call 'fictive' elements; this was expected and did not concern the ancient reader (2007: 185). Thus, it is Lincoln's opinion that if we assume that the ancient Greco-Roman *bios* is the paradigm of the NT Gospel accounts, biblical readers today should not expect 'factual accuracy of each detail of the narrative' (2007: 186).

In addition, Blomberg supports the ancient biographical genre as a basis for the canonical Gospel, with the understanding that,

> [n]one of the Gospels is a history or biography of Jesus according to modern standards of precision in reporting, accuracy in quotation, or nature of materials included and excluded. Nevertheless, Matthew, like the other three Gospels, and particularly Mark and Luke, measures up quite well when compared with ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman histories and biographies (1992: 46).

He concludes that the best genre for the canonical Gospels is the 'theological biography', because there is good reason to study the Gospels 'historically, theologically, and literarily'. He suggests that unless we take all three methods of study into consideration, 'we shall overlook important dimensions of the texts and run the risk of misinterpreting them as well' (1997: 107-108).

Outside of the biographical genre, Godawa supports the concept that the author of 'Mark' 'deliberately structured according to theatrical conventions' (2009: 64). Godawa defends the idea that 'Mark' resembles a Greek tragedy much like the structure outlined by Aristotle: 'a prologue (Mk. 1:1-15), complications (1:16–8:26), a "recognition" scene (8:27-30), and a "reversal" of fortunes of the leading character, followed by a denouement (8:31–16:8)' (2009: 64). It is Godawa's contention that the NT authors communicated through known, conventional, even artistic literary forms. Further, he writes that the

Bible is not just a collection of revealed information, or a compilation of doctrinal truths, but 'a dramatic script written by God for the stage of the world' (2009: 64). In support of this dramatic approach, Vanhoozer suggests that 'to become a Christian is to be taken up into the drama of God's plan for creation' (2005: 71).

b. Mark and Genre Debate

The debate concerning the primacy of the 'Gospel of Mark' continues into the twenty-first century. Kloppenborg, for example, argues for the 'double tradition' of 'Mark' and 'Q' that were used by the authors of 'Matthew' and 'Luke'. There is, therefore, some kind of 'literary relationship' between the three Synoptics (2008: 9–13). He states that the literary relationship of the Synoptics is quite complicated, and there are still many unknowns. Kloppenborg reminds us that we are dealing with 'hypotheses', and that we may never be sure of the primacy of 'Mark'. He contends that 'at a minimum, the copies of Mark used by Matthew and Luke were different copies ... [In addition,] we cannot even be sure that Matthew or Mark or Luke did not write multiple drafts of each of the Gospels' (2008: 38-39). Perhaps the 'sayings gospels' like 'Q' were the beginnings of the canonical Gospels, but the combination of discourse and narrative sets the NT Gospels apart from the purely 'sayings' texts.

Another observation has been made concerning the unique creation of a gospel genre by the author of 'Mark'. Many Johannine scholars have advanced the idea that the Fourth Gospel is completely independent from the other three Synoptic Gospels (Talbert 1977: 9; Evans 2005: 143). So, if the author of 'Mark' was the originator of the genre of the 'gospel', and if the author of John did not depend on Mark's account, what did John use for a model for his account? Was John aware of Jewish or Hellenistic biographical literature, and if so, did they influence his account? On the one hand, the framework of the 'Gospel of John' follows the literary framework of 'Mark' only at the beginning with the story of John the Baptist and at the end with the death of Jesus in Jerusalem (Funk 1998: 20). On the other hand, Lieu contends that 'Mark has best claim as a source for John, supported by fine details of language' (2005: 182). Current research, therefore, is observing more concrete evidence that 'Mark' served as a foundation for the other three canonical Gospels.

