

BIOGRAPHY AS THE GOSPELS' LITERARY GENRE

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Resum

Aquest treball és el discurs per a l'obertura del Simposi sobre «La Tradició de Jesús i els Evangelis», organitzat per la Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya a Barcelona el maig del 2012. Com que aquest tenia lloc en el vintè aniversari de la publicació de la meua tesi doctoral sobre el gènere biogràfic dels evangelis, ho aprofito per a revisar d'una manera crítica, en la secció de la introducció, el consens acadèmic anterior sobre la singularitat del gènere dels evangelis, reconeixent el mèrit del professor Graham Stanton com a pioner en el fet d'argumentar que les tradicions de Jesús en els evangelis són «biogràfiques». La primera secció analitza el meu treball original d'investigació doctoral, fent èmfasi en la importància de la teoria de gènere adequat i la comparació dels evangelis amb narracions biogràfiques contemporànies greco-romanes; també hi repasso les reaccions a aquesta proposta durant la dècada següent, i com la hipòtesi biogràfica es va convertir en un nou consens acadèmic. En un segon apartat abordo les implicacions d'això en les noves investigacions sobre les tradicions rabíniques, els evangelis no canònics, la crítica narrativa i els retrats cristològics en els evangelis i per a l'ús dels evangelis, i les tradicions de Jesús en el debat d'ètica d'avui. També hi preparo el camí per al tractament més detallat d'aquestes qüestions en la resta de ponències del Simposi.

Paraules clau: Evangelis, Jesús, biografia, narrativa, cristologia.

Abstract

This paper is the opening keynote presentation for the Symposium on "Jesus Tradition and the Gospels" organized by the Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya in Barcelona in May 2012. Since this hap-

pens to be the twentieth anniversary of the publication of my revised doctoral thesis on the biographical genre of the gospels, the introductory section describes the previous scholarly consensus from the form-critics about the uniqueness of the gospels' genre, paying proper credit to Prof. Graham Stanton as the first person to argue that the Jesus traditions in the gospels are "biographical". The first main section discusses my original doctoral research, stressing the importance of proper genre theory and the comparison of the gospels with contemporary Graeco-Roman biographical narratives; it also charts the reactions to this over the next decade, as the biographical hypothesis became the new scholarly consensus. The second section introduces the implications of this for further research about rabbinic traditions, the non-canonical gospels, narrative criticism and the Christological portraits in the gospels, and for the use of the gospels and Jesus traditions in ethical debate today. It also prepares the way for the more detailed treatment of these issues in the other papers through the rest of the Symposium.

Keywords: *Gospels, Jesus, biography, narrative, christology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a great honour and privilege to be invited to contribute the opening paper in this International Symposium on "The Jesus Tradition and the Gospels" and I wish to thank Professor Armand Puig i Tàrrach for organising this symposium, and for all his kind hospitality, especially in this year when he is President of the SNTS. I shall begin with some introductory remarks to explain the purpose and structure of this paper and to set it in the context of previous scholarship on the gospels.

1.1. *Purpose and Structure*

My purpose is to set the theme for this Symposium on "The Jesus Tradition and the Gospels", particularly with regard to the biographical genre of the gospels, and the implications of this for how we read and study them today. It is twenty years since the publication of my doctorate on this topic,¹ and I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to mark the anniversary in this way and to study the other papers which will follow in response to this keynote presentation. There are two main parts to this opening paper: the first is to explain my original work on the literary genre of the gospels as biography, and the second is to consider the later implications and consequences of

1. Richard A. BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTS MS 70), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992; paperback edition 1995.

this biographical genre as a way of linking to and introducing the other papers in the rest of this Symposium.

1.2. *Previous scholarship*

We must, of course, begin with scholarship on the Jesus tradition and the gospels prior to my undertaking research into the genre of the gospels. In the nineteenth century, Ernest Renan and others were writing what you might describe as “Romantic Lives of Jesus”. These accounts of Jesus drew upon the gospels but were influenced by biography as it was understood in the nineteenth century; they were also influenced by the great romantic movements of that period.² During the 1920s, Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann (as they paved the way for the rise of Form Critical ways of reading the gospels) said that this kind of romantic biographical approach could not be used.³ Instead, we should concentrate on the individual *pericopae*, the individual passages that we find in the gospels and the genres of those units (such as pronouncement, story or legend, for example). The form of the gospels as a whole, they said, was *sui generis*, of its own genre. This meant that scholars were unable to talk about the gospels in any shape or form as “lives of Jesus”. The gospels might contain traditions about Jesus, but these traditions were seen as more about the setting in the Early Church, their *Sitz im Leben*. The effect of this was to disconnect a large part of the Jesus tradition from the gospels.

During the 1960s, the rise of Redaction Criticism, with its concentration on the different ways each gospel related a story or teaching of Jesus, restored the concept of the evangelists as individual theologians and writers.⁴

2. Ernest RENAN, *Life of Jesus*, ET, London: Kegan Paul 1893.
3. K. L. SCHMIDT, «Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte», in Hans SCHMIDT (ed.), *EUCARISTHRION: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1923, vol. 2, 50-134; ET as Karl Ludwig SCHMIDT, *The Place of the Gospels in the General History of Literature*, translated by Byron R. McCane, with an introduction by John Riches (University of South Carolina Press 2002); Rudolf BULTMANN, «Evangelien», in H. GUNKEL et al. (ed.), *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd edn Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr 1928, vol. 2, cols. 418-422, ET as «The Gospels (Form)», in J. PELIKAN (ed.), *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, London: Collins 1969, vol. 1, 86-92.
4. See for example, the classic studies by G. BORNKAMM, «The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew», in G. BORNKAMM – G. BARTH – H. J. HELD (eds.), *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, London: SCM, 1963, 52-57; H. CONZELMANN, *Theology of St. Luke*, trans. G. Buswell, London: Faber & Faber 1960; W. MARXSEN, *Der Evangelist Markus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1st

Scholars were therefore once again able to talk about Matthew or Mark's theology, as evidenced by the particular words or emphases in each gospel. However, this also brought back the personality of seeing the author as a writer with a particular intention, which meant that questions of genre could start to be asked again, particularly in works by Charles Talbert and David Aune during the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ It was in direct response to Talbert and Aune that I felt challenged to compare the genre of the gospels with Graeco-Roman biographies for my own doctoral research.

