

What Are the Gospels? Richard Burridge's Impact on Scholarly Understanding of the Genre of the Gospels

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Abstract

A quiet revolution has taken place in the scholarly understanding of the Gospel genre since the publication of Richard Burridge's *What Are the Gospels?* in 1992, reversing the earlier consensus that the canonical Gospels should not be considered biographies. Burridge's research has been widely accepted and has produced a new consensus, that the Gospels are a species of ancient biography (*βίος*). This article: (i) lays out the former consensus and demonstrates its widespread acceptance; (ii) outlines the key arguments of Burridge's research and the contribution he made; (iii) provides evidence of the shift in the scholarly consensus to Burridge's view that the Gospels are ancient biographies; (iv) maps discussion of genre in recent Gospel commentaries; and (v) suggests further work that is opened up by the new consensus, notably in fine-tuning the identification of the Gospel genre.

KeywordsGospels, genre, Richard Burridge, biography, life, *βίος*

It was 22 May 1995, and I was sitting in a room being interviewed for the post of Tutor in New Testament at St John's College, Nottingham. Facing me was what, with hindsight, was an intimidating panel: being asked what you mean by 'hermeneutics' by John Goldingay with Anthony Thiselton—who is 'Mr Hermeneutics'—in the room could certainly be considered intimidating! There was a moment in the interview when I was asked which recent scholarly New Testament book I had read and appreciated, and I responded, a little hesitantly, to say that Richard Burridge's *What Are the Gospels?* (Burridge 1992; revised ed.:

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Burridge 2004) was the most stimulating and helpful thing I had read recently. The hesitation was because there, on the panel, was Richard Burridge himself, and he had the grace to chuckle, I recall, when I mentioned his book.

Reading that book was one of those relatively rare moments when I found my view changed, and wondered afterwards why I ever held the other view. What was it that made Burridge's work on the four canonical Gospels (hereafter 'the Gospels') so remarkable? It was not that no one had ever proposed the idea that the Gospels shared characteristics with Graeco-Roman 'lives'. This had been the standard view in the nineteenth century and, not long before Burridge's work, Talbert and Shuler had argued for it (Talbert 1977; Shuler 1982), although their arguments had not carried the day because of significant errors or weaknesses (Burridge 2004: 83-86; Aune 1981).

This study is significant because it is not given to many to turn round a scholarly consensus in their lifetime, and it is given to even fewer to do that with their PhD work. Yet this is what Burridge's study of the Gospel genre did: scholarship largely adopted his view that the Gospels are a form of Graeco-Roman biography. As Burridge himself is wont to remark, he has spent his scholarly career stating the 'bleeding obvious' (to echo the British comedians Peter Cook and Dudley Moore): the Gospels are books about Jesus! To reflect on his contribution and impact, we shall consider the setting in scholarship into which Burridge made his contribution, the key arguments which he used to make his case, and the impact over subsequent years of his results.

Setting the Scene in Twentieth-century Gospel Studies

The dominant view of the Gospels' genre in twentieth-century Gospel scholarship came from Germany, and it was that the Gospels were *sui generis*—they did not fit any previously known genre of literature. This consensus grew in reaction to the nineteenth-century 'lives of Jesus', which took the Gospels as biographies and combined them to produce a 'biography' of Jesus (e.g. Renan 1863; ET: Renan 1864). Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann represent key figures in this reaction, as Burridge notes (Burridge 2004: 8-12; Schmidt 1923 [ET Schmidt 2002]; Bultmann 1931 [ET Bultmann 1968]). Central to their response is the distinction between *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*—roughly, literary writing and popular or folk-writing. They identify the Gospels as folk writing because they see them as closer to stories concerning people such as Dr Faustus and St Francis, rather than Graeco-Roman biographies. In particular, they see the Gospels as oral traditions about Jesus strung together—hence their original anonymity. This shows, they claim, that the evangelists had no pretensions to write *Hochliteratur*. Bultmann regards the Gospels as stemming from worship of Jesus, and thus as being significantly different from biographies, which present an individual for admiration or imitation. Indeed, the Gospels lack the desiderata

of a modern biography: the origins, childhood, education, psychological development, and personality of Jesus are notable by their absence or thin coverage (Bultmann 1968: 372). The evangelists, on this view, are not seeking to write biography, but aiming to unite the exalted Christ with stories of the earthly Jesus (Bultmann 1968: 372). Thus Gospels are ‘an original creation of Christianity’ (1968: 74), a comment Bultmann makes about Mark, but extensible to all four Gospels (1968: 347-48).

