

1517 Media

Fortress Press

Chapter Title: The Gospel Genre

Book Title: The Gospel of John and Christian Origins

Book Author(s): JOHN ASHTON

Published by: 1517 Media; Fortress Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt22h6sn6.6>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



1517 Media and Fortress Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*

JSTOR

Excursus I: The Gospel Genre

What are the Gospels? This is the title of a book by Richard Burridge in which he sets out “to establish the case positively and finally for the biographical genre of the gospels to become the new scholarly consensus and orthodoxy.”¹ Consensus? Orthodoxy? Should the torrent of critical applause that greeted this work, liberally quoted in the second edition,² be allowed to drown out any misgivings one might have about these grandiloquent claims?

Let us begin by tackling the question of genre: “Genre is at the heart of all attempts to communicate,” declares Burridge.³ Even if we limit ourselves to *literary* genres this is patent nonsense, though *genre* is a category tossed around comfortably and casually by literary critics of all persuasions. Sometimes it may be useful. *Tragedy*, for instance, is a term applied particularly to three groups of writings, the first composed in fifth-century Athens, the second in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and the third at or around the court of Louis XIV of France. We have a sufficient number of well-preserved examples of all three of these groups to make comparison straightforward and illuminating. The audience of each of the three groups is well known and well documented, and in spite of some dispute about the origins of the first two groups it is easy to trace probable influences. So here is an example in which the term *genre* performs a useful function.

Compare this happy situation with Greek *bioi* and Latin *vitae*, generally classed together as Greco-Roman biographies, written in two different languages over some nine centuries in a wide variety of styles, and with a number of different aims in view. Burridge has selected ten illustrative examples. Five of these predate the Gospels. Isocrates’ *Evagoras* is a funeral eulogy of Evagoras, king of Cyprus c. 411–374 BCE. Xenophon’s *Agesilaus* gives an account of its subject’s life (king of Sparta 398–360 BCE), followed by a systematic review of his virtues. Satyrus’s *Euripides*, extant only in fragments, recounted various episodes of the life of the Greek tragedian and concluded with his death. Nepos’s *Atticus* tells the story of the political career of Cicero’s

1. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 99.

2. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 253–55.

3. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* 2nd ed., 48.

famous friend and correspondent; while Philo's *Moses*—exceptional among his works, which are otherwise mostly pure allegories—is an apologetic account of the career of Moses, written with a Gentile readership in mind. Three of Burridge's other examples (Tacitus's *Agricola*, Plutarch's *Cato Minor*, Suetonius's *De vita Caesarum*) were composed soon after the Gospels, the final two (Lucian's *Demonax* and Philostratus's *Apollonius*) considerably later. (The last named, frequently cited in discussion of the Gospels, will receive further discussion.)

Suppose that we put the Greco-Roman *bioi* completely out of our mind: suppose they never existed. Would we then have to conclude that the Gospels could never have existed either, because then there would have been no preexisting genre for them to be slotted into? The form critics brought to light the great variety of forms, or *Gattungen*, that make up the bulk of the Synoptic Gospels. Add the necessary connective links, plus a passion narrative, and you have a Gospel. Anyone who then wished to speak of a Gospel genre would have to say, as Bultmann did, that the Gospels are *sui generis*. Burridge objects: "It is hard to imagine how anyone could invent something which is a literary novelty or unique kind of writing,"⁴ and elsewhere that "the gospels cannot be *sui generis*, but must be set within the web of literary relationships of their own day"⁵—comments that appear to suggest that the first person to write a Gospel must have had some already existing model in mind. Yet nowhere does he actually claim (how could he?) that the Christian evangelists were influenced by any of the *bioi* prior to their own, or that they knew even a single one of them.

Bultmann also saw that the Gospels cannot be classed as biographies in the modern sense of the word, because they show no interest in the *character* of Jesus. It is largely because the Greco-Roman *bioi* are equally uninterested in the character development of their subjects that the Gospels can plausibly be ranged among them. Burridge concluded of his survey that it "has provided a clear picture of the βίος genre: there is a family resemblance, yet the overall impression is of a diverse and flexible genre, able to cope with variations in any one work."⁶ Yet it is worth asking just how much these vastly different works have in common. Two things: they were all written either in Greek or in Latin sometime between 500 BCE and 400 CE, and they were all concerned with the life and career of a particular individual.

4. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 2nd ed., 12.

5. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 2nd ed., 101.

6. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 2nd ed., 84.