1.3. *Graham N. Stanton*

However, I want to pay tribute to Graham Stanton who started the modern study of the Jesus tradition and the gospels from the point of view of ancient biography in his own doctoral research completed in 1969.⁶ All Stanton's major books have titles which include either "Jesus" or "Gospel", or sometimes even both "Jesus" and "Gospel"; this demonstrates his concern always to connect the Jesus tradition with the gospels. Stanton had an overall interest in the Jesus traditions and how the gospels mediate those traditions to the early church. Stanton was, of course, renowned particularly as a scholar of Matthew, but I have recently argued that the phrase, "The Gospel of Jesus" would sum up his approach not only to Matthew, but to all his work.⁷ The published version of his doctoral thesis makes this absolutely clear: it is interesting that although he became a Matthean scholar, the concentration in his PhD is on Luke-Acts, while Matthew hardly features. Stanton began with the pre-Lukan traditions about Jesus contained in the Book of Acts and looked at Luke's presentation of Jesus, and then went on to consider how that connected to Paul's preaching and teaching, and the relationship between the gospels and ancient biographical writing. Despite this, he concluded, however, that there was a "wholly justifiable insistence that the gos-

edn., 1956, 2nd edn 1959; ET *Mark the Evangelist*, New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press 1969.

5. C. H. TALBERT, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels*, Fortress 1977 – SPCK 1978; David E. AUNE, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. 1988.
6. G. N. STANTON, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (SNTS MS 27), Cambridge University Press 1974.
7. Richard A. BURRIDGE, «The Gospel of Jesus: Graham Stanton, Biography and the Genre of Matthew» in Daniel M. GURTNER – Joel WILLIITS – Richard A. BURRIDGE (eds.), *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel and Early Christianity*, (LNTS 435) London: T & T Clark – Continuum 2011, 5-22.

pels are not biographies”.⁸ Such was the power of the international scholarly consensus since Bultmann, that the one thing one could not say about the gospels was that they were biographies. Stanton’s entire thesis argued that the gospels were about the Jesus tradition —but then he said that it was “wholly justifiable” to say that they were not biographies even though his work had just removed most of the reasons for that argument! As he pointed out, the gospels “tell us a surprisingly large amount about the life and character of Jesus”. He even compared the gospels with other ancient biographies and he actually says that the gospel traditions are “biographical”.⁹ Thus, Stanton got as far as the adjective, “biographical”, but with the pressure of international consensus, he was unable to move as far as the noun, “biography”. His thesis has two final chapters: “Jesus in the Gospel traditions”, and, “The Gospel traditions in the Early Church”. He concluded that the early church was interested in Jesus but this was not an interest in the psychology or personality of Jesus, since psychology is not something you find in ancient biographies. Ancient biographies do, however, reveal their subjects’ moral character. Stanton concluded that we need to know what sort of a person Jesus was in his earthly life because it is part of our preaching today to talk about Jesus’ life and character, the same Jesus who was crucified, raised from the dead, vindicated and exalted by God.

2. GOSPEL GENRE AS BIOGRAPHY

2.1. *Richard Burridge’s Doctoral Research*

Being a generation or so younger than Graham Stanton, I studied Classics at the University of Oxford in the 1970s, and then became a schoolmaster, teaching Latin and Greek language and literature, history and philosophy. From this Classics perspective, it is crucial always to ask questions like, what kind of text is it that we are studying? What are the traditions behind it? How does it compare with other examples in the ancient world? When I turned to the gospels, I wanted to start with similar questions, and, while training for the priesthood at theological college, I started my postgraduate research to examine the fact that some American scholars like Talbert and Aune were proposing biographical theories to consider the genre of the gos-

8. STANTON, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 135.

9. *Ibid.*, 170.

pels. I continued that work after ordination, both in a parish, and then as the senior Chaplain at the University of Exeter, until the PhD was awarded in 1989 and it was revised for publication in 1992, twenty years before this Symposium. There are two main parts to its argument, as follows.

2.1.1. Genre and Interpretation

To ask the question, “What is this text or work?” is to do genre criticism. One problem is that, in English, we do not have a word for this idea: we use *genre*, but that is French; *Gattung*, but that is German; *species*, but that is Latin; or *genos*, and that is Greek. It is curious that we do not seem to have a word in English for what kind of a thing it is we are talking about, and yet we recognise genres instantly and unconsciously. Let me illustrate this from broadcasting. If I begin by saying, “Good evening, here is the news”, then you expect to hear about the events which are currently going on in the world, with expert commentators and a balanced approach. However, if I open instead with, “Once upon a time”, you expect to hear about damsels in distress, knights in shining armour and you will not worry if the dragon does not receive balanced and fair treatment! Even children can understand this —yet it is genre criticism, as we distinguish between a news broadcast and a fairy story.