To give some examples of standard New Testament and Gospels books which adopt this approach, consider these:

From C.F.D. Moule in 1962 (1962: 4-5, my italics):

. . . two new genres of literature offered by the New Testament. First, the ‘Gospel’. Imagine (if possible) that an otherwise educated person of our own day, with absolutely no knowledge of Christianity or its literature, were suddenly presented with St Mark’s Gospel. What would he make of it? He would quickly recognize that it was quite unlike any other genre of writing known to him. It is concerned with Jesus of Nazareth, yet there is no description of his personal appearance, practically no attempt to date the action, only the barest indications of its place. It starts with no family history or background, it presents little ordered sequence of events. It springs straight into what it describes as good news, *εὐαγγέλιον*, and points to the coming of John as the fulfilment of a certain passage in the Old Testament. From this jumping-off point it goes on, through a series of brief, loosely linked paragraphs describing the activity or (more rarely) the sayings, of Jesus, to a proportionately very long account of his arrest, trial, and execution; and at the point where the tomb is found empty it seems to end abruptly—for the few verses which follow are patently from a later hand and constitute a summary of the traditions about the sequel.

This is certainly not biography, real or fictional. Yet neither is it an ethical or moralistic writing. It has no real parallels before it. *It is the first extant specimen of a new genre: it is what we have learnt to call ‘a Gospel’,* although the term *εὐαγγέλιον* is used by Mark himself not for his book but for its contents.

From Ralph Martin in 1975, although note his caveat (1975: 16, my italics):

. . . it is doubtful that the term ‘biography’ really fits the case when we ask about the scope of the Christian Gospels. Certainly, *if we give a modern connotation to the term,* it becomes inappropriate for several reasons.

Martin goes on to cite the absence of Jesus’ predecessors, culture, and environment, and the lack of interest in the mental and psychological development of Jesus.

From Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann, writing in 1985 in German (and translated into English in 1988) (1988: 26-27):

There are no parallels to the NT literary type ‘Gospel.’ A comparison with certain literary types of antiquity, such as the biography and the historical monograph, demonstrates this. The substantial difference to the classical biography, such as that of Plutarch or Suetonius, is made clear especially in the Gospel of Mark: The person of the author cannot be recognized and the action of the ‘hero,’ namely of Jesus of Nazareth, is not presented biographically. Apparently the issue is not at all a continuous description of the life of Jesus or a presentation of his character; instead, the primary focal point is the work of Jesus as the revealer sent by God, as seen in his deeds, teaching, and passion. Events are of interest only from this vantage point . . . There is not even a trace of a development of the self-consciousness and character of Jesus.

From Graham Stanton in 1989, in a widely used textbook (1989: 15-20):

. . . the more widely accepted view is that the form of the gospels is unique and that Mark had no literary models at all . . . It was frequently claimed that the early church was so taken up with its proclamation of the Risen Christ that it was not interested at all in the past of Jesus. On this view the gospels stemmed from the proclamation of the early church and [can] not in any sense be seen as ‘memoirs’ or ‘records’ . . . The gospels must be read against the backdrop, not of modern biographical writing, but of their own times. When this is done, the gospels do not emerge as fully-fledged biographies of Jesus, but it then becomes clear that the evangelists are concerned with the *story* as well as the *significance* of Jesus . . . We can be almost certain that Mark did not intend to write a biography of Jesus in the Graeco-Roman tradition . . . [the Gospels] can only be linked with the Graeco-Roman biographical tradition only with very considerable qualifications.