Admitting that the Gospels match these very broad criteria used for detecting Greco-Roman *bioi*, we can hardly object to giving them the name; but we may still wish to ask whether this is all that can or should be said in reply to the question, What are the Gospels? I think not. I suggest that to call the Gospels *Lives of Christ* without further ado is inadequate and misleading, simply because we have not yet taken account of the primary aim of the evangelists, which was to promote faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

In 1987, five years before the publication of BurrIDGE's book, David Aune defended the thesis that the Gospels are indeed Lives of Christ. In the first two chapters of his book *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*,⁷ he gives a perfectly adequate defense of this thesis. BurrIDGE was to criticize Aune for defining biography as the portrayal of "a whole life" (thus ruling out both the Gospels and many ancient biographies), for paying insufficient attention to what he calls *genre theory*, and for failing to "establish the case positively and finally for the biographical genre of the gospels to become the new scholarly consensus and orthodoxy."⁸ Many readers like myself, however, content with Aune's more concise exposition, will not have needed BurrIDGE's rather more labored treatment of the same subject to persuade them that, while the Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word, it is reasonable to put them in the same category as Greek and Roman *bioi*, not because they have borrowed from any individual Greek *bios* or Roman *vita*, but because they meet the not very stringent criteria—they were written at the right time, in the right language, and with the right focus on a single individual. Reasonable, but still misleading, because the kerygmatic purpose of the Gospels is so different from that of the bulk of the writings with which they are thus aligned.

Aune objects to the concentration of many New Testament scholars on the proclamatory aims of the evangelists because this is often theologically motivated, resting on the false supposition that kerygma (proclamation) and history are mutually exclusive. Hellenistic biographers, he argues, "often wrote with rhetorical purposes and techniques," because they were interested in providing incentives to virtue:⁹

History and biography focused on the past as a source of lessons for the future. Hellenistic history and biography, no less than the Gospels, tended to merge the past with the present. If the Gospels and Acts deserve the (exaggerated) designation "theology in

7. David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

8. BurrIDGE, *What Are the Gospels?*, 2nd ed., 98–99 (emphasis added).

9. Aune, *New Testament*, 64.

narrative form,” then Greco-Roman history and biography fully merit the label “ideology in narrative form.” Functionally the differences are minimal.¹⁰

It is here that, with respect, I part company with Aune, for two reasons. He provides no example of lives “written with rhetorical purposes and techniques”; and as far as I can see the only Hellenistic biographer to fit this description, and to have written, sometimes, “to provide incentives for virtue,” was Plutarch—nobody else.¹¹ More importantly, in urging their readers to believe that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God the evangelists had in mind something quite different from “ideology in narrative form.” This is not the right way to describe the Gospels, which were certainly not written “to provide incentives to virtue.” Rather, as I put it in *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, “a Gospel is a narrative of the public career of Jesus, his passion and death, told in order to affirm or confirm the faith of Christian believers in the Risen Lord.”¹²

Three late *bioi* (dating from the third and fourth centuries CE) have a closer resemblance to the Gospels than all the others, because they deal with the lives of men who were regarded as gods or sons of gods—Philostratus’s *Vita Apollonii* (one of Burridge’s chosen examples), Porphyry’s *Vita Pythagorae*, and Iamblichus’s *Vita Pythagorica*. Patricia Cox says of these that “they exhibit the idealizing and propagandist features of Graeco-Roman biography but with a crucial addition. They were involved in religious controversy and so *attempted to sway not mere opinion but belief*.”¹³ She goes on to point out that, although

10. Aune, *New Testament*, 62.

11. Nepos, Suetonius, and Tacitus were historians. But they can hardly be said to provide “a source of lessons for the future.” Some of Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*, in fact, were quite derogatory—the lives of Divus Julius and Divus Augustus are followed by the lives of Tiberius, Gaius Caligula, Divus Claudius and the truly villainous Nero; and against Plutarch’s lives of the virtuous Cato and his Greek counterpart Phokion one might set the lives of Pyrrhos and Marius, object lessons in the dangers of overreaching oneself, or, more simply, of discontent. Lucian, another writer placed by Burridge among his writers of *bioi*, was not primarily a biographer or historian but a humorist, writing to amuse, and a satirist, writing to disabuse, as in *Alexander or the Pseudo-Seer*, a savage exposure of the charlatan Alexander of Abonuteichos. Lucian’s sole purpose was to undermine Alexander’s credibility, along with that of Glycon, whose cult he had founded. This work, like *Timon the Misanthrope* (an early though indirect source of Shakespeare’s famous play) is arguably a much more characteristic example of Lucian’s writing than the laudatory life of his friend Demonax.

12. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 332; also, for a fuller discussion, 24–27.

13. Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Men*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 16 (emphasis added).

the philosopher sage was a time-honored and traditional paradigm, “in later biographies by such authors as Philostratus, Porphyry . . . and Iamblichus the great wisdom and noble character of the philosopher are augmented, and sometimes overshadowed, by specific qualities and talents linking him to divinity.”¹⁴ As characteristic traits of the divine philosopher she names wisdom, insight into human nature, a real sympathy and concern for his fellow human beings, and finally a desire to communicate his wisdom. Moreover, the lives of the “sons of god” are marked first by birth stories that credit them with divine parentage, and, second, by the working of miracles, for they have the power to dominate nature by curing diseases, both mental and physical, and by manipulating natural phenomena.