My interest in genre studies began with my Classics degree at Oxford and continued in school teaching: it was clear in both contexts that, if you are going to read epic, then you must look at it according to the conventions of epic; legend, the conventions of legend; historiography, the conventions of historiography, and so forth. In the ancient world, the theory of genre was used primarily as a classification system or a taxonomy, a way of organising things. On the other hand, modern literary theory sees genre in a much more dynamic, flexible way. We talk about the birth, life, development and even the death of genres over a period of time, as they change and are replaced by other genres. For example, our modern understanding of biography really comes to birth in the late nineteenth century after Freud. This is where we become interested in the nature of the individual human personality; after Marx, we want to understand people in their political setting; after Weber and Durkheim, people are placed in their sociological setting. Thus, our understanding of modern biography grows and develops throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Bultmann looked at the gospels and said they do not look like biography, or

at least biography as it was understood in the early twentieth century. However, Bultmann made a simple category error and should have compared the gospels instead with *ancient* biography, which was very different.

Genre is used in communication theory. How do we decide what a genre is? Traditionally, we use the example of a librarian: which shelf would you put this text on? Genre is like a “pigeonhole”, a classificatory system, and plays a role in how we communicate. It is a contract between the author and the audience where we agree how something will be composed and interpreted. For example, if I am going to write according to the conventions of a fairy story, you need to interpret it according to the conventions of a fairy story. If I write according to the conventions of fairy story but you interpret it according to the conventions of history, the result will be confused communication. It is about how we receive or interpret a text. Thus modern literary theory sees genre as more dynamic, alive and developing. Alistair Fowler, the great theorist of genre, says that, “in reality genre is much less of a pigeon hole than a pigeon”.¹⁰ Therefore, the first argument in *What are the Gospels?* about why New Testament scholars had not answered a rather important and basic question (“what are the gospels?”) was because they had not done genre theory. This lay at the heart of Bultmann’s mistake: he could not have done any thinking about genre theory when he said the gospels were unique, since a unique genre can neither be composed nor understood by others.

2.1.2. The gospels and neighbouring contemporary literature

My second contribution was to place the gospels in the setting of wider ancient literature, especially with regard to the nature of ancient *bios*. I use the word *bios* in Greek (meaning “life”) or the Latin word *vita* (also meaning “life”) because that was what these works were called in those days; the word *biographia* appears for the first time only in the ninth-century writer Photius, quoting Damascius’ *Life of Isidorus*, written in the fifth century AD.¹¹ If we use the word “biography”, it is inevitable that we think of what the term means today, with all its psychological, political and sociological overtones.

10. Alastair FOWLER, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford University Press 1982, 37.

11. Photius, *Bibliotheca* 181 and 242; see Arnaldo MOMIGLIANO, *The Development of Greek Biography*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1971, 12.

Ancient *bioi* or *vitae* describe ancient “Lives”, and in turn relate to the *genera proxima*, the neighbouring works with which the genre overlaps, such as philosophy, history, encomium or praise, discourse and so forth.¹² This is why my revised doctoral thesis was published with the question *What are the Gospels?* as the main title, but with *A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* as the subtitle. In Part One, I described the problem about the genre of the gospels and how biblical scholars had researched and debated this topic, in the light of my account of the literary theory of genre. However, in Part Two, I compared the gospels with Graeco-Roman Lives, demonstrating that the gospels have same generic features as are found in ancient *Lives*.

If Bultmann’s mistake was to compare the gospels with modern biographies, it would be important instead to compare them with works known or recognized as “Lives” in the ancient world which were written within the same general period of history. Therefore I selected a group of *Lives* from the earliest examples of ancient biographical writing dating from a few centuries before the gospels to later works a couple of hundred years after the gospels. The works before the gospels were Isocrates’ *Evagoras* (c. 370 BC), Xenophon’s *Agesilaus* (c. 360 BC), Satyrus’ *Euripides* (? probably third century BC), Nepos’ *Atticus*, (written in Latin at Rome, c. 34-27 BC), and Philo’s *Moses* (written in Alexandria in the first decades of the first century, so just before the gospels). The latter group includes Tacitus’ *Agricola* (AD 98), Plutarch’s *Cato Minor* (around AD 100), Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars* (written in the first decade or two of the second century), Lucian’s *Demonax* (later second century) and Philostratus’ *Apollonius of Tyana* (early third century). As well as ranging across the period before and after the gospels, this group includes works written in both Greek and Latin, some at the centre in Rome, others across the empire and even among the Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt. Thus, we are comparing the gospels clearly with other works composed in their own period of time across the ancient world.

2.1.3. The generic features of the gospels compared with biography

Members of the same family are usually recognized because they share a range of similar features; no two members are identically the same (except perhaps for identical twins from a single fertilized egg), but they all share

12. See the genre map of how *bios* relates to other genres in BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels?* (1992), 61, or (2004), 64.

enough in common for us to be able to speak of a “family resemblance”. The same is true for genre, which is recognized by a group of features, some of which are more external (to do with form and structure) while others are internal (concerned more with content). In terms of *formal structure*, ancient *Lives* are mostly composed in continuous prose narrative (although Satyrus writes in dialogue, befitting the tragedian Euripides); they are between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length, which is approximately the number of words which can fit on to a single scroll and can be read in a single sitting of an hour or two, as opposed to much longer works composed for a number of scrolls, or “books”; usually the structure is little more than a bare chronological outline in which the person appears at their public debut at the start and the person dies at the end, while, in between, material about the subject is inserted by topic. The scale is narrowly focussed on the subject; a similar range of literary units is used, notably anecdotes, stories, speeches and sayings, taken from a wide range of oral and written sources to display the subject’s character indirectly through words and deeds.