Considering textual evidence, we do not have any written 'sayings' sources such as 'Q' which pre-date the four canonical Gospels. Perhaps some Jesus-material and traditions existed before the Gospels, and may have been written down for preservation, but were destroyed or perpetually lost. It was not until the composition of the canonical Gospels that the specific form of narrative units and discourse content were interwoven together as a complete literary unit. Further, textual evidence demonstrates another interesting concept. We have multiple manuscript copies from the second and third centuries CE of the canonical Gospels: twelve copies of 'Gospel of Matthew', seven copies of the 'Gospel of Luke',

and sixteen copies of the 'Gospel of John'; yet, we have only one third-century copy of the 'Gospel of Mark' (Hurtado 2006: 20). This evidence does not show a 'disapproval' of 'Mark', yet the 'manuscript evidence suggests that Mark was considerably less frequently and less widely used' (Hurtado 2006: 31). 'Mark' may have been considered 'inferior' to the other Gospels, perhaps because it has fewer 'sayings' of Jesus and is less 'elegant' in its literary nature (Hurtado 2006: 31). If a Christian community had a copy of the 'Gospel of Matthew', for example, they did not need the 'Gospel of Mark', because 'Matthew' contains most of the 'Gospel of Mark'. Our known textual evidence may support the idea that 'Mark' was the primary Gospel written, and that the other NT Gospels adopted and adapted a written genre that the writer of 'Mark' created. We do not know for certain if a 'gospel-like' document existed before 'Mark', or if the author of 'Mark' intentionally created an entirely new form of literature. With our current understandings, perhaps all we can say is that a literary understanding of the 'Gospel of Mark' can offer clues to the beginnings of the NT Gospel genre.

c. 'Apocryphal Gospels' and Canonical Gospels

What was begun in the twentieth century still continues in current research on early Christian literature. Current discussion is concerned with the nature and form of the canonical Gospels in light of a growing knowledge of other Christian literature. Ancient manuscripts (in the original ancient languages) have enabled scholars to see other perspectives on the Jesus-story, written at approximately the same time as (or just after) the New Testament. Such extra-canonical documents that are similar to the canonical Gospels can lend support to the types of literature that are found in the NT. Yet, such documents can also call into question many of our earlier thoughts concerning the 'gospel' genre. Scholarship raises the question, is it too narrow to place only the four canonical Gospels in their own genre?

The discovery of collections of ancient manuscripts (and pieces thereof) makes it certain that a variety of literature about Jesus circulated around Asia, Africa and the area of Palestine during the first and second centuries CE. Many other Christian documents were written after the four canonical Gospels. The writer of the 'Gospel of Luke', for example, begins his 'orderly account' (Lk. 1.3) by telling his readers that,

> [m]any have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word (Lk. 1.1-2).

Startling discoveries from these papyrus and parchment manuscripts captured the attention of the Western media as well as biblical scholarship. People became interested in how these documents were related to the accepted, canonical Gospels.

Bernhard writes that there are 'long-forgotten gospels…[which] shed new light on the formative years of Christianity and, perhaps, even on Jesus himself' (2006: 1). His 2006 book is an attempt to collect the more recently recovered manuscripts of early Christian gospels (excluding the four canonical Gospels) and add to the gospel-genre discussion. Bernhard includes thirteen Greek manuscripts in his book, seven of which are portions of 'gospels' assumed to be written before 130 CE. The remaining six are smaller fragments of 'unidentified gospels', the dates of which still remain under discussion by scholars (2006: 3). He believes that, 'it is clear that the "Gospel of Thomas," "Gospel of Peter" and "Unknown Gospel" [Egerton Papyrus 2] circulated, like the NT Gospels, in second-century communities' (2006: 3). Bernhard uses the term 'gospel' as a 'label for any written text that is primarily focused on recounting the teachings and/or activities of Jesus during his adult life' (2006: 2). Notably, his definition of the 'gospel' genre is significantly broader than the earlier literary *bios* genre. The term has necessarily been expanded to include a variety of early Christian literature. For Bernhard, even small fragments of an unidentified text, probably written before the fourth century, are *possible* early Christian gospels (2006: 5).

