

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The problem of gospel genre is still a problem and will remain so until it is solved on the basis of sound literary theory and a thorough study of ancient literary history.¹

This study has been in two parts: the overall review of the problem of the genre of the gospels and the suggestion of a solution. It has been an argument of cumulative weight, with the methodology coming from literary theory and leading to the solution. Concluding summaries have been provided at each stage, leading to the final conclusion that the gospels belong to the genre of Graeco-Roman βίοι. Finally, therefore, we will outline the contribution of this study to gospel studies and some further implications which may flow from its suggestion that the gospels are βίοι. While the latter cannot be dealt with in detail, since they are ancillary to our main argument, they may provoke further studies to build upon our conclusions.

A Contribution and results

1 Evaluation of previous discussion

The first Chapter provided a general survey and evaluation of attempts to solve the problem of gospel genre over the last century or so. We saw that, although early studies suggested parallels between the gospels and Graeco-Roman biography, this was dismissed by the form critics because of their stress on the oral and *Kleinliteratur* nature of the gospels. However, redaction criticism has renewed interest in the gospel writers as authors in their own

¹ Susan Marie Praeder's conclusion of her review of Shuler's *A Genre for the Gospels* in *CBQ* 45 (1983), p. 709.

right, and with this the debate about the genre of the gospels reappeared. The most common suggestion is that the gospels are in some form of biographical genre. The various proposals for this over the last two decades or so were considered in Chapter 4. None of them has received widespread support as a definitive answer, although the cumulative effect has been an increasing assumption by scholars that some link with Graeco-Roman biography helps in understanding the gospels. Our evaluation is that most of these attempts failed because of either an insufficient grasp of critical literary theory or an inadequate understanding of the nature of Graeco-Roman biography, or both. It was suggested that only a proper interdisciplinary study involving literary theory and Graeco-Roman literature as well as gospel studies would succeed.

2 Establishment of a proper methodology

We have set out a methodology taking both literary theory and Graeco-Roman biography into account. Chapter 2 provided a survey of critical literary theory of genre, revealing the way genres form a set of expectations between authors and readers and how they are mediated through a variety of features. In Chapter 3 we considered the use of genre in classical studies and the development of Graeco-Roman biography. We suggested that 'βίος' is a better term for this flexible and widespread ancient genre, rather than 'biography' with all its modern expectations and connotations. One contribution is thus to have provided a study of the disciplines of critical literary theory and Graeco-Roman literature for the benefit of New Testament scholars who do not have this background.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 then applied the methodology of generic features to various examples of Graeco-Roman βίοι. From this study of ten different authors and periods, some on the fringes of the genre and others at its centre, a clear family resemblance of the genre of βίος emerged. This demonstrated the flexibility of the genre and the room for variation of features within it. However, the genre does have its limits: analysis of some works revealed that they sit on the overlap with other *genera proxima*, or indeed fit better into philosophical treatises or *memorabilia*. To belong to the genre of βίος, it is necessary for a work to demonstrate the same family resemblance with at least as many features in common with βίοι as βίοι tend to have in common with each other.

3 Demonstration of the genre of the gospels

Finally, in the last two Chapters, we applied the same, systematic analysis of generic features to the synoptic gospels and to the Fourth Gospel in turn. We discovered a high degree of correlation between the features of the gospels and those noted in βίοι, indicating a shared family resemblance. All four gospels lack any kind of biographical title, but the range of opening features (genealogy, starting directly into narrative, preface or prologue) is also found in βίοι, especially the early use of the subject's name. Analysis of the subjects of the verbs demonstrates that the gospels exhibit the same 'skew' effect noticed in βίοι, caused by the concentration on *one* person as the subject, rather than a range of subjects in the manner of other narrative genres; also the allocation of a reasonably large amount of space to the events of Jesus' death and Passion can be compared with the allocation of space in βίοι to the subject's significant period, including the death in some cases.

Turning to the structural, external features, the mode of representation of prose narrative, the medium-length size, the chronological structure with topical inserts and the narrow scale are all typical of βίοι. Furthermore, the basic literary units of stories, sayings and speeches are not dissimilar from those of βίοι, nor is the deliberate selection from a range of oral and written sources to reveal the particular characterization desired by the author for his portrait. There is, therefore, a high degree of similarity of external features. The study of the internal features, based more on content, revealed both similarity and variation. The wide range of geographical settings caused by the concentration of the dramatic setting on the subject is very similar, and there is a similar selection of topics and motifs. The rather serious and respectful atmosphere of the gospels is quite reminiscent of some βίοι, although other βίοι do have a lighter feel. The style and the apparent social setting of the gospels are both more popular than most of the βίοι studied; this may reflect the general preservation of more upper-class material from the ancient literary world, rather than indicate a significant difference, since there are suggestions that βίοι at a more popular level were actually quite common. The somewhat mixed quality of the characterization in the gospels, and the range of their purposes, can all find parallels within βίοι.