In terms of *internal content*, the *Life* begins perhaps briefly with the ancestry, and the birth, and then moves almost immediately to the person’s public debut. It is the public life that the ancient *Lives* are interested in (while we moderns are much more intrusive and want to know about the individual’s personal life). The dramatic settings may move around, following the person, who will usually be centre stage for most of the work. The atmosphere is normally fairly serious, and the aims may include apologetic, polemic or didactic—to attack, defend or instruct about the person. There is always a major concentration on the subject’s death with a detailed treatment of his last days or hours, whether they died fittingly as they lived, often taking up to a quarter to a third of the work. When the gospels are compared to this group, rather than to modern biographies, they too fit this ancient pattern and share most of these generic features of Graeco-Roman biography—certainly enough to share the family resemblance.

2.1.4. The subject of the gospels

For much of the twentieth century, New Testament scholars were surprisingly resistant to the idea that the gospels were really about Jesus (preferring to state that the “real subject” is more about God) and the way in which the Jesus traditions have fed into the gospels. We have already noted Stanton’s hesitancy about using the word “biography”, preferring instead the adjective,

“biographical”, despite demonstrating how much the Jesus tradition is preserved in the gospels. Therefore, I undertook an analysis of the subjects of the verbs of the gospels to see what this revealed about their overall subject and how this compares with similar analyses of other ancient texts. Because of the inflected nature of Greek and Latin grammar, it was possible to do some computer analysis by noun endings (which was the first time computers had been used in Oxford to do research on humanities texts). However, for best accuracy, there is no substitute for manual analysis, counting the subjects of the verbs by hand. One thing which quickly emerged was that in most forms of literature, the verbal structure includes as subjects lots of different people. For instance, in Homer’s *Iliad* Hector and Achilles may be the main heroes but they are the subject of only about 2% of the verbs and they occur by name in about 4 or 5% of the sentences. However, when we move to Homer’s *Odyssey*, where he is concentrating on the journey particularly of one man, Odysseus himself scores twice as strongly, but the percentages are still relatively small, with Odysseus only the subject of 4.8% of the verbs, and being named in 8.8% of the sentences.¹³

This is even more noticeable as we move to ancient biography. Thus in Xenophon, Agesilaus is the subject of almost 10% of the verbs and occurs in nearly one fifth of the sentences. In Plutarch’s *Cato Minor*, Cato dominates the verbal structure with 15% of the verbs and appears in nearly half the sentences. This is an unconscious consequence of the decision to focus all the way through on this one person, the subject of his biography. It dominates the way he tells the story: Plutarch is discussing the Civil War particularly between Pompey and Caesar, between the republicans and Caesar’s forces. However, he is telling the story from the point of view of Cato, and so the result is that even the two major adversaries, Pompey and Caesar (who are the subjects of about 3% of the verbs each, and appear in around an eighth of the sentences), are dominated by the much larger statistics of Cato as the subject. A manual analysis of Satyrus’ life of *Euripides* that shows that Euripides is the subject of a quarter of the verbs and another fifth of the verbs are quotations from his plays. Overall, ancient Lives display this generic feature that some 25%-30% of their verbs have the hero as subject plus another 15% to 30% in sayings, speeches or quotations from the person; in other words, around half of the verbs and the sentences are devoted to the words and the deeds of the subject —a massive concentration.

13. See BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels?*, Appendix I for pie charts of all these statistics.

When we compare these statistics with Mark's gospel, the proportions are almost entirely the same as for Satyrus' *Euripides*. Jesus is the subject of 25% of Mark's verbs, with another 20% spoken by him in his teaching and parables. While form critics said that the gospel is really about God the Father or about the early Christian preaching, the *kerygma*, the statistics do not bear this out: God the Father is the subject of only 0.2% of Mark's verbs. In comparison, Matthew and Luke both make Jesus the subject of around 18% of the verbs, while about another 40% are spoken by him, reflecting the amount given to their shared teaching material (Q). John has a mediating position: about half of John's verbs either have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips. Interestingly, a large part of Jesus' teaching in John's gospel is teaching about himself: some 10% of the verbs in John's gospel are spoken by Jesus and have him as the subject of the verb which he is saying. This is a phenomenal concentration on the deeds and words of Jesus, and marks out the genre of the gospels as the same as ancient biography.

2.2. *Reactions and Reviews*

Forty years ago, Graham Stanton could not quite say the gospels were biography: he had to say that they were biographical. Twenty years ago, I published *What are the Gospels?* against the main scholarly consensus that the gospels were unique and argued instead that they were a form of Graeco-Roman biography. This led to a scholarly debate which took place over the next through the 1990s. Ten years ago, Graham Stanton himself encouraged me to write a second edition of my book for which he wrote a very generous Foreword.¹⁴ However, it was not possible simply to "update" the book, since what was a radical position in 1992 had become the mainstream scholarly position by 2002-03. In response, therefore I included a new 25,000 word chapter describing how the consensus had turned around, and which dealt with some of the critiques, reviews and reactions to the first edition, as well as including an appendix on rabbinic biography.¹⁵

It made an interesting case study of how the international process of New Testament scholarship meets new challenges, and changes its consensus. The

14. Richard A. BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans 2004; Stanton's Foreword is pp. viii-ix.

15. See BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels?* (2004) Chapter 11 on «Reactions and response», 252-307; Appendix II on Rabbinic Biography, 322-340.

earliest reviews of my published thesis immediately noted that the previous assumptions would no longer be sufficient and drew attention to my treatments of both ancient literature and genre theory: “an immensely learned volume... a superb survey of the topic, but also breaks new ground in its nuanced reading of ancient texts and its literary model.”¹⁶ Equally, Tuckett described it as “a most impressive study, displaying masterly control of the discussion of modern literary theory as well as being at home in a wide range of classical literature”, while other reviews made similar points.¹⁷

