

## The New Testament Gospels and Other Gospels: two contrasting views

Richard A. Burridge, University of Manchester, UK

### Abstract

A critical review article of Simon Gathercole's *The Gospel and the Gospels* and Francis Watson's *What Is a Gospel?*

### Keywords

*euaggelion*, Francis Watson, genre, Gospel, Simon Gathercole

Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2022); xxiv + 576 pp.: 9780802877598, \$55.99 (hbk)

Francis Watson, *What Is a Gospel?* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2022); xvii + 335 pp.: 9780802872920, \$49 (hbk)

Before apprehending any text or communication, we must know what *kind* it is – treatise, movie, Shakespearian tragedy, sauce bottle label, washing machine instructions, etc.

Recognizing *genre* is crucial to understanding both its form and content – otherwise serious mistakes occur in interpretation. Treating colour-coded wiring instructions like a Jackson Pollock painting may lead to electrocution!

One puff on Watson's jacket calls it an 'insightful and engaging monograph', but reading it like that became increasingly confusing and frustrating. The introductory chapter shares the book's title, opening with the question 'What is a gospel?' and leading into a well-structured discussion of that topic in Watson's typically elegant prose. In only 23 pages, Watson discusses the relationship between the four New Testament Gospels and all the others, often referred to as non-canonical or apocryphal. The first section, 'The gospel proclaimed and written', begins with 60 occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in Paul, continuing through its use in Mark and the other three NT Gospels, to all the other texts from the first few centuries that are often described as 'gospels'. This all-embracing approach is defined by his clearly stated principle that 'if a gospel genre exists at all, it *should* be defined in such a way as to include GThomas and its extracanonical companions' (p. 3, emphasis added). Distinguishing the canonical four from others can 'only be justified on theological grounds and is not objectively

verifiable. An attempt to define the characteristics of the gospel genre *must* take all available early gospel literature into account' (p. 15, emphasis added). However, such use of '*should*' and '*must*' betrays a polemical axe being ground, determined to remove any suggestion that the four New Testament Gospels are different.

Second, 'Defining the gospel genre' rejects the distinction of 'canonical' and 'apocryphal' as well as the 'influential definition' that 'the gospels are biographies' (pp. 12–13).<sup>1</sup> Instead, Watson proposes three criteria: (1) a 'focus on the human Jesus'; (2) 'Jesus's authority and significance'; and (3) 'attribution' to 'apostles or to those closely associated with them' (pp. 16, 22). He concludes that 'we are free to accept, question, or view with indifference' both 'patristic opinion' and 'church practice', but 'what we *should* no longer do is to speak of the "the gospels" when referring only to the canonical four' (p. 23, emphasis added).

After such a clear introduction, we expect the 'monograph' to continue with this single (mono-)focus, through a carefully constructed argument leading to a final conclusion, as in Watson's magisterial work *Gospel Writing* (Eerdmans, 2013). However, far from being a 'mono-graph', this book is in fact a collection of Watson's previously published articles, dating from 2010 to 2019. Apart from the introduction, only Chapters 2 and 9 are new, discussing Judas Iscariot, while the conclusion is a reprint of Watson's rejoinder to the SBL debate about *Gospel Writing*.<sup>2</sup> This final chapter, 'A reply to my critics', is particularly confusing without all the original essays by those 'critics'; looking up the page numbers that Watson quotes in this reprint here will be frustrating for readers of *this* volume, since they actually reference that *other* book.

Thus, this book's genre is not a 'monograph' but a *volume of previous essays*. Interpreted in that genre, it is a useful (if expensive) way of reading Watson's other articles – but not a coherent argument answering the question 'What is a gospel?' This review was written during the mourning preparation for the funeral of HM Queen Elizabeth II. Watson's criteria, based entirely on content, could be applied to any material with (1) a 'focus on the human' Elizabeth; (2) her 'authority and significance'; and (3) 'attribution' to royals 'or to those

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<sup>1</sup> Citing Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A comparison with Graeco-Roman biography* (referencing the 2nd edition, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2004, rather than the more recent, and greatly expanded, 3rd edition, Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Originally Chapter 12 in Catherine Sider Hamilton with Joel Willitts (eds), *Writing the Gospels: a dialogue with Francis Watson* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 227-248.

closely associated with them'. This includes books of serious scholarship and articles in the gutter press, as well as plays and films, such as Helen Mirren's 2006 portrayal. Interpreting the 1969 documentary on *The Royal Family* in the same way as Netflix's series *The Crown*, or accepting either of them as historical, leads only to confusion. Genre 'should' and 'must' include *form* as well as *content*, structure and modes of presentation as well as topics and themes.

Despite being nearly twice the size, Gathercole's book is most definitely a 'mono-graph', on the same topic as Watson's. As in many genres, its opening words make clear its mono-focus: 'is there anything that makes the four New Testament Gospels different from most of the others?' (p. 1). The opening chapter considers various 'strategies for differentiating Gospels', the circumstances of composition, attestation, literary form, aesthetics and theological content. It concludes with two theses: (1) what 'marks' the four NT Gospels out from the non-canonical ones is a shared theological content, which (2) 'follows a preexisting apostolic "creed"', the *kerygma* (p. 15).

Chapter 1 details the 'criteria for selection', such as date, title, family resemblance, subject matter and preservation. These criteria produce 11 gospels: the four in the New Testament, Peter, Marcion, Thomas, Truth, Coptic Philip, Judas, and the Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians. They are compared with the 'comparator' of the kerygma: Jesus as Christ/Messiah, his vicarious death, resurrection, and fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is justified by the antiquity and wide distribution of this kerygma in Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation, with a discussion of Acts.

Part Two, the heart of the book (pp. 79–460), takes us on a detailed treatment of each of the 11 gospels in turn, with respect to the four marks of the kerygma, with every chapter ending with a brief conclusion that aids the clear sense of the argument of the monograph. This necessary background spade work of description and individual analysis then leads into Part Three, which examines Thesis 1 through a comparison of all 11 gospels against the four marks of the kerygma, (pp. 461–79), while the final chapter considers Thesis 2, the 'reception of the kerygma' in all 11 gospels (pp. 480–99).

A brief final conclusion sums up Gathercole's argument that 'there was a very old kerygmatic "creed"' that predated all written gospels. He also concludes that the four NT Gospels 'emerge from a context in which this kerygma circulated, and they follow that kerygma';

however, all other gospels discussed ‘either consciously or unconsciously do not follow the kerygma all the way’. Finally, this is explained by the way in which some, at least, emerged later from ‘particular, identifiable movements in early Christianity’, such as the Valentinians or Gnostic groups, while the Four Gospels ‘follow the theological position’ of the earliest kerygma of all the apostles which predates any gospel writings or Jesus books (pp. 500–2).

This massive tome has been in preparation for over more than a decade, with its argument first presented at the 2014 British New Testament Conference in Manchester, then refined by many subsequent lectures. However, unlike Watson’s collection, this is no mere reprint of earlier work but a clearly structured and well-presented monograph in the proper sense, with a single focus driven by a coherent argument and final conclusion. Interestingly, Gathercole shares with Watson a regrettable absence of genre theory. As well as demonstrating the difference between the two volumes as a true monograph rather than a collection of previous essays, proper attention to literary theory of genre would have prevented Watson’s lumping all Jesus books into one group regardless of form, while it would have bolstered Gathercole’s theological argument for the distinctiveness of the four New Testament Gospels.

### **Author biography**

The Revd Canon Professor Richard A. Burridge is a biblical scholar, ethicist, theologian and social commentator. He served as Dean of King’s College London for over 25 years.