Five codices in the Nag Hammadi library bear the name 'Gospel'; numerous other 'apocryphal gospels' that may date to the second century have been identified. Funk lists extra-canonical gospel documents, not unlike those outlined by Bernhard: the 'Gospel of Thomas', 'sayings gospels, infancy gospels, passion gospels', as well as fragments from such works as the 'Gospel of Ebionites', the 'Gospel of Egyptians', the 'Gospel of the Hebrews', as well as the 'Gospel of the Nazoreans' (Funk 1985: v). The term 'gospel' has broadened again as scholarship recovers and reviews many ancient manuscripts and fragments. The idea of a unique gospel genre seems more and more remote. Are these other 'gospel' documents identical in content and purpose to the canonical Gospels, and were they written within the same guidelines and limitations? Literarily, are all 'gospels' alike? Were the later non-canonical 'gospels' read and accepted by the early church? While some scholars attempt to demonstrate clear similarities between the 'apocryphal gospels' and the canonical material, others are focusing on the obvious points of distinction.

Certainly there are those scholars who contend that the canonical and non-canonical gospel documents are too different to be placed in the same category. As Jenkins writes,

> [i]f so much value is found in 'apocryphal' gospels, just why are they apocryphal, rather than being included in the canon? This question is all the more relevant for modern readers who have learned to be suspicious of all literary canons, of any approved lists of favored texts because such choices are believed to reflect the interests of particular ideologies and interest groups. To canonize some texts is to exclude others and according to contemporary theories, the excluded voices generally belong to the powerless and disinherited (2001: 82).

Therefore, the task of comparing and contrasting the canonical and non-canonical 'gospel' material has been a challenge for scholars since the discovery and translations of the 'apocryphal' materials. Critics are currently comparing the canonical and non-canonical documents in three major areas: in terms of historical authenticity, in terms of authorial intent and purpose, and in terms of literary composition.

i. Historical authenticity. The fact that the Jesus Seminar participants did not include later works called 'Gospels' indicates that they were attempting to apply at least some traditional criteria about historical sources, in which factors such as date of composition are crucially significant. Some texts provide important information about the life and times of Jesus because they use traditions and sources which stem from the first and second centuries; others do not. For example, later texts (such as the 'Gospel of Mary') are not considered to be historical because they were written with no direct sources linking them to the events described, and were composed much later (Funk 1985: 90). Although an earlier document is not necessarily more or less historically reliable than a later one, sources written nearer the time of events they describe generally tend to be more useful and reliable (Funk 1985: 93). In regard to actual textual evidence, it is interesting to note that the numbers of ancient textual witnesses (manuscripts) of the canonical Gospels that we have from the second and third centuries CE far out-number the 'apocryphal gospel' writings (see Hurtado 2006: 20-23). However, any apocryphal texts can still be useful to current biblical studies. Written texts from the second or third centuries can be of great value for what they tell us about the intellectual, cultural and social world of the early centuries of Christianity. In particular, such documents give us clues to the history and situations of the churches to which books in the NT were written.

In spite of new discoveries and new understandings of early literature, Jenkins maintains that 'all gospels are not created equal', and that, indeed, some are 'genuinely more historical' than others (2001: 84). He believes that the distinctions are important, and that there were 'many good reasons for the adoption of our four NT Gospels for the canon' (2001: 84). Jenkins concludes that,

> [t]he traditional orthodox view was that the canonical texts gained this status because they were earlier and authentically reflected the historical reality of Jesus and the first-century church, while their competitors were later, and were created by flagrant heretics who stood at best on the fringes of Christianity. In recent decades, though, a more suspicious alternative view has gained widespread credence which views the section of the canon as a capricious process, in which the heavy hand of church orthodoxy excluded anything which failed to serve its dogmatic purposes. This view of the canon as a political artifact has a natural appeal to Western audiences. But the idea that the various noncanonical gospels are equally valid witnesses to Christian antiquity is deeply flawed (2001: 83).