If reviews are the first way the consensus can be challenged, this was quickly followed by debates about the biographical hypothesis at various conferences, including the British New Testament Conference (Exeter, 1992), the SBL International Meeting (Leuven, 1994) and a symposium between classicists and New Testament scholars on “Biographical Limits in the Ancient World” (Dublin, 2001).¹⁸ Meanwhile, significant other articles and books about the gospels began to take the biographical hypothesis seriously, with challenges from Wills and Vine, and support from Frickenschmidt with a detailed study of large numbers of ancient Lives.¹⁹ Increasingly, the mainstream of New Testament scholarship took the biographical genre of the gospels as its starting point, as in work by N. T. Wright.²⁰ Finally, Hurtado’s huge treatment of devotion to Jesus contains an interesting chapter about the gospels as “Jesus Books” compared with other Graeco-Roman literature; he concludes that “the Gospels do have a number of formal similarities to various examples of *bios* writings of the Greco-Roman era”, referring to my work, since “the choice to write books about Jesus in the *bios* shape likely seemed

16. Jerome H. NEYREY, *CBQ* 55, April 1993, 361-363.

17. Christopher TUCKETT, *Theology* (1993), 74-75; for some other reviews, see Mark W. G. STIBBE, *Biblical Interpretation* 1,3 (1993), 380-381; Charles H. TALBERT, *JBL* 112 (1993), 714-715; Christopher BRYAN, *Sewanee Theological Review*, 36.1 (1992), 173-174; Neville CLARK, *Expository Times*, Aug. 1992, p. 334; Tim DUFF, *The Classical Review*, New Series XLVI.2 (1996), 265-6.; F. E. BRENK, *Gnomon* 66 (1994), 492-496.

18. Published as Brian MCGING – Judith MOSSMAN (ed.), *The Limits of Biography*, Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales 2006.

19. Lawrence M. WILLS, *The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John and the Origins of the Gospel Genre*, London: Routledge 1997; Michael E. VINES, *The Problem of the Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel*, Atlanta: SBL 2002; Dirk FRICKENSCHMIDT, *Evangelium als Biographie: Die vier Evangelien im Rahmen antiker Erzählkunst*, Tübingen: Francke Verlag 1997.

20. See N. T. WRIGHT, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*: Vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God*, London: SPCK/Fortress 1992; Vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London: SPCK – Fortress 1996; Vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, London: SPCK – Fortress 2003.

to the Gospel authors an effective way to focus attention on the person of Jesus".²¹ Thus within a decade of the publication of my revised thesis, New Testament scholarship came to accept the biographical genre of the gospels—and moved instead to the implications of that for new research.

3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL GENRE

Therefore we now turn from demonstrating the gospels' biographical genre to consider the implications of this for "the Jesus traditions and the gospels", considering what has been done over the last decade or so, and looking ahead to the other papers in this Symposium.

3.1. *Rabbinic material and the gospels*

One of the first criticisms which was made about my work, quite fairly, was that the book's subtitle said it was a comparison with *Graeco-Roman* biography—and that it ignored the whole area of Jewish writings and rabbinic biography. In response, I wrote an article in a collection of essays in honour of David Catchpole which was also included in the second edition of *What are the Gospels?* as an appendix.²² Obviously, I had looked at Graeco-Roman biography because I was a classicist. However, New Testament scholars, since Bultmann, and even before him, frequently compare individual gospel *pericopae* with stories in the rabbinic tradition. Traditio-historical analysis often parallels gospel stories with individual rabbinic anecdotes. Thus, Jesus being questioned about the Great Commandment (Mark 12.28-34 and the parallels in Matt. 22.34-40 and Luke 10.25-28) can be compared with a *Sifra* passage from Rabbi Akiba on Lev. 19.18, Genesis Rabba 24.7 (on Gen. 5.1) and the famous story from the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31A, about the different reactions from Shammai and Hillel when asked to teach the whole law to a Gentile enquirer while standing on one leg. However, there is a nota-

21. Larry HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003, 279 (see esp. n. 45) and 281-282.

22. Richard A. BURRIDGE, «Gospel Genre, Christological Controversy and the Absence of Rabbinic Biography: Some Implications of the Biographical Hypothesis» in David G. HORRELL – Christopher M. TUCKETT (eds.), *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David Catchpole*, Leiden Brill: 2000, 137-156; reprinted in *What are the Gospels?* 2nd edn 2004, Appendix II, 322-340.

ble absence of rabbinic biography as a coherent narrative about a particular teacher. Today, we could go to the rabbinic tradition and construct a biography of Hillel or Shammai or others simply by stringing all the stories about them together, in the manner in which the form critics viewed the evangelists as putting *pericopae* together like beads on a string. What is significant is that no one in the rabbinic tradition ever actually did this.²³ Instead, what they do is to collect together what different rabbis say about this or that topic of the Law. It is their interpretation that is important, since the focus of rabbinic stories is always upon the Torah. The point about the gospels as biographies is that they are making a Christological claim: that the person of the interpreter is now more important than the interpretation. This constitutes a radical break with the rabbinic tradition as the Jesus tradition is developed for the writing of the gospels. Therefore it is right that papers 3 and 4 of this Symposium by Professors Santiago Guijarro Oporto and Armand Puig i Tàrrach will be considering how the formation of Christology contributed to the development of the Jesus tradition, and the role played in that by the parables, especially the example of the Tenants in the Vineyard (Mark 12.1-12).²⁴ The comparison of the biographical genre of the gospels with the absence of Rabbinic biography means that the whole area of Christology is vital for our work together here.