Other striking resemblances between the Christian Gospels and the *Lives* of Philostratus and Iamblichus had already been noticed by the eminent historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, in an essay entitled “Good News Is No News: Aretology and Gospel.”¹⁵ Of those figures for whom the claim is made that they are sons of god, he argues, their biographies “serve as apologies against outsiders’ charges that they were merely magicians and against their admirers’ sincere misunderstanding that they were merely wonder-workers, divine men or philosophers.” All of these biographies are characterized by a double defense against the charge of magic—“against the calumny of outsiders and the sincere misunderstanding of admirers.”¹⁶

“The solution of each group or individual so charged,” he continues, “was the same: to insist on an inward meaning of the suspect activities. The allegedly magical action, properly understood, is a sign. There is both a transparent and a hidden meaning, a literal and a deeper understanding required. At the surface level the biography appears to be an explicit story of a magician or a *Wundermensch*: at the depth level it is the enigmatic self-disclosure of a son of god.” The various literary devices employed in all these stories (including riddle, aporia, joke, and parable) “depend upon a multivalent expression which is interpreted by admirers and detractors as having univocal meaning and thus invites misunderstanding. The function of the narrative is to play between various levels of understanding and misunderstanding, inviting the reader to assume that both he and the author truly do understand and then cutting the ground out from under this confidence.”¹⁷

14. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 34.

15. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (1978; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 190–207.

16. J. Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 193. Smith includes the Gospel of Mark among the biographies so designated.

“What an Apollonius, a Pythagoras, a Jesus,” concludes Smith, “reveals in the narratives concerning them, is their own enigmatic nature, their *sui generis* character. What was said by one of these sons of god might have been said by the others: ‘You will seek me and you will not find me, where I am you cannot come’ (Jn 7:34)—a saying which was misunderstood by opponent and disciple alike.”¹⁸

Many of the points made in this rich and suggestive essay are, I suspect, intentionally provocative. By and large, New Testament scholars have either deliberately ignored it or simply failed to notice it.¹⁹ If they were to pay it the attention it deserves, they would no doubt cavil at not a few of Smith’s comparisons. But he and Cox discuss in some depth the very few Roman *vitae* that have a real resemblance to the Gospels, and in doing so show how dim a light the simple classification of the Gospels as ancient *bioi* sheds on their real nature.

In an appendix to the second edition of his work (2004), BurrIDGE shifts his attention to the christological aspect of the Gospels, something to which he had already drawn attention in an article written for a collection edited by Richard Bauckham: “The historical, literary, and biographical methods [of Gospel scholarship] combine to show us,” he states, “that the Gospels are nothing less than Christology in narrative form, the story of Jesus.” But if “Christology in narrative form” (only a hair’s breadth away from Aune’s “theology in narrative form”) is an essential element in the definition of the Gospel genre, would not this imply that the Gospels are indeed *sui generis*? BurrIDGE goes on immediately (in the very next sentence, opening a new paragraph): “The implication of this biographical hypothesis is that the Gospels are about a person, not about theological ideas.”²⁰ But what is Christology if not a branch of theology—a reasoned organization of theological ideas? The purpose of the evangelists, as their name suggests, is not to do theology but to proclaim the good news. (And who thinks of theology as good news?) The Gospels are not theology (Aune, with some hesitation) nor are they Christology (BurrIDGE). And to call them Greco-Roman *bioi* without further qualification is, as I have argued, if not wrong, insufficient and misleading.

17. J. Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 194.

18. J. Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 203–4.

19. Neither Aune nor BurrIDGE refers to Smith’s essay, close though it is to their concerns. BurrIDGE does not mention Cox either, although her book does figure in his bibliography.

20. Richard A. BurrIDGE, “About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113–45.

I find some support for this argument in an unexpected quarter. Martin Hengel begins a lecture called “The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ” (summarizing a book of the same title) with a zealous defense of the view that the Gospels are biographies. Aware, however, that this is not enough, he adds, with reference to Mark, that it is a “*kerygmatic* biography.” “Because ‘biography’ and ‘proclamation’ are fused in his work,” he continues, “Mark can call his narrative about Jesus ‘[a] saving message,’ that is an account of Jesus’ activity which brings about faith and thus salvation.”²¹ Leaving aside the tendentious translation of εὐαγγέλιον as “saving message,” I might point out that the addition of the word *kerygmatic* effectively guards against the misleading implications of the simple term *life* or *biography* if this is used without qualification. For *kerygma* is the traditional term for the early promulgation of the Christian message that was subsequently expanded in the Gospels. It should no doubt be said that all the Gospels have much more in them than *kerygma*—the moral teaching in the Synoptics, for instance, and the bitter controversies in John. Yet the stated purpose of John, writing “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (20:31), indicates that none of this extra material affects the main thrust of his work.

It seems that some of the most ardent champions of the hypothesis that the Gospels are Greco-Roman *bioi* feel compelled to add a word such as *theology* (Aune), *Christology* (Burridge), or *kerygma* (Hengel) to specify them further. It is my contention, therefore, that to call the Gospels biographies without more ado is radically mistaken: we should think of them primarily in terms of the stated purpose of John, and of the implicit purpose of Mark (since his word, εὐαγγέλιον, gospel—good news, is equivalent to a statement of intent).

21. Martin Hengel, “The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ,” in *The Earliest Gospels: The Origins and Transmission of the Earliest Christian Gospels. The Contribution of the Chester Beatty P45*, ed. Barbara Aland and Charles Horton, Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 258, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 22.