Recent publications persist in debating the historical issues surrounding both the NT Gospels and the non-canonical 'gospels'. One is *The Historical Jesus: Five*

Views (Beilby and Eddy 2009); it is a lively discussion by five contributors, who are quite diverse in their opinions: Robert Price, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, James D.G. Dunn and Darrell Bock. Their interactions with each other as scholars reveal that there is no solid agreement concerning the historical nature of the Gospels. In the same manner, there is less agreement about the literary distinctions between the NT Gospels and the non-canonical 'gospels'. Second, *The Forgotten Gospels: Life and Teachings of Jesus Supplementary to the New Testament* (Newton 2009) is a 'new translation' of non-canonical gospel materials (such as the 'Gospels' mentioned above). Newton offers explanations of the relevance and origins of apocryphal literature and considers the body of non-canonical literature to be a 'supplement' to the canonical Gospels. Again, his emphasis is on the 'historical Jesus' as revealed in the 'supplement accounts', and not on the literary nature of the writings themselves.

Funk admits an interesting conclusion: that the more access we have to ancient 'alternative gospels', the more we can respect the choices made by the early church in forming its canon (1985: 106). Scholarship of this century continues to observe significant historical distinctions between the canonical Gospels and the other 'gospel' documents.

ii. Authorial intent/purpose distinctions. The Gospels, both canonical and otherwise, are composed of material that is arranged, selected or excluded on the basis of how well the material contributes to the author's specific theological purposes. The 'apocryphal gospels' were written for different purposes than the canonical Gospels. The later apocryphal material reflects a passage of time for the infant Christian church to grow, develop and interact with new and existing ideas. For orthodox, early Christians who believed that Jesus had lived and died in a real historical setting, it was possible to describe these events in objective terms, as we see in the canonical Gospels. In contrast, the Gnostics viewed the historical figure of Jesus as 'one manifestation of a universal and even pantheistic reality'. That is, for the Gnostics, Jesus was not so much an actual living person as a 'force' that existed within the believer (Funk 1985: 103). Therefore, the intentions of the later, more Gnostic 'apocryphal gospel' writers varied from the earlier, more orthodox texts.

One critical difference that separates the NT Gospels from the numerous other narratives is the resurrection of Jesus. As a unique and unrepeatable event, the accounts of the resurrection differentiate the NT Gospel narratives from other stories and other 'gospels' that do not record or recognize the event. The resurrection of Jesus is critical to the story in the 'Gospel of Mark', and the events are re-told and expanded in the other three Gospels (Evans 2005: 145). The resurrection becomes a central factor of faith in the early church, as it served a central purpose in the NT Gospel accounts. While there are those scholars who suggest that we can never know an author's true intent, it is fairly clear that the canonical Gospels were not written for entertainment purposes, to reveal 'secret knowledge'

or strictly for the preservation of information. They were written for the purpose of persuading people to believe in the veracity of the message of the resurrection, and to believe in the Person behind the message. With regard to purpose, intent and effect, other 'gospel' documents are not identical to the canonical Gospels.

iii. Literary composition. It appears that the literary differences between the canonical and non-canonical 'gospel' literature may be vital and clear enough to put the canonical Gospels into their own unique category or genre, quite separate from the later books and fragments labeled 'gospels'. Guelich believes that he can demonstrate very clearly that there was a distinctive form and content that appeared only in the four canonical Gospels (1991a: 175). He contends that in terms of their literary nature, the NT Gospels appear to be quite unlike any other ancient literature.

The NT Gospel authors all incorporated aspects of rhetoric and persuasion to convince their audiences that belief in Jesus as the Christ is imperative (see, for example, Jn 20.31). The persuasive nature of these four accounts was recognized and employed by the early Christian believers. Research has also shown that very early in the life of the Christian communities, the four Gospels were put together into codices and passed from community to community as a four-fold unit, separate from other 'gospel' writings. The four-fold Gospels were to be read aloud to believers and shared with non-believers, implying their evangelistic substance and purpose (Hurtado 2006: 2-4). On the one hand, it is this persuasive aspect of the NT Gospels that is a critical difference between the Gospels and a typical Greco-Roman biography. On the other hand, it is the 'story-form', or narrative nature of the canonical Gospels, that sets them apart from other similar second- and third-century 'sayings' accounts.