It is notable that Stanton takes this view, given that in his groundbreaking doctoral thesis, published as *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching*, he argues carefully and cogently that the earliest Christians had an interest in the past of Jesus and sought to preserve memories of his past in the Gospels (Stanton 1974). Not only that, he argues that a comparison with the Graeco-Roman biographical tradition is helpful to illuminate the Gospels (Stanton 1974: 117-36). At this point and for some years later, however, Stanton is unwilling to take the step of placing the Gospels in the genre of ancient biography, for he writes of ‘The wholly justifiable insistence that the gospels are not biographies’ (Stanton 1974: 135). Burrige acknowledges that Stanton’s work critiquing the Bultmannian consensus prepared the ground for his own argument (which persuaded Stanton to reverse his opinion on Gospel genre) (Burrige 2011: 6-9, 12-13, 16).

Finally, from Larry Hurtado, writing in the widely used *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* in 1992, which sums up the ‘state of the art’ of Gospel studies at the time (it is noteworthy that Burrige himself wrote the article ‘Gospel: Genre’ in the 2013 second edition of this dictionary, Burrige 2013):

The Gospels are not fully explainable, however, simply in terms of the Greco-Roman literary setting or by linking them with literary genres of that era. The impetus for the Gospels derives from the religious complexion and needs of early Christianity; and their contents, presuppositions, major themes and literary texture are all heavily influenced by their immediate religious setting as well. In very general terms, the Gospels can be likened to other examples of Greco-Roman popular biography, but they also form a distinctive group within that broad body of ancient writings. (Hurtado 1992: 282)

The implication of this view is that the Gospels should be studied to identify the authentic sayings of Jesus, and to understand the process of transmission of the stories about Jesus, a process that was assumed to be long. The form-critical method instantiated in this approach was followed by the development of redaction criticism, which taught scholars to reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of the evangelists and ‘mirror read’ the Gospels for the situation of the church(es) to which each was addressed—the Gospel communities, as we might say. Thus both form and redaction criticism treated the Gospels as windows into the earliest churches, rather than windows on Jesus—and they considered this choice as a clear either/or. However, redaction criticism’s rediscovery of the author in the third quarter of the twentieth century began to raise questions of authorial intention (even with all its attendant difficulties), which itself led to reopening the question of Gospel genre. Following the failed attempts of Talbert and Shuler to argue for Graeco-Roman biography, Burridge entered the field.

Burridge’s Contribution

Burridge came into this discussion with a training in Classics which included awareness of discussions of genre in such circles. He came to his doctoral work with the sense that the then-consensus view was correct, and expected to show that the Gospels are not Graeco-Roman ‘lives’ (Greek βίοι; Latin *vitae*) (Burridge 2004: 101). His doctoral work under Maurice Casey makes pioneering use of (then) new computer technology to engage with the texts of Graeco-Roman ‘lives’ and the Gospels—extraordinarily, these days you could probably do it on a mobile phone!—as well as painstaking study of some of the texts by hand, including the Gospels. His work is interdisciplinary, crossing the boundaries of Classics, genre criticism, and New Testament studies, using all three disciplines to inform his approach.

Burridge identifies four significant markers of Graeco-Roman ‘lives’ which, in combination, allow him to recognize this genre with confidence (Burridge 2004: 105-23, esp. 107).

1. *Opening features*: there is usually a title and an opening formula which identify the book’s focus on the subject of the biography.

2. The *subject* of the biography is the subject of the lion's share of the main verbs in the book, and is given the lion's share of the space, which places the subject in the spotlight (cf. Plutarch, *Alex.* 1.1). This is where Burridge's groundbreaking computer analysis fits, allowing him to get a good 'feel' for the focus of the verbs by considering nominative nouns and pronouns, which tend to be verb subjects. Studying verbs 'by hand' then allows him to fine tune his analysis by noting verbs without explicit subjects which are nevertheless performed by the book's subject.
3. *External features*, including the structure of the book, its style, and so forth, which enhance the focus on the subject.
4. *Internal features* such as the settings, the topics and content included, the values and attitudes espoused or promoted by the work, and the author's intention and purpose (whether stated explicitly or not).