3.2. *Non-canonical gospels*

Another frequent question about my work asked why I was concerned only for the genre of the four canonical gospels, and did not consider the non-canonical gospels. It is true that my book argued very strongly that the four canonical gospels all share the same genre of *bios* and, despite the differences between the synoptic gospels and John, they are remarkably similar when compared either with Graeco-Roman literature or with non-canonical texts. The Jewish-Christian gospels, like the gospels of the *Ebionites*, *Hebrews* and

23. See Philip S. ALEXANDER, «Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus: A Survey of the Evidence» in C. M. TUCKETT (ed.), *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, (JSNTSS 7) Sheffield: JSOT 1984, 19-50; Jacob NEUSNER, *In Search of Talmudic Biography: The Problem of the Attributed Saying*, (Brown Judaic Studies 70) Chico: Scholars 1984; Jacob NEUSNER, *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?* (Brown Judaic Studies 135) Atlanta: Scholars 1988.

24. See the contributions of Professors Santiago Guijarro Oporto (p. 49-73) and Armand Puig i Tàrrach (p. 75-97) in this volume.

Nazarenes, may have been similar to the canonical gospels, but we cannot know for certain because they only exist as fragments. The “sayings” gospels, like the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Q arelogia*, just collections of sayings (“Jesus said...”) and there appears to be no overall narrative linking the sayings; no Passion, and no birth or infancy narratives. The important generic feature of ancient biography is a combination of deeds and words, as a person’s actions are woven together with accounts of their ideas or teachings; such “sayings” gospels contain only words, and thus do not fit within the genre of ancient biography. On the other hand, the infancy gospels (e.g. the *Protevangelium of James*) and Passion gospels concentrate on an account of only one part of the subject’s life, so are more about their deeds or actions at the beginning or end of their lives, than how their words and deeds fit together throughout. The Gnostic gospels tend not to be about the earthly life of Jesus at all but more about what happened after his death: they tend to be more “revelatory discourses” of the risen Christ.

I am pleased that, in the final paper of this Symposium, Prof. Begonya Palau will give us an analysis of the Jesus traditions in all of these different sorts of non-canonical gospels.²⁵ However, I would want to argue that, from the point of view of genre theory, these so-called “gospels” are all tertiary developments of the gospel genre, following Alastair Fowler’s analysis of the “life and death of literary forms” like genres.²⁶ We start with the origins of the genre, the primary level, which would be Mark; there then follows the development of it which would be Matthew, Luke and John. Finally at the tertiary level, there are further radical changes to the genre, which changes it beyond its original generic features —and this would seem to be what is happening in the second, third and fourth centuries with these non-canonical gospels moving away from the biographical emphasis of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

3.3. *Christological narrative*

During the period when I was working on my doctoral research, something interesting was happening in a liberal arts college in America. David Rhoads

25. See also the contribution of Prof. Begonya Palau (p. 155-185).

26. Alastair FOWLER, «The Life and Death of Literary Forms», in Ralph COHEN (ed.), *New Directions in Literary History*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1974; see BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels?* (2004), 44-45.

taught a New Testament class in one classroom and Donald Michie taught an English class in another classroom and between them there was a door; one day, these two lecturers took the radical step of opening the door between their classrooms and mixing the two classes. They started teaching Mark's gospel just as one would teach a piece of literature, or teaching a story. The result was an extraordinary book, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*.²⁷ I undertook a lecture tour of the USA in 1993 to debate the issues being raised by the publication of *What are the Gospels?*, during which I realized how much study of the biographical genre of the gospels fitted in with the development of narrative criticism. I am therefore delighted that the next paper in this Symposium from Prof Samuel Byrskog (with whom I have enjoyed debating these issues for many years) will examine the status of oral tradition after the critique of form criticism and take us on into how to our current understanding of narrative, while in paper 6 Prof Grappe will discuss the "literary units" of Jesus tradition before the gospels were written down. Furthermore, in paper 5, Professor Borrell will talk about the "gospels as story", considering in particular the narrative dimension of the Jesus tradition.²⁸

My own attempt to provide a narrative reading of the four gospels which flows from their biographical genre can be found in my book *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*²⁹ On the cover, we have the famous four pictures of the lion, the ox, the eagle and the human face. These are the four faces of God in Ezekiel chapter 1 and also the four living creatures in Revelation chapter 4. These four faces get applied to the gospels very early, particularly by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III.11.8-9). In Celtic manuscripts and art, we often see the use of an eagle, or a lion, an ox and a human face for each gospel (although which symbol represents which gospel does change in various manuscripts). They are often viewed today as images of the evangelists, but Irenaeus says that they are images of "the disposition of the Son of God": the lion shows his regal qualities, the ox his humility, and so on. This struck me as very interesting, and challenged me about the narrative Christologies of the four gospels: therefore I wrote *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* as though the image was about Jesus, not about the evangelist, but about their portrait. While this

27. Donald MICHIE – David RHOADS, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1982.

28. See in this volume the contributions of Professors Byrskog (p. 31-48), Borrell (p. 99-116) and Grappe (p. 117-138).

29. Richard A. BURRIDGE, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, London: SPCK – Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994; second edition 2005; new Classic edition 2013.

can be seen as rather fun, and possibly a little forced at times, in fact using these four faces as a way of helping Christians to distinguish the four accounts and to understand the four narrative Christologies of the gospels has proved to be very successful. All that is possible here is to include a brief synopsis, as follows.