Thus, a wide range of similarities have been discovered between

the gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι; the differences are not sufficiently marked or significant to prevent the gospels belonging to the genre of βίος literature. The increasing tendency among New Testament scholars to refer to the gospels as 'biographical' is vindicated; indeed, the time has come to go on from the use of the adjective 'biographical', for *the gospels are βίοι!*

B Generic implications

1 The identity of the gospel genre

The first implication from even a brief consideration of their shared generic features is that all four canonical gospels are the same genre, despite the various apparent differences between them, notably the different 'feel' of the Fourth Gospel. Using the idea of 'family resemblance', we may compare the gospels to children of the same family: each child is indeed different, unique and special in its own right, but intimate knowledge of them from the inside and comparison with others outside the family show their shared family features arising from a common ancestry. Such similarities between the gospels have long been recognized, especially between the synoptic gospels with their literary interdependence, but also between John and the rest. This 'group identity' was recognized by the Tübingen Symposium in 1982: Stanton affirmed Matthew's dependency on Mark, saying 'if Mark is a εὐαγγέλιον, so is Matthew . . . he is almost certainly not attempting to create a new *genre*'. Marshall points out that, although there was the alternative pattern of Q, 'the important point is that neither Luke nor Matthew followed its pattern in the composition of their works. Both writers incorporated the Q material in a pattern that is based on Mk.' Finally, Dunn affirmed the identity of John with the others:

For all its differences from the Synoptics, John is far closer to them than to any other ancient writing (as the Symposium has shown). Although it is the discourses of Jesus which are the most elaborated feature of John's Gospel, the Evangelist did not elect to present a document consisting solely of the discourses or sayings of the redeemer (we may contrast gnostic equivalents like Gospel of Thomas, Thomas the Contender and Pistis Sophia). Rather he chose, and chose deliberately, to retain the developed

discourse material within the framework of a Gospel as laid down by Mark.²

As already noted, the differences between John and the synoptic gospels emerge when these four works are studied in isolation; however, as Stanton says, 'when the four gospels are set alongside all the other "gospels" and related writings which flourished for a time in some circles in the early church, it is their similarities rather than their differences which are striking'.³

It is necessary to affirm this generic identity of the gospels, since sometimes each gospel is described as its own genre, so that, for example, Matthew turns out to be a manual of church discipline, or Luke is described as a monograph. Even some who recognize the biographical genre of the gospels do not apply this to all four equally. Thus, on Talbert's system, Mark and John are both Type B (Lives written to defend the subject), while Luke and Matthew are different – Types D (written to link the life of the founder with those of his followers) and E (to provide hermeneutical legitimation of his teaching) respectively. Similarly, Aune puts John with Mark and Matthew, but Luke 'does not belong to a type of ancient biography for it belongs with Acts, and Acts cannot be forced into a biographical mold'. Conversely, Barr and Wentling compared Graeco-Roman biography with Luke-Acts alone, ignoring the other three.⁴ Given the high degree of family resemblance between all four canonical gospels' generic features, these studies must have made a mistake somewhere in methodology: in Talbert's case, the difference arises from a classification based solely on purpose, whereas Aune insists that both Luke and Acts must be the same genre. Maddox suggests that Luke-Acts is 'theological history'; Hengel calls it 'historical monograph', while Aune prefers 'general history'.⁵

² Stanton, 'Matthew as a Creative Interpreter', p. 287; Marshall, 'Luke and his "Gospel"', pp. 292–3; Dunn, 'Let John be John', pp. 338–9; all in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, ed. P. Stuhlmacher.

³ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, p. 135; see also his *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 184: 'If the evangelist did not intend, at least in part, to indicate what sort of person Jesus was, why did he write a gospel which, when placed alongside, say, either the *Gospel of Thomas* or *Pirqe Aboth*, looks so much like the synoptics?'

⁴ Talbert, *What is a Gospel?*, pp. 134–5, see p. 85 above; Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 77, see p. 103 above; Barr and Wentling, 'Conventions of Classical Biography', see pp. 100–2 above.

⁵ Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, pp. 15–18; Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 14 and 36; Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, pp. 77ff.