Dunn has observed the 'striking fact' that the author of the Fourth Gospel chose to retain the format of the Synoptic Gospels. While the 'Gospel of John' is distinctive in its own right, it is 'far closer to them [the Synoptics] than to any other ancient writing' (1991: 322). Certainly the Fourth Gospel features the discourses of Jesus, but it is not solely a 'sayings gospel'. The author deliberately chose to follow the literary framework of the Gospels written before him, as 'laid down by Mark' (1991: 322). The writer of the Fourth Gospel, then, apparently felt 'bound by the Gospel framework tradition', yet free enough to develop his own literary presentation of the Jesus-story. Dunn says he composed his Gospel with 'greater freedom than we find in the Synoptics, but greater restraint than we find in the Gnostic equivalents' (1991: 322).

Another aspect of the literary nature of the NT Gospels that is currently under observation is the familiar plot of the Jesus-story. Twenty-first-century culture has borrowed the basic narrative and plot of the NT Gospels and reinterpreted the story to create a familiar, current theme. That is, like other ancient and modern literature, the Jesus-story of the NT Gospels has a memorable, human-interest plot. An innocent man is wrongly accused, tortured and put to death for the sake of those around him (who often do not deserve his sacrifice). It is a powerful,

emotive message of great human interest. The same plot, with adaptations and translations, can be found in any number of writings from the World Wars, or Vietnam, or among the stories of current struggles in the Middle East. Modern films such as *X-Men* portray a 'Christ-like hero', and belong to a recognized 'hero genre' of films. Certainly the NT story of Jesus Christ is not without parallels in terms of plot; it is not unusual to read or view a 'modern-day gospel' story, whether it is a heroic act on the streets of New York, or a missionary in a hostile nation accused of espionage. However, as mentioned above, it is the resurrection of Jesus that makes the plot of the NT Gospels distinctive and unique. While the 'gospel' message of the NT can be adapted into a universal plot, the individual literary presentations of that message (featuring the persuasive elements and resurrection events) in the NT sets them apart from other literature, films and art forms.

iv. Literary transformation. If the canonical Gospel writers were, indeed, consciously following the Greco-Roman *bios* literary form, they were also creative in their transformation of that literary form. If the *bios* form served as the literary 'starting point', the NT authors used and molded a known literary form to most effectively communicate to their respective audiences. The authors changed the very purpose and impact of the familiar *bios* genre, because they had a very different purpose in relating the story of Jesus.

As one example, the addition of Jewish historical and narrative elements into the story of Jesus is significant in many ways, since Jesus was a Jew and his ministry was primarily among the Jewish people. The NT Gospel writers incorporated allusions and references to the OT, a feature rarely found in non-canonical 'gospels' (see, for example, Jn 12.38-41). Evans writes that 'Mark' is 'Semitic', and 'unpolished, stylistically and grammatically flawed' (2005: 135). Bauckham suggests that the 'evidence shows that John knew pre-70 Jewish Palestine accurately and intended to set his story of Jesus plausibly within that chronological and geographical context' (2007: 238). Jewish festivals and feasts, for example, are important in the unfolding of the plot of the Fourth Gospel. Thus, by blending Jewish elements into the *bios* form, the writers transformed the familiar biography form.

