

which has only been alluded to (as a rule favourably, though not uncritically) in earlier chapters; and chapter 9, the last, after briefly looking at some other recent varieties of theism, resumes the exposition of process thought. The courteous criticism of others' positions which has hitherto marked the book is not applied to Barbour's own. The result is a little odd. Professor Barbour writes as a Christian, and criticizes, for example, Maurice Wiles for departing from the biblical witness; yet many readers will probably feel that he himself has done just the same, though to a lesser extent. For example: we are told that Christ differs from other religious figures only in degree. The cross and resurrection are only mentioned (with one doubtful exception) in reporting the views of others. He is unhappy with the picture of God as King, though he agrees it is biblical. And God is seen largely as our fellow-sufferer, a position which surely fits the biblical picture only if a much stronger doctrine of the Incarnation is held than Barbour himself holds. It would be unreasonable to expect Barbour to defend his theological position at length in a book on the relationships between religion and science, but the effect produced is one of imbalance, and slightly diminishes the value of a very worthwhile book.

Richard Sturch
Islip, England

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What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

Richard A. Burridge

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage comprend surtout une comparaison étendue et schématique entre les Evangiles et diverses biographies faites par des auteurs grecs et latins, depuis Xénophon et Isocrate jusqu'à Plutarque et Philostrate. L'auteur retrace et évalue les discussions classiques et récentes sur la nature du genre qu'est l'Evangile et insiste sur la nécessité d'avoir recours à l'érudition classique et à une théorie de la littérature. Il conclut que les Evangiles appartiennent au genre de la 'biographie', au moins autant que tout autre texte grec ou latin reconnu comme tel. Cette thèse est utilement défendue. Pourtant quelques questions importantes comme celle de l'usage de sources d'information par les biographes classiques et celle

de l'exactitude de ces sources ne sont pas abordées. De telles lacunes nous donnent l'impression que l'étude au sujet des Evangiles eux-mêmes reste inachevée.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der größte Teil des Buches besteht aus einem umfangreichen und strukturierten Vergleich der Evangelien mit verschiedenen griechischen und römischen Biographien von Xenophon und Isokrates bis Plutarch und Philostratus. Der Autor beschreibt und bewertet klassische und moderne Ansichten zur Gattung Evangelium, wobei er sich für einen Ansatz einsetzt, der sowohl Elemente der Klassizistik als auch moderne Literaturtheorie mit einschließt. Er schlußfolgert daß die Evangelien als Form zur Gattung 'Biographie' gehören, zumindest in demselben Maße wie andere griechische oder römische Texte, die als 'biographisch' eingestuft werden. Diese These ist im Grundsatz überzeugend und sorgfältig vorgetragen. Allerdings werden einige wichtige Detailfragen, z.B. über die Genauigkeit im Gebrauch von Quellenmaterial bei den klassischen 'Biographen', nicht beantwortet. Dies hinterläßt uns mit einer Reihe von offenen Fragestellungen im Hinblick auf die Evangelien selbst.

Outside the confines of scholarly New Testament criticism, Burridge's question must seem an odd one. What are the Gospels? To my teenage son the answer is obvious: the Gospels are books about Jesus. Burridge would agree, in fact, with this simple answer: more precisely, he would say, they are biographies of Jesus and would have been recognised as such by any contemporary reader in the Graeco-Roman world. The larger part of this book, therefore, is taken up with a wide-ranging schematic comparison between the Gospels and a number of Greek and Roman biographies, from Xenophon and Plutarch and Philostratus.

Within the world of New Testament scholarship, however, the idea of comparing the Gospels with Graeco-Roman biography has not always met with approval. Bultmann's categorical assertion that the Gospels 'cannot be included in the category of biographies' has dominated the critical tradition for over half a century. Only recently have scholars started to question this assertion and its concomitant insistence that the Gospel is a unique literary genre created by the early Christians. Accordingly, Burridge takes quite a time to describe and evaluate both the classic (ch. 1) and the more recent (ch. 4) discussion on the genre of the Gospels, and highlights the theological assumptions which have largely determined

the drift of the debate. The only way to get to grips with the problem, he rightly avers, is to enlist the aid of two external disciplines: classical scholarship and literary theory. The first will be familiar enough to readers of this Quarterly as a constant theme of the late F. F. Bruce: note that Burridge insists (and Bruce would have agreed with him) that taking the classics seriously means reading what classical scholars say about their texts as well as reading the texts (ch. 3). The second is more modish but equally welcome, and the chapter on 'Genre criticism and literary theory' (ch. 2) may well prove to be one of the most useful in the book for non-afficionados of literary theory.