However, we have shown that the borders between the genres of historiography, monograph and biography are blurred and flexible. Medium-length works of prose narrative sharing external features, such as a vague chronological structure made up from units of stories and speeches, belong to one of three related genres: historical monograph or one volume of a larger work of historiography, romance or novel, or βίος. They are only differentiated by internal features such as subject or focus. Richard Pervo has argued that Acts belongs not to historiography but to the genre of the ancient novel, because it is written to entertain as well as for edification. However, these were common purposes also found in much ancient historiography; in the end, Pervo's definition that 'the novel = material + manner + style + structure'⁶ is rather vague for identifying genre. Aune criticizes Pervo in that only his use of the term 'fiction' distinguishes his novel from other forms of ancient historiography;⁷ furthermore, we have noted already the use of fiction within βίοι. Thus Pervo's identification of the genre of Acts is not persuasive. However, Aune's assertion that 'Luke-Acts must be treated as affiliated with one genre' is also problematic.⁸ As Parsons replies, 'it is entirely possible that Luke produced works belonging to two distinct genres of literature'.⁹ Clearly, the works are closely connected, as is shown by the literary parallels between the characters of Jesus, Peter and Paul, the use of the journey motifs, and, of course, the reference to τὸν πρῶτον λόγον in Acts 1.1. However, the two works are never found together in the manuscripts, but are separated by John (or sometimes by Mark), and even Aune accepts that they could have been published separately.¹⁰ It is possible that Acts, like the gospel, is linked to

⁶ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 114.

⁷ Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 153.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80, his italics.

⁹ In his review of Pervo, in *Interpretation* 1989, p. 409.

¹⁰ Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 77; note also: 'The Acts of the Apostles, though it is Luke's second volume and a sequel to his Gospel, does not belong to that genre. That it is separated from the Gospel of Luke by the Fourth Gospel is significant; the four belonged together, and had to be kept together, even at the cost of splitting Luke's work in two', quotation from F. Kermode, 'Introduction to the New Testament', in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (London: Collins, 1987), p. 383; J.M. Dawsey, 'The Literary Unity of Luke-Acts', *NTS* 35 (1989), pp. 48–66, notes that Luke and Acts are different genres and are never found together in the manuscripts; for the Western order of the gospels, see Bovon, 'The Synoptic Gospels', *HTR* 1988, p. 20.

βίος literature, either as a list of the Lives of the main subject's followers,¹¹ or as a βίος of the church, in the manner of Dicaearchus' biographical work on Greece, Περὶ τοῦ τῆς Ἑλλάδος βίου, mentioned above. Although Acts and the gospels share many generic features, they differ over their focus and concentration of subject: computer analysis of proper names in Acts shows that God appears in 17% of the sentences or major phrases, Paul in 14.5%, Jesus in 7%, Peter in 6% and the Pharisees in 9%. However, Acts and the gospels may be related genres. Both βίος and monograph may be distinguished from history itself by the feature of size: they are medium-length works, whereas historiography tends towards large works of several volumes. Although they are of the same size, βίος differs from monograph in that it focusses on one person, while monograph concentrates on a particular situation, war, or period. Thus Cicero suggests to Lucceius that, out of his large overall history ('Italici belli et civilis historia'), he should extract his account of the Catilinarian conspiracy from its start to Cicero's return from exile, which would make a reasonable sized monograph ('modicum quoddam corpus'), so that he can praise Cicero's part in it all (*Ad. Fam.* V.12.2-4). However, the generic boundaries of historiography, monograph and βίος could get blurred even within one work: thus Diodorus Siculus' massive history of the world in forty books devotes an entire book (XVII) to Alexander the Great, displaying many features of βίος, which is then followed by the 'Acts of his Successors' (τὰς τῶν διαδεξαμένων πράξεις, XVII.118.4); however, his treatment of Agathocles' activity in Sicily is fitted around events elsewhere in Greece or Asia in annalistic fashion, with a wider focus, typical of monograph (XIX.70-XX.101). The differing approach probably results from the sources available to Diodorus for the respective sections.

Thus it is not surprising as Luke moves from the βίος focus on one individual in his gospel to the wider scene of his second work, that generic features shared with history, monograph or romance start to appear in Acts. However, this does not alter the fact that Luke's gospel itself shares the same family resemblance as the other three gospels. Matthew and Luke are the same genre as their source, namely Mark; John, for all its individual 'feel', is also not significantly different from the point of view of genre. Because all four canonical gospels exhibit a high degree of generic similarity, they

¹¹ As Talbert suggests, *Literary Patterns*, pp. 125-43; *What is a Gospel?*, p. 134.

all belong to the same genre, i.e. βίος, and to the same subgenre, i.e. βίοι Ἰησοῦ.