It appears that the necessary literary transformation of the NT Gospels from familiar forms of literature is a result of the authors' historical situations and persuasive intents. The sheer impact of the NT Gospels on generations of Christian believers is evidence of their importance and their uncommon essence. Like heavy cream, the canonical Gospels have separated themselves from other 'gospel' documents, and have floated to the top in terms of content, theology and form. It appears that they did so in the early centuries of Christianity, and continue to do so now. Hence, many NT scholars have agreed that the other 'gospel' documents deviate enough from the canonical Gospels that they do not belong in the same category. Even so, while fragments and documents such as the 'Gospel of Philip', the 'Gospel of Peter' and the 'Gospel of Mary' may be 'mis-named' in terms of literary genre, it does not seem likely that scholarship will change their titles.

d. 'Speech-Act' Theories

In keeping with current trends, one final concept must be mentioned. Outside of the analogical and the derivational approaches to the Gospel genre, more research needs to be conducted on the language of the NT Gospels and the 'speech-acts' of God. This current force in hermeneutics has not been sufficiently addressed among Gospel critics. Linguists have informed biblical scholarship concerning the concepts of speech-act theory which can be used in conjunction with other interpretative tools. Human language has a 'performative' dimension, in the sense that an utterance does not merely relay information; it can also involve performing an action. The idea of communicative actions provides an additional tool for scholars to evaluate the texts. Communicative actions stretch readers beyond the concept that language is used only to give information and descriptions. As an example, if Yahweh God 'spoke' the world into being (see Gen. 1.3, 6, 9 and 14), and by God's speech, his intended actions took place, then what can we say about Jesus' speech-acts in the NT Gospels? By his words, people were healed (i.e., Lk. 5.17-26); by his words, a dead man was raised to life (Jn 11.43). The speech-acts of Jesus in the NT parallel the speech-acts of God in the OT.

In Col. 1.15-23, Paul declares that humanity is reconciled to God through physical actions of Jesus—his death and resurrection. Then Paul writes, 'this is the *gospel* that you have heard and that has been proclaimed [*spoken*] to every creature under heaven' (my emphasis). The 'gospel' is proclamation at the same time that it is action. All of the words and actions of Jesus are combined into the 'gospel message'. Therefore, we can ask, are the speech-acts of Jesus as revealed in the NT Gospels so distinctive that they, too, can be distinguishing marks which set the NT Gospels apart from all other writings as a unique genre of literature? No other 'gospel' documents demonstrate the force of Jesus' speech as the canonical Gospels. Perhaps the sustained impact of the NT Gospels on generations of Christian believers can be attributed to the unique (and divine) speech-acts of Jesus in these documents.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, biblical scholars have observed the unique literary nature of the NT Gospels, and have attempted to explain how and why these documents were written as they were. This article has briefly reviewed two main paths of biblical scholarship with respect to the 'gospel' genre. We considered the analogical approach, which demonstrates that the Gospels were written in a form or manner similar to other written documents of that time and culture. In contrast, the derivational approach attempts to show that the Gospels are unique and exclusive in all of literature. It is interesting to see how the NT Gospels appear to be similar to other ancient literature in some ways, yet they are

distinctive enough in content, form, theology and purpose to set them apart from other literature. Many scholars have suggested that the 'Gospel of Mark' is the first of its kind, and was really the beginning of the unique genre of a 'gospel'. It may have been an original creation by its author, and the other three Gospel writers adopted and adapted this distinctive literary format.

Literary or narrative studies of the Gospels have been secondary to the more prominent historical, form- and source-critical studies of the Jesus accounts. The discovery of other ancient documents, or 'apocryphal gospels', outside of the NT Gospels, has contributed to scholarly interest in this form of literature. While the search for the 'historical Jesus' is not extinct, the literary approach has set the NT Gospels squarely within the concept of 'story', with all its implications, including genre. The genre of a piece of literature, then, takes on a very critical role to help determine meaning and understanding for the reader. Recently, more and more scholars have investigated the Gospels as literary documents, comparing them to each other and to other ancient texts. The challenge of clearly identifying the 'Gospel genre' presses on, as scholars try to understand both canonical and non-canonical literature. Can we set human limits and boundaries, and establish clear human categories for such distinctive literature? Is it possible for even the most astute scholar to harness and categorize the 'word of God' (Jn 1:1)? In a sense, this is what we are trying to do, in order to more fully understand and appropriate the biblical message.

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