In this chapter, Burridge provides a workman-like digest of genre theory which explains the central importance of genre for the study of literature (p. 34) and introduces the idea of genre as a 'system of expectations', or a 'contract' between author and reader (p. 35). These expectations may be confounded by the author and will be continually revised and adjusted in the light of the reader's encounter with the text: in other words, they are not simply a set of rules which the author must 'obey'. But the fact that they are adjustable does not mean that they do not exist: they are a real factor in the composition of the work, and readers who do not share them will make serious mistakes in decoding it. Conversely, discovering the extent of shared expectations between the author and the original readers can assist us to decode even old or unfamiliar works: 'when dealing with documents like the gospels which are not part of our contemporary literature and whose conventions are unclear it is through genres that we may enter into the hermeneutical circle and comprehend their meaning' (p. 38). It follows that an understanding of the way genres operated in contemporary literature is essential for the critic who would understand the Gospels or any other ancient text: 'The gospels must be compared with literature of their own day' (p. 53). Moreover, just as there is no such thing as a private language (if it is truly private it is not a language), so there is no such thing in terms of literary theory as a unique genre: the author must at least begin with something that the readers think they understand, otherwise no communication is possible (p. 49). And finally, genre theory allows Burridge to distinguish between different levels of literary comparison. Much of the confusion in current NT genre studies, he suggests, 'arises from a failure to appreciate the proper definition of genre and the levels at which it operates. Many of the proposed analogies [for the Gospels] are *modal* rather than *generic* descriptions, e.g. whereas Mark could well have many dramatic characteristics (modes), its form

and content will not allow it actually to be described as drama (genre)' (p. 53).

In the second part of the book, Burridge outlines the reasons why he believes, in the light of all these factors, that the best description of the Gospels in terms of genre (i.e. in terms of the literary expectations of their first readers) is 'biography' or (in Greek terms) *Bios*. This genre is to be defined not by starting with a rigid formula but (following good practice among literary critics) by considering a broad 'cluster' of features. Thus Burridge's checklist includes formal, external features like length, scale, and structure as well as internal aspects of content and style. The checklist is then used to set up a systematic comparison with ten Greek and Latin biographies ranging in date from the fourth century BC to the third century AD. The list is clearly chosen to encompass a wide variety of *Bioi* from different periods and language-groups: it is designed to be inclusive rather than discriminatory. Within the group, therefore, there is room for diversity: it is important for Burridge's purpose to stress that no example will contain all the generic features, and it is not necessary that they should. Thus, for example, the fact that Satyrus' *Life of Euripides* is in dialogue form does not disqualify it as a *Bios*, despite the fact that most *Bioi* use prose narrative, because in other respects it conforms to expectations for the genre; Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, similarly, is unusually long for the genre, since most *Bioi* are single-volume works.

When judged against this list, the Gospels turn out to be *as much Bioi as any of the others*: in other words, they fulfil as many of the generic expectations as the Greek and Roman texts which are universally accepted as belonging to the genre. This is a deliberately understated conclusion: Burridge is determined not to be more precise than his method allows, although he does allow himself some more tentative precision in his final chapter. His aim is (if I read him rightly) simply to clear the ground methodologically for future study of the Gospels within the broad genre classification *Bios*. If this understanding of the broad aim is correct, then the enterprise must be judged successful: I see no difficulty in understanding the gospels as *Bioi* in this overarching sense. I particularly value his insistence on using a 'cluster' of features to categorize genre, and his repeated stress on formal, external characteristics like metre and size in forming a literary judgement on a book. Within the cluster, not all the categories are equally convincing: I find it hard to detect in practice, for example, what is the difference between some of the headings used under 'authorial intention and purpose' (pp. 149–52, pp.