When Burridge studies a selection of Greek and Latin 'lives' and compares the four Gospels one by one with this pattern, he finds each of these features to be present in a comparable form in every Gospel. This strongly suggests that an ancient reader hearing Mark and the others read aloud (the normal means of 'reading' in the ancient world, e.g. Acts 8.30; see Walton 1995: 8 n. 52) would recognize them as βίαι—'lives'—of Jesus. This does not mean that we should think of them as like *modern* biographies, of course—comparing the Gospels with today's biographies was the error which Bultmann and his generation made—but it does mean that the evangelists have chosen a vehicle which would be recognizable to a wide readership around the Mediterranean basin. That seems intrinsically likely, for to use a literary form which was *sui generis* to communicate a new worldview, belief system, and lifestyle focused on Jesus would be to place a double barrier to communication.

Burridge here identifies a key point which moves the debate forward, and which implies that *the focus of the Gospels is Jesus*, the subject of the 'life'. This might sound blindingly obvious—and some, such as Tuckett and Petersen, regard this claim as trite or trivial (Tuckett 1993; Petersen 1994: 146)—but for much of the last hundred years the heart of Gospels scholarship has been in examining the communities supposed to be behind the Gospels, the process of transmission of individual stories, and so on, rather than their true subject, Jesus himself. Burridge followed this study up with his own attempt to read the Gospels for their Christology in his excellent, less technical, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (1994), a book that has been valued by generations of students.

The Impact of Burridge's Work

Burridge's work was rapidly seen as highly significant, not to say game-changing, in understanding the genre of the Gospels, and his conclusions were widely

accepted. This sea change in scholarship is Burridge's major contribution to the scholarly world; he was not alone in contributing to this argument—Graham Stanton is another. As we noted, Stanton's doctoral work argued that the earliest believers did regard preserving memories of Jesus and his teaching as important (Stanton 1974), and Burridge's work built on this by offering a rigorous case that the Gospels were intended as books telling the story of Jesus, rather than being a 'coded' version of early church history. It is noteworthy that Stanton wrote a commendation of the first edition of Burridge's *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, describing it as a book which would enable 'Novices and old-hands alike [to] read the gospels with new eyes.' Thus by 1995, only three years after the publication of Burridge's book, Stanton wrote,

Ancient biographers often wrote with several different intentions, including apologetic and polemic. Some wrote in order to uphold (or to challenge) a system of beliefs or values personified in the subject of the biography. So too with the evangelists, whose accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus were 'foundation documents' for the newly emergent Christian communities.

The Gospels, then, can be seen as a special kind or sub-set of ancient biographical writing . . . They tell the story of the career of Jesus in order to persuade the reader of its significance. (Stanton 1995: 138-39, my italics)

In their discussion of genre in the New Testament, Brook Pearson and Stanley Porter state in 2002 that 'the overwhelming trend has been towards seeing the Gospel genre as some kind of biography' (1997: 138). They cite Burridge as the key scholar who had moved debate in this direction (1997: 141-42).

Bart Ehrman's widely used introduction to the New Testament states in 1997, 'Scholars have come to reject the view that [the Gospels] are totally unlike anything else . . . some of these investigations have suggested that the Gospels are best seen as a kind of Greco-Roman (as opposed to modern) biography' (1997: 52). Burridge's influence is clear, for Ehrman cites *What Are the Gospels?* as a 'thorough study that emphatically argues that the Gospels are best understood as a kind of ancient biography' (1997: 55).

It is also worth noting that some subsequent work, while not necessarily being directly dependent on Burridge's work, was done in a context and atmosphere in the scholarly guild which was more open to such discussions. In particular, the collaboration of Richard Bauckham and others (including Burridge himself; Burridge 1997) in arguing that the Gospels were written with a wide audience in mind, rather than the narrow communities envisaged in redaction criticism (Bauckham 1997b). Bauckham's key essay in that book cites Burridge's work in support of his argument: 'it seems very unlikely that anyone would expect a *bios* to address the very specific circumstances of a small community of people . . . its relevance would be pitched in relatively broad terms for any competent reader' (1997a: 28).