2 The nature of the gospel genre

Critical literary theory of genre revealed the different levels at which genre and related considerations operate. Fowler had three distinct levels: mode (higher level, vague, based on styles or motifs), genre itself (including features of both form and content) and subgenre (usually differentiated by subject material).¹² If this analysis is applied to the gospels, it clarifies some of the links proposed with other literature. Many possible genres proposed for the gospels are actually modal relationships: thus the dramatic, tragic or tragi-comic elements (mode) do not make the gospels into drama or tragedy (genre), any more than parabolic concepts make them parables.¹³ Below this modal level, we have genre itself, and the genre of the gospels is βίος: no further definition of the genre of the gospels is needed. Below this level again, however, it is possible to be more precise. The subgenres of βίος include political βίοι, literary βίοι, βίοι of philosophers and so forth. The gospels exhibit several features which are also found in philosophical βίοι, such as the use of discourse and teaching material, whereas typical features of political βίοι, such as precise chronology, are missing. Thus there is a similarity with the subgenre of religious or philosophical βίοι. Below this level they are βίοι Ἰησοῦ, and below that is the level of the individual meaning of each gospel.

3 The development of the gospel genre

Our genre theory also showed us that genres emerge from mixed origins, drawing on neighbouring genres and beginning to assemble the pattern of their generic features. The primary stage is reached when someone first puts all these features together, sometimes unconsciously, and often not completely successfully. The secondary stage occurs when others develop the primary model. The tertiary stage involves radical reinterpretation in a new direction. After this the genre 'dies', or ceases to be written in the original form; new genres then develop.¹⁴ Thus βίος moves from its origins

¹² Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 106-18, see pp. 41-2 above.

¹³ The suggestions of Kelber, Bilezikian or Via - see p. 200 above.

¹⁴ See Fowler, *Kinds* pp. 149-69 and 'Life and Death' pp. 90-1; see pp. 45-7 above.

in historiography and rhetoric through the primary works of the philosophical schools into secondary Hellenistic βίοι. Roman biography mixes the Roman origins of family honours and traditions with the Greek model to produce new forms of βίοι, which are then modified, developing eventually into the late-imperial genre of hagiography and the new genre of mediaeval biography.

We may apply the model to the development of the gospels within the overall genre of βίος. The origins lie in the oral traditions of the early Christian communities and their preaching, including various contemporary genres; Baird sees twelve different genres, such as polemic, romance, aretalogy, dialogue, etc., reflected in the synoptic gospels.¹⁵ The origins also include proposed sources of the gospels, and *Ur-* or proto-gospels: Robinson saw Q as belonging to the genre of Wisdom sayings, and Kloppenborg sees Q moving from this in the direction of biography. Downing's writings have attempted to show a link between Q and Cynic sayings, although Tuckett is not convinced. Sato has argued for a prophetic background and genre for Q, while Williams calls it a 'parable-chreia collection'.¹⁶ Similarly, Fortna believes that his Johannine 'Signs Source' is already a 'gospel' in terms of genre through its narrative; however, once it is combined with the Passion Source into the 'Gospel of Signs', then we have the earliest real gospel, 'roughly contemporary with Q' around the 40s/50s AD.¹⁷ Fascinating though these speculations are, they concern texts which, if they existed at all, have not survived; therefore, we cannot be certain about their genre. It is when Mark combines all these various origins and traditions together into a narrative based around Jesus that the βίος form becomes important and we have the primary stage of the subgenre. He may have been consciously writing about Jesus in a way which was similar to βίοι of philosophers, or he may have done it unconsciously, falling into a βίος pattern simply

¹⁵ Baird, 'Genre Analysis', p. 400.

¹⁶ J.M. Robinson, 'Logoi Sophon: On the Gattung of Q', in *Trajectories*, pp. 71–113; refined by R. Hodgson, 'On the Gattung of Q: A Dialogue with James M. Robinson', *Biblica* 66 (1985), pp. 73–95; Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*, pp. 262 and 327–8, and 'The Formation of Q and Antique Instructional Genres', *JBL* 105 (1986), pp. 443–62; F.G. Downing, 'Quite like Q. A Genre for "Q": The "Lives" of Cynic Philosophers', *Biblica* 69 (1988), pp. 196–225; C.M. Tuckett, 'A Cynic Q?', *Biblica* 70 (1989), pp. 349–76; Migaku Sato, *Q und Prophetie: Studien zur Gattungs- und Traditionsgeschichte der Quelle Q*, WUNT 2.29 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1988); James G. Williams, 'Parable and Chreia: From Q to Narrative Gospel', *Semeia* 43 (1988), pp. 85–114.