3.3.1. The roar of Mark's lion - roaring and rushing about

If Mark's gospel does date from the late 60s, then the background would be the period of the Jewish War; also, if it was written in Rome or Asia Minor, with a possible link with the last days of Peter, then these are all good reasons to understand Mark's Jesus as a roaring lion, rushing around. The account begins in Mark 1.9 with "and immediately" as the fully-grown Jesus leaps on to stage with no birth or infancy stories; furthermore, "immediately" recurs ten times in chapter 1 alone, and forty times in the gospel overall, equivalent to all the other uses of it in the rest of the New Testament. This sense of pace and speed is given additional vividness as Mark has 151 uses of the historic present, using the present tense for past events. Throughout the first "movement" of chapters 1-8, areas of conflict build: Jesus' ministry is conducted in the face of rising opposition and misunderstanding from family and friends, earthly authorities and Satan himself (3.19b-35). Even the disciples in Mark seem not to understand what is happening. Then we have a slower "interlude" between the healing of two blind men, as chapters 8-10 raises the identity of the subject: what kind of creature is this? Jesus is the enigmatic wonder-worker who tells people not to say anything; the eschatological prophet who is going to Jerusalem, but only to die; the Messiah and Son of God, who is also the Son of Man. For the final section, Jesus comes to Jerusalem and the Temple, where the lion's lair has become a "den of thieves", where fig-trees and vineyard tenants alike produce no fruit and the temple is barren (chapters 11-13). At the end, the roaring and rushing Jesus becomes finally silent and passive, as he suffers and dies in dark desolation: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the only word from the cross (Mk. 15.34). Even the ending is full of enigma, fear and awe, as the women go to an empty tomb and find that Jesus has already gone; although they are instructed to tell others, they say nothing "for they were afraid" (Mk. 16.1-8). One cannot help but think of C. S. Lewis' portrait of Aslan the Lion in Narnia—but if Aslan is "not a tame lion", nor is Mark's portrait of Jesus at all comfortable or reassuring.

3.3.2. Matthew's human face – the teacher of Israel

In contrast to the dark and riddling portrait of Mark's lion, Matthew provides a human face to the one sent by God to be the teacher of Israel. In the opening chapters, Jesus' Jewish background is stressed, with a genealogy going back through David to Abraham and things seen from Joseph's point of view. When he starts his ministry, Jesus is another Moses, who teaches from mountains (5.1) and fulfils the law and the prophets. His teaching is laid out in five great blocks like the books of the Pentateuch (5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25). Only in Matthew is his mission described as to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10.6), but as he faces increasing opposition, he founds a new community of faith on Peter the Rock, the Church to which he gives his instructions for their life together (16-18). All that is left are woes to the leaders of Israel (23). While Matthew follows Mark's account of the Passion closely, his additions make it much more awesome (Matt. 27.3-10, 17-25). The cry of abandonment is answered by an earthquake and signs of a theophany as everyone present recognize him as son of God (27.51-54). The supernatural atmosphere continues at the resurrection, as Jesus gives his final teaching from another mountain while Israel is divided between those who will follow him to the end of the age, and those who sleep and tell lies (28.1-20).

3.3.3. Luke's burden-bearing ox —the Gospel for Gentiles, universal bearer of burdens

While Matthew takes Mark's dark picture and opens it to a more Jewish audience, Luke's Preface immediately sets his portrait in a more universal context (Lk. 1.1-4). Luke's symbol is the ox, the universal bearer of burdens in the ancient, pre-mechanized world, yet one who was also sacrificed in the temple for sin. Therefore, the infancy stories are told from Mary's viewpoint, among women and the lowly poor like shepherds (1.5-2.52). Jesus is set in historical perspective and geography comes into play with the three-fold structure of the long journey along the Jordan to Jerusalem (9.51-19.28), separating the ministry in Galilee from the final week in Jerusalem. Jesus' human development is recorded (2.40, 42) yet he is also Saviour and Lord, beyond Caesar (2.11). The disciples go beyond the twelve apostles, including women (8.1-2), the seventy (-two) (10.1-16) and the crowds are more enthusiastic (12.1; 23.5). The disciples are painted in a better light while the Pharisees often invite Jesus to dinner (7.36; 11.37; 14.1); the real opposition comes

from the powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem, who know what to do with an ox who will not keep to its place in the temple. Throughout, as the bearer of burdens, Jesus is concerned for the poor, the lost and unacceptable, outcasts, women and Gentiles; he is also a man of prayer (11.1-4) and of the Holy Spirit (4.18). Like the subjects of so many ancient biographies, he is depicted at the end dying as he lived: he is concerned for the women of Jerusalem (24.27-31) and prays for forgiveness, bringing the lost into the kingdom (23.34, 43). At the resurrection, he dines with friends (24.30, 35, 43) as history and geography find their meaning in him (24.44-47); it all ends just as it began, “in Jerusalem with great joy, in the Temple blessing God” (24.51-52).

3.3.4. John's high-flying all-seeing eagle – the spiritual Gospel?

In the Old Testament eagles are a sign of God's care and provision for his people, but also of judgement and hard to understand (Job 39.27-29; Exod. 19.4; Deut. 28.49; Prov. 30.18-19) —and all are true of John's portrait in the fourth gospel. John begins with a Prologue, as the Word of God is with God before all things, yet who swoops low to take on human existence and dwell among us (Jn. 1.1-18). Throughout the gospel, John's story is structured with a mixture of deeds and words like other ancient Lives, as “signs” and discourse are interwoven by the Son, who is equal with the Father (10.30), yet totally dependent upon him (5.19). The eagle faces increasing opposition from “the Jews” during the first half (2-12), and then gathers his disciples to his breast to wash, clean and comfort them (13-17). In John's account of the Passion, Jesus is always in control, directing events (19.11), organizing his mother and disciple (19.26-27), fulfilling scripture (19.28) until “it is accomplished” (19.30). This continues after his resurrection when he appears where and when he wishes, to comfort Mary (20.14), challenge Thomas (20.26) and restore Peter (21.15-19). The divine bird has swooped down from the Father's breast and returns there having accomplished all he had set out to do.