Bauckham draws a further implication from the written nature of the Gospels, which is that it seems strange for a member of a community (an evangelist) to *write down* a ‘coded’ message for his own community’s situation, rather than address the situation orally. Indeed, by contrast with a letter, which would probably stop circulating with its first, named recipients, a ‘life’ would be highly likely to circulate *and be intended to circulate* more widely (1997a: 29).

Whence Scholarship?

Let us turn to consider one area where Burridge’s work might be expected to make an impact (commentaries on the Gospels) and one area where there is unexploited capital to be gained.

Gospel Commentaries since What Are the Gospels?

Given the wide acceptance of Burridge’s conclusions, it is worth considering commentaries on the Gospels since 1999, on the basis that a seven-year interval should give sufficient time for Burridge’s conclusions to permeate scholarship sufficiently to affect them—for good-quality commentaries generally are a long time in the making.

There is discussion of Gospel genre in the introductions to some (but not all) commentaries, and this shows that the issue is now on the agenda of Gospel commentators. Examples, among about twenty samples considered, are the work of Craig Keener on Matthew and John (1999: 16-24; 2003: 1.3-34), the work of Andrew Lincoln on John (2005: 14-17), and the work of both R.T. France and Robert Stein on Mark (France 2002: 4-11; Stein 2008: 19-21). All four scholars substantially accept Burridge’s case.

In his Matthew commentary, Keener summarizes and accepts Burridge’s conclusion that the Gospels are ‘lives’ and spends the largest part of his introduction to Matthew’s themes on Christology (1999: 53-68).

On John, Lincoln sketches the range of the genre βίος, from ancient history-writing to encomia, and draws important implications from the differences between this genre and ancient historiography, notably that a βίος would be likely to build on core events ‘with substantial correspondence to what happened in the past’ by adding ‘varying amounts of embellishment’ to present the story (2005: 17). Lincoln’s fine commentary ably carries through Burridge’s hermeneutical programme of focusing attention on the portrait of Jesus in John.

Keener, in his John commentary, discusses Gospel genre and strongly sides with Burridge’s view (2003: 1.11-12). In a careful discussion of Graeco-Roman biography and history, Keener rejects the false dichotomy of historical–theological and argues rather that John should be seen as ‘both historical *and* literary/theological’, while recognizing that John is the most literary/theological of the

four Gospels (2003: 17, his italics). Keener's two-volume study of John holds its focus commendably on Jesus.

France on Mark also accepts Burridge's case, and notes how it turned around the consensus of a previous generation (2002: 4-6). Stein similarly states that Mark is a form of Graeco-Roman biography, citing Burridge in support (2008: 19-21). France goes on to recognize that Mark writes to tell the story of Jesus in order to summon people to follow him as disciples, and identifies three distinctives in Mark's 'life of Jesus' compared to other Graeco-Roman 'lives': first, the subject matter of Mark is one who was more than a great man, but one who is even now alive and worthy of worship, although rejected and humiliated while on earth; second, the material of Mark bears the signs of being used in Christian proclamation; and third, it is written not for private use, but for reading in communities which were not composed only of the highly educated. France's commentary is a fine example of reading Mark christologically.

We should also note that James Edwards's valuable narrative-critical commentary on Mark focuses attention strongly on Jesus throughout, and his introduction highlights the portrait of Jesus in Mark (2001: 12-15), although he does not engage explicitly with questions of genre (and, surprisingly, Burridge does not appear in his index).

That is not to say that Burridge's work has entirely carried the day among the commentators. Joel Marcus offers an interesting half-way house position, in placing Mark within 'the Markan community', whose composition he appears to know rather well (1999: 25-39). And yet in accepting, too, that it shares many features of Hellenistic biography (1999: 64-69), Marcus places himself clearly in the camp influenced by Schmidt and Bultmann, for he regards the continuing presence of Jesus in the church as marking the Second Gospel as an incomplete βίος.