185–88). But there are real advances here, not least in the demonstration of methods of characterization in ancient biography (pp. 143–44, pp. 175–77), which should lay to rest once and for all the old complaint that the gospels cannot be biographies because they are not interested in ‘character portrayal’. Perhaps Burridge’s single most illuminating contribution to the debate is his analysis of the subjects of the *Bioi* (pp. 134–38, pp. 162–67 & *Appendix*) and of the Gospels (pp. 195–99, pp. 223–25 and *Appendix*). This analysis will be confirmed, I believe, by more detailed analysis of transitivity patterns. In sociolinguistic terms, Jesus is the ‘subject’ of the Gospels to an extent that is hard to parallel, even in the acknowledged biographies.

In broad terms, then, I would concur with Burridge’s thesis: there will always be room for argument about details, but overall the cumulative effect of his analysis is impressive. If there is a sense of dissatisfaction on reaching the end of the book, it is probably simply because the classification of the Gospels as *Bioi* is too broad to answer many of the precise questions which many readers want answered. For Burridge, this breadth is quite deliberate: to achieve greater precision would be to discuss ‘subgenres’ (p. 247), and that is not part of the concern of this study. In fact the breadth is necessary to accommodate much of the Gospel evidence: often a correlation is expressed in negative terms (‘not dissimilar,’ p. 212; ‘there appears to be nothing about this generic feature preventing them being *Bioi*,’ p. 214). But the problem is that by using this technique Burridge risks failing to deliver the understanding he offered at the outset: if genre is an essential clue to the meaning of a text, what hermeneutical advances has this classification in the end enabled us to make? Burridge makes the point himself in his concluding paragraphs (pp. 255–6): ‘our solution may be easier to demonstrate [than a rival thesis put forward by Shuler], but produce less direct results, since *Bios* is a widely diverse and relatively flexible genre within which to place the gospels, without this conclusion dictating all that we need to know about their interpretation’.

Thus this is very much a book which opens up possibilities rather than one which solves problems. It will not answer questions about accuracy and the use of sources among the biographers, for example. There is a wide range within the genre in this respect: Plutarch or Nepos could draw on good historical sources, but the Alexander Romance (which Burridge does not discuss) is wildly imaginative despite the existence of sober historical accounts of Alexander, and the biographies of writers and philosophers

contain a lot which is described simply as ‘fiction’ by classical scholars like Mary Lefkowitz. Similarly the question of linguistic and cultural register is touched on, but left deliberately open: some biographers belong to (and write for) the literary élite, others are more ‘popular’ (p. 149, p. 185). Biographies could vary widely in purpose, too: some are written to praise their subject, some to attack, some to teach (pp. 149–52, pp. 185–88). Again, Burridge deliberately stresses the wide range of possibilities here, and readers who want a more precise analysis of the social functions of biography within a particular tradition will have to look elsewhere (see for example Talbert’s article on ‘Biography, Ancient’ in the new *Anchor Bible Dictionary*). There is room for much fruitful work on these and related areas before we can claim fully to appreciate the Gospel’s impact on their first readers.

But to say that more needs to be done is not to denigrate the achievement of this study. Burridge has done much to clarify a rather confused issue in Gospel studies, and students concerned with genre issues in many other areas of NT research should find this a helpful introduction. And it may be that he himself has underestimated the hermeneutical gain to be made from his demonstration of the centrality of Jesus to the Gospel form. Scholarly approaches to the Gospels in recent years have suggested a surprising number of different ‘subjects’ for the Gospels: Mark is ‘about’ discipleship, for example, or John is ‘about’ the community’s break with the synagogue. There is a lot to be said for reminding ourselves again of the obvious (but too easily forgotten) fact that first and foremost the Gospels are ‘books about Jesus’.

Alexander Loveday
Sheffield, England

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Kingdom Concerns: A Theology of Mission Today

Ken Gnanakan

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RÉSUMÉ

Il ne s'agit pas là d'un traité académique sur la mission, mais d'un ouvrage écrit par un missionnaire engagé. Il a été publié à l'intention de lecteurs asiatiques, mais il mérite une diffusion plus étendue. Gnanakan présente une grande vision de l'effort missionnaire sur le plan de l'évangélisation et de l'action sociale. L'ouvrage présente des points faibles,