¹⁷ Fortna, 'Excursus A: The Source's Genre' in *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 205–16.

because it is the natural genre for any text concentrating on the deeds and words of a single person.

Matthew and Luke represent the secondary stage: it seems that they did recognize Mark's genre and bring it closer to other Graeco-Roman βίοι: thus the Greek style is tidied up, and ancestry, birth and infancy narratives are added, together with a clearer chronological and topical structure. Berger sees a development towards a 'Königsvita', while the 'philosopher-vita' is suggested by Dieter Georgi.¹⁸ The Fourth Gospel may also be secondary stage; either the evangelist 'reinvented the wheel', as Aune puts it,¹⁹ – developing the form separately through his oral sources shared with the synoptics and seeking to blend Jesus' teaching with narrative – or he edits and reinterprets a source which already has this form, such as one of the synoptic gospels (Barrett, Kümmel), the Gospel of Signs (Fortna) or earlier editions from the community (Brown *et al.*) – see pages 221 and 228 above. The amount of discourse material included begins to push the work towards other genres, such as philosophical dialogues, but sufficient narrative and other biographical features are retained for it still to be a βίος.

The tertiary stage may be discerned in the apocryphal and non-canonical gospels. Again, many of these works are not preserved but are known to us from citations in the Fathers or from papyrus fragments, so genre identification is difficult.²⁰ However, taken as a whole, they are a mixed group with varying relationships to the canonical gospels. Some examples, especially the 'Jewish-Christian' gospels, such as the *Nazarenes*, *Ebionites* and *Hebrews*, share stories with both the synoptic gospels and the Fourth Gospel, and may have had a similar overall structure: this can be explained through common oral traditions. These works may have been forms of βίοι; Gero says, 'these works were "complete" gospels, and included much narrative material' and he calls both them and the canonical gospels '*Vitae Jesu*'.²¹

¹⁸ Berger, 'Hellenistische Gattungen im NT', *ANRW* II.25.2, p. 1245. repeated and affirmed in his *Formgeschichte des NT*, p. 356; Georgi, 'The Records of Jesus', p. 541.

¹⁹ Aune, 'The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography', *Mosaic*, 1987, p. 4.

²⁰ See further, E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (London: SCM, 1963) and James H. Charlesworth, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (London: Metuchen, 1987); also his article with a full bibliography, 'Research on The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha', in *ANRW* II.25.5 (1988), pp. 3919–68.

²¹ Stephen Gero, 'Apocryphal Gospels: A Survey of Textual and Literary Problems', *ANRW* II.25.5 (1988), pp. 3969–96. quotations from pp. 3975 and 3989;

In other cases, however, especially those from the Gnostic tradition, we have different genres: the *Gospel of Thomas* consists of 114 sayings of Jesus. Thus it lacks many generic features of the canonical gospels, such as narrative or chronological and geographical settings.²² Similarly, the *Gospel of Truth* is related to monograph and 'hortatory, laudatory address' while the *Gospel of Philip* is a collection of sayings, a different pattern of generic features from the canonical gospels.²³ Other documents termed 'gospels' concentrate on one part of the story of Jesus. The *Protevangelium of James*, which begins with the conception of Mary and ends at the birth of Jesus is described by Gero as 'not really a *Vita Jesu*, but rather a *Vita Mariae*', while the so-called 'infancy gospels' consist of legendary stories about the boyhood of Jesus, designed to fill out the gap we noted in the canonical gospels. Finally, 'Passion gospels' concentrate on the other end of Jesus' life. Thus, none of these documents share the family resemblance of the four canonical gospels.²⁴

As Gero concludes, therefore, 'one must guard against an assumption that "apocryphal gospels" or "post-canonical" traditions represent a distinct literary genre'.²⁵ It is better to see them as part of the tertiary stage of reinterpretation and sophistication away from the basic generic pattern of βίοι Ἰησοῦ. The missing features, such as lack of narrative, settings and chronological development, the scale and focus on the ministry of the earthly Jesus and so on, are the features which place the canonical gospels in the

see also, A.F.J. Klijn, 'Das Hebräer- und das Nazoräerevangelium', *ANRW* II.25.5, pp. 3997–4033, and George Howard, 'The Gospel of the Ebionites', pp. 4034–53; P. Vielhauer, 'Jewish-Christian Gospels', in Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, pp. 117–65.

²² Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, pp. 278–307 and 511–22; 'Evangelium Thomae Copticum', Appendix 1, in *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, ed. Kurt Aland, 5th edn (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1968), pp. 517–30; for discussion and bibliography, see F.T. Fallon and R. Cameron, 'The Gospel of Thomas: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis', in *ANRW* II.25.6 (1988), pp. 4195–251.

²³ J. Helderman, 'Das Evangelium Veritatis in der neueren Forschung', *ANRW* II.25.5, pp. 4054–106, esp. 'Die Gattung des EV', pp. 4069–72; G.S. Gasparro, 'Il "Vangelo secondo Filippo": rassegna degli studi e proposte di interpretazione', pp. 4107–66, esp. pp. 4113–18, and J.J. Buckley, 'Conceptual Models and Polemical Issues in the Gospel of Philip', pp. 4167–94.

²⁴ See Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, pp. 363–417 and 433–510 and Gero, 'Apocryphal Gospels', *ANRW* II.25.5, pp. 3978–89 for all these gospels; for the *Protevangelium of James*, see p. 3978 and E. Cothenet, 'Le Protévangile de Jacques', *ANRW* II.25.6 (1988), pp. 4252–69.

²⁵ Gero, 'Apocryphal Gospels', *ANRW* II.25.5, pp. 3995–6.

genre of βίος. The use of the word εὐαγγέλιον to describe many of these works is evidence of the early church's recognition of the genre of the gospels, but even then it is sometimes 'so-called' when applied to the non-canonical gospels, as in Bishop Serapion's counterblast περὶ τοῦ λεγομένου κατὰ Πέτρον εὐαγγέλιον (c. AD 200).²⁶ The final evidence that the genre of gospel as βίος Ἰησοῦ has ceased to be composed is that those who wished to write about Jesus without following the Gnostic route out into treatise or sayings/discourse genres chose instead to write in the genre of gospel commentaries, indicating that the canonical gospels have become revered works – and so we have a change of genre.

Thus the canonical gospels form a subgenre of βίοι Ἰησοῦ, possibly related to philosophical βίοι, which displays a clear generic development from its origins in the oral traditions through the primary stage of Mark to the classical secondary versions of Matthew and Luke. John displays some minor variations on the theme, but it is with the development of the non-canonical gospels and commentaries on the canonical gospels that we have moved through the tertiary stage into other related, but different, genres.

4 The setting of the gospel genre

The question of whether Mark wrote in the genre of βίοι deliberately or whether he just fell unconsciously into a natural biographical pattern, and the suggestion made above that Matthew and Luke attempted to conform their work more closely to βίος, both raise the issue of the setting of the gospel genre in contemporary first-century society and of the level of the evangelists' education and literary awareness: would they have known some of these other βίοι and, if so, how did they meet them? A large gulf has been envisaged between classical literature and the New Testament since Schmidt and Bultmann's distinction between *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*. This depends upon two ideas: first, that literary knowledge and competence was confined to the upper classes in the ancient world, and second that the early Christians were drawn from the lower classes. The combination of these two ideas implies that the early Christians would not have known 'higher literature' and that their works, such as the gospels, were forms of popular story-telling. If this is true, it causes severe

²⁶ See Moule, *Birth of NT*, pp. 251–2.

problems for our suggestion that the gospels belong to the genre of Graeco-Roman βίοι.

First, however, the penetration of literary ideas through ancient society was widespread. Francis Cairns points out that awareness of genres and how they operate was taught as part of childhood exercises and would be 'the minimum formal rhetorical equipment of any literate person from the Hellenistic period on'.²⁷ The content of Hellenistic primary education centred around reading and writing skills based on extracts from classical literature, with moral education being imparted through the choice of elevating stories. These would often be biographical – the great deeds of this or that hero put forward as a model for the children to emulate, and this moral, paradigmatic purpose was typical of βίοι even at a high literary level. Thus the concepts and nature of βίος were taught indirectly at primary level, followed by direct teaching of genres and other aspects of rhetoric and composition at secondary level.²⁸ Such schools were all over Asia Minor and Syria, and were set up in Palestine, especially in Greek areas like the Decapolis, as part of the process of Hellenization. Their success can be deduced from the response of conservative Jews, in the Maccabean period and later, to safeguard their own school system as 'exclusively a moral and a religious education'.²⁹ However, even if our early Christian had avoided any contact with Greek literary forms in his schooling, the whole culture of the eastern Mediterranean would have communicated them to him. As Downing argues, literary and cultural awareness was mediated down the social scale from the higher educated classes through public debates, the Cynic philosopher on the corner and the crowded market-place, the theatre, courts and assembly, as well as the after-dinner entertainment, which the lower classes attended as servants and slaves, if not as guests; he concludes, 'there is no sign of a culture-gap between the highly literate aristocracy and the masses'.³⁰ The first argument for a gap between the gospels and Graeco-Roman literature is thus demolished.