I tried particularly to follow this narrative biographical reading of John in my volume in the *People's Bible Commentary*,³⁰ as one of the three Series Editors, we used a narrative approach, passage by passage, rather than verse by verse in an attempt, as we put it on the book jackets, to “Instruct the head

30. Richard A. BURRIDGE, *John*, *People's Bible Commentary*, Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford 1998; Lambeth Conference second edition 2008; third edition 2010.

and warm the heart” —to provide scholarship that would be useful for the churches. It was then used at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from across the world in 2008 by Archbishop Rowan Williams as background reading for the Bible Studies. Another example of the implications of such biographical approaches to John can be seen in the work of the “Jesus, John and History Group” at the Society of Biblical Literature.³¹ Once again, therefore, I am very glad that this Symposium has singled out the fourth gospel for particular treatment in our paper 7, as Prof. Thomas Söding discusses the Jesus tradition and the gospel of John.³²

3.4. *Ethics & gospel narrative*

My most recent work has been on how this biographical genre impacts upon the use of the gospels in ethics. This research began because of the debate in the UK and around the Anglican Communion about the use of the Bible, particularly in the arguments the church is having about sexuality and gender issues. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is one of King’s College London’s most distinguished alumni, and I was invited to represent King’s College London at Archbishop Tutu’s service of retirement in Cape Town in 1996. He then invited me back to spend several months in South Africa during the period of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he chaired. I was teaching clergy schools in the Cape and Gauteng area where I became increasingly interested in the way in which the Dutch Reformed Church had argued that apartheid was a biblical doctrine. Once again, I discovered that we were back to the same issue about narrative and story and how the Jesus traditions are used in the gospels.

Often, in ethical arguments, people quote the phrase, “The Bible says!” Increasingly the Bible is used as a weapon to attack other Christians. However, most of the time these moral debates merely quote biblical teaching —completely missing the surrounding context and the role of narrative. The biographical genre, and the stress of this Symposium about the Jesus traditions in the gospels are about holding deeds and words together, as previous-

31. See for example *John, Jesus and History, Vol. 2*; Paul N. ANDERSON – Felix JUST, SJ – Tom THATCHER (eds), *Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: SBL 2009), which also contains my chapter, «Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to the Ethics of the Historical Jesus and John’s Gospel», 281-290.

32. See the contribution of Professor Söding in this volume (p. 139-153).

ly noted in this paper several times already. Interestingly, the more I looked at Jesus' *words* I saw a rigorous ethic, while the more I looked at Jesus' *deeds*, I saw his inclusive approach to those with moral difficulties and the marginalized. This research led me to argue that the biographical genre of the gospels means that we need to hold both the words and deeds of Jesus together: as it says at the beginning of Acts, "What Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1.1). I also argued that there is a unity between the way in which Paul stands in the Jesus tradition and the rest of New Testament ethics. This research was published by Eerdmans as *Imitating Jesus* in late 2007, and it was used extensively at the sessions during the Lambeth Conference in July 2008; I was honoured when it was shortlisted for Michael Ramsey Prize at Hay-on-Wye in 2009 and I used the material for clergy study days during the 400th anniversary of the KJV in 2011.³³

Imitating Jesus is only half of the original vision, looking at the ethical material in the New Testament. Now I am working on the implications of this use of the Jesus traditions for how the New Testament is used in ethics. Initially, the draft title was *Following Jesus* to reflect the fact that Jesus, according to the gospel traditions, is more of a preacher to be followed more than ethical teacher to be obeyed. The subtitle covered the topics to be covered: *Money, Sex, Power, Violence and the Meaning of Life*. However, following various reactions during my recent study leave, lecturing on these topics in different academic and theological contexts around the world, I have changed the title and the subtitle around to *Money, Sex, Power, Violence and the Meaning of Life: Following Jesus Today*. Once again, as we will explore throughout the rest of this Symposium, it is the importance of biographical narrative for the Jesus traditions in the gospels which is driving this research.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to sum up the last thirty years of my research on the biographical genre of the gospels, both to explain how we have come to hold this Symposium on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of my revised doctoral thesis and also to introduce some of the implications which the rest of the papers will develop further. Firstly, I have argued that the

33. Richard A. BURRIDGE, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2007.

form-critical views of the gospels as unique, *sui generis*, are no longer held as the dominant view in New Testament scholarship. They are important about the forms of the individual *pericopae* and gospel stories, but they miss the importance of the form or genre of the gospels as a whole. Secondly, there is now a broad acceptance of the importance of genre across New Testament scholarship and a recognition that the gospels share both internal and external generic features with examples of ancient *bioi*, or *Lives*. Thirdly, from this biographical hypothesis, I have drawn out a number of implications, both for my own continuing research and for our Symposium together: these include the Christological implications of this focus upon Jesus, particularly in the light of the absence of Rabbinic biography and in comparison with the non-canonical gospels, as well as how we can read the four gospels as biographical narratives, each with their own account of Jesus, which in turn leads to further implications for how we can follow Jesus today in New Testament Ethics through holding together, in good biographical fashion, both Jesus' deeds and words. I would like to conclude with a final word of thanks to Professor Armand Puig i Tàrrach for organising this Symposium and to my colleagues who will present the other papers; I hope that these words of introduction will set the tone for some fascinating discussion to come!