Adela Yarboro Collins, in her commentary on Mark, appears to give with one hand and then take back with the other when she concedes that Burridge makes a good case for the likeness of Mark to Graeco-Roman βίοι, but argues that Burridge should have considered other models, especially in the Old Testament (2007: 27-29). Collins herself prefers to think of Mark as a new genre: eschatological historical monograph. Burridge has to a degree responded to this criticism in his essay 'Gospel Genre, Christological Controversy and the Absence of Rabbinic Biography: Some Implications of the Biographical Hypothesis', appended to the second edition of *What Are the Gospels?* (2004: 322-40).

Ulrich Luz, in his commentary on Matthew, considers that treating Matthew as a Graeco-Roman 'life' would be foreign to what he takes to be a predominantly Jewish audience. He considers that Matthew modelled his work on Mark, and wrote it as a 'foundation story', much like some Old Testament books (e.g. Chronicles) (2007: 13-15, esp. 15).

The debate is clearly far from over. Indeed, some commentary writing appears to go on just as before, with little recognition that genre must affect exegesis. It

may be that such commentators have read Burridge and rejected his view, but if so, they show no sign of engaging with his work. This appears to be the case with François Bovon's commentary on Luke (2002-2012: 1.5-6). Disappointingly, although David Turner mentions genre (including citing Burridge) in his commentary on Matthew, he focuses mainly on the historical value of Matthew in his discussion of genre, suggesting that he sees the generic question as not greatly relevant to the interpretation of Matthew (2008: 5-6). There is still room for good commentating (perhaps particularly on Luke) which takes the biographical nature of the Gospels seriously, and which works out the agenda set by Burridge's research at every level of the exegesis of the text.

Unexploited Capital: Fine-tuning the Genre Description

Burridge himself recognizes that the Graeco-Roman βίος is a broad genre, ranging over books which are rather different in style and content, and others repeat this point (e.g. Alexander 1994: 75-76). So a key question is whether we can get a more fine-grained description of the genre of the Gospels, perhaps by more detailed comparison with specific types of βίος. Burridge hints at this in writing,

since many βίοι were used by philosophical groups or schools for teaching about their beliefs and founder, as well as for attack and defence in debate with other groups, and some of their generic features are also found in the gospels, we can begin interpreting them with the expectation that we will find didactic, apologetic and polemical purposes and material here also. (2004: 248)

One valuable suggestion comes from Scot McKnight, who accepts Burridge's 'now established conclusions' concerning Gospel genre (2011: 61) and seeks to fine-tune them by comparing Matthew with the content of Paul's gospel message. McKnight sketches four key claims based on studying both the key Pauline texts (notably 1 Cor. 15) and other 'gospel' passages (especially in Acts) (2011: 61-67): (i) the gospel narrates and declares the whole life of Jesus, from incarnation through exaltation and onto consummation; (ii) the gospel treats the Jesus story as fulfilling Israel's story—it necessarily involves a hermeneutic of Israel's story; (iii) a key feature of the Christian gospel's instantiation of Israel's story is that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah of Israel; (iv) the gospel story saves, frees, and gives victory to those who receive it. Thus, turning to Matthew, McKnight argues that as a βίος Matthew is 'a *gospelling βίος about Jesus, who is Messiah and Lord and Saviour*' (2011: 67, his italics), and he goes on to argue that Matthew fulfils each of the four distinctives of 'gospel' (2011: 69-74). This is helpful and suggestive, and may open doors into further work—many will hear resonances with some of N.T. Wright's work on the Gospels (notably Wright 2012—he mentions McKnight's work, but not this essay).

Building on McKnight's work, there is an as-yet-unfulfilled agenda for potential PhD students to pursue. Can we develop a more fine-grained description of the Gospels in dialogue with a range of ancient βίαι and thus deepen our understanding of the Gospels' testimony to Jesus yet further? It is a considerable tribute to Richard Burridge's work that we are now ready and able to engage with such a question.

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