²⁷ Cairns, *Generic Composition*, pp. 37, 70 and 75, see p. 59 above.

²⁸ See further, H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), esp. pp. 142–75.

²⁹ E.B. Castle, *Ancient Education and Today* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 184; see also pp. 160–4 on the clash with Hellenism.

³⁰ F. Gerald Downing, 'A bas les aristos. The Relevance of Higher Literature for the Understanding of the Earliest Christian Writings', *NovT* 30 (1988), pp. 212–30.

The second argument, that the early Christians were found only in the lower classes, can be traced back to early Marxist analysis of Christianity as a 'working class movement' and to Deissmann's work, linking the insults of Celsus that Christians were 'wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels' (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.55) with Paul's admission that 'not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor. 1.26). However, this suggestion has been criticized in recent years: from the names contained in the New Testament and indirect evidence about travel, slave ownership, money and the tensions within Pauline communities, Meeks has argued that 'a fair cross-section of urban society' is represented, bringing together several social levels, and only 'the extreme top and bottom of the Greco-Roman social scale are missing'. Malherbe has concluded that the quotations and allusions in the New Testament 'help us to establish the lowest educational level that can reasonably be assumed for the New Testament writers who use them, *i.e.*, the upper levels of secondary-school instruction'.³¹ Thus neither of the foundations for the suggestion that the early Christians would not have known Graeco-Roman literature are correct, and therefore the form-critical view that the gospels are popular, non-literary and oral in character collapses. There is nothing about either the literary ability or education of the evangelists, nor the social and cultural setting in which they wrote and were interpreted, to prevent the generic link of the gospels with βίοι.

The question of how much of this was conscious is harder to answer with respect to Mark than to the others. Our study of literary theory stressed that generic conventions and expectations are often mediated unconsciously through society, and that the originators of generic shifts and new types are often not the great writers.³² Mark's biographical genre may be a natural, if unconscious, consequence of his decision to present his Christian message with such a concentration on the life, deeds and words of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, both Beavis and Tolbert have argued that Mark's educational background and the reader response expected from the audience suggest a basic level of

³¹ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, pp. 51–73, quotations from p. 73; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 45; see also, Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), pp. 90–103.

³² See Chapter 2, pp. 44–6 above.

popular education at least.³³ Both Matthew and Luke, however, must have been aware of the similarity between Mark and βίου: not only do they correct his Greek style, they also expand and develop his work to bring it into greater conformity with the genre. As Kee notes, 'Matthew was also strongly affected by the biographical tradition, especially in his interests in the circumstances of Jesus' birth and infancy. In Luke, however, the impact of Hellenistic and Roman biography is clearly and pervasively apparent.'³⁴ Finally, it would be strange if the author/editor(s) of the Fourth Gospel did not realize the parallels with βίου, given the many other links to Graeco-Roman and Jewish philosophical and religious ideas and literature which are found in John.

So we may conclude that the authors of the gospels were aware of the βίος nature of their work. Similarly, their audiences must have realized this, as Hengel says 'The ancient reader will probably have been well aware of the differences in style and education, say, between Mark and Xenophon; but he will also have noticed what the gospels had in common with the literature of biographical "reminiscences" – and unlike the majority of German New Testament scholars today, he did not mind at all regarding the evangelists as authors of biographical reminiscences of Jesus which went back to the disciples of Jesus themselves.'³⁵

5 Summary

Our main study demonstrated that the genre of the four canonical gospels is to be found in βίος literature. These final observations about the generic implications of such a result have not revealed anything to oppose this conclusion; the gospels all share an identical genre, that of βίος, and also make up a subgenre within that genre, namely βίου Ἰησοῦ. This group of literary texts is separate both from its origins and its successors in the non-canonical gospels and gospel commentaries. Finally, New Testament scholarship must not be done in a vacuum: no matter how clear the results of

³³ Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, pp. 20–44; Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, pp. 301–9.

³⁴ H.C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (London: SCM, 1980), p. 145.

³⁵ M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, p. 29; see also, Helen Elsom, 'The New Testament and Greco-Roman Writing', in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Alter and Kermode, pp. 561–78: 'Such conventions were part of the literature in Greek which was likely to be familiar to the urban citizens of the Roman Empire who read the Gospels', p. 563.

our analysis might be, the idea that the gospels are βίου would be untenable if no connection with Hellenistic literary culture was possible for their authors and readers. In fact, not only is such a link possible, it is demanded both by the generic features of the texts themselves and also by the social setting of early Christianity within the eastern Roman empire of the first century AD.

C Hermeneutical implications

1 Genre – the key to interpretation

Our study of the critical literary theory showed that genre plays a crucial rôle in the interpretation of written texts, especially texts from a different period or environment than our own. Genre is a major literary convention, forming a 'contract' between author and reader; it provides a set of expectations for the reader about the author's intentions, which helps in the construction of the meaning on the page and the reconstruction of the author's original meaning, as well as in the interpretation and evaluation of the communication contained within the work itself. To avoid the errors likely in simple application of a text to ourselves without regard for the setting and background of either, appreciation of genre is crucial as a major 'filter' through which the author 'encoded' his message, and through which we may 'decode' the same.

The first implication of all this is that any idea of the gospels as unique, *sui generis* works is a nonsense: authors cannot create, and readers cannot interpret, a total novelty. The second implication is that we must have the same generic expectations as the author and his original readers: trying to 'decode' the gospels through the genre of modern biography, when the author 'encoded' his message in the genre of ancient βίος, will lead to another nonsense – blaming the text for not containing modern predilections which it was never meant to contain. The third implication is that the assignation of different genres to texts results in different interpretations: one listens to the TV News with different expectations than to a fairy story. It has become clear in this study that the narrower the genre proposed for the gospels, the harder it is to prove the case, but the more useful the hermeneutical implications; whereas the wider the genre, the easier it is to demonstrate that the gospels belong to it, but the less helpful the result. Thus, if Philip Shuler

had proved that his genre of 'encomium biography' actually existed and that the gospels belonged within it, we should then have interpreted them encomiastically. However, since he managed to establish neither that the genre existed nor that the gospels belong to it, we are not helped in the hermeneutical quest. On the other hand, our solution may be easier to demonstrate, but produce less direct results, since βίος is a widely diverse and relatively flexible genre within which to place the gospels, without this conclusion dictating all we need to know about their interpretation. Graeco-Roman βίοι could have a variety of purposes from encomium to entertainment, from information to polemic, not all of which are necessarily applicable to the gospels. However, 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. To this extent, therefore, real progress has been made, even if βίος is a wide and flexible genre.

2 Jesus – the key to the gospels

If genre is the key to a work's interpretation, and the genre of the gospels is βίος, then the key to their interpretation must be the person of their subject, Jesus of Nazareth. Perrin says that 'the nature of a Gospel is not the ministry of the historical Jesus, but the reality of Christian experience'.³⁶ Such comments obscure the genre of the gospels; while they include the 'reality of Christian experience', or the Kingdom of Heaven, or the salvation of God in history, and other proposed 'subjects', to place such subjects as their primary concern above the person of Jesus is to miss the fact that they are βίοι. This is clear if we compare the gospels with the Epistles and Rabbinic material.

Paul is also concerned for the reality of Christian experience and the salvation of God in Christ, but he does not write βίοι. Instead, he handles these concerns in the genre of Epistle, which has different links with Graeco-Roman literature. The overall message of the writer must not be confused with the genre he uses. The 'reality of Christian experience' can be conveyed in many genres, from gospel and epistle to sermon or drama. Paul's choice of the

³⁶ Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 75.

genre of epistle may have been to communicate to a community some distance away, but it is also a genre which is amenable for dealing with a specific event, issue or doctrine; βίος, on the other hand, deals with a specific person. Something similar emerges from a comparison of the gospels with Rabbinic material. Although the individual gospel units often find parallels with Rabbinic stories, Alexander pointed out that there is no parallel to the overall gospel form in the Jewish material, probably because 'the centre of Rabbinic Judaism was Torah; the centre of Christianity was the person of Jesus'.³⁷

This emphasis on the centrality of the person of Jesus is an hermeneutical consequence of the gospels being βίοι. Because Paul says little about the person of Jesus in his epistles does not necessarily mean that he was not interested in his earthly ministry; it might be because he is writing epistles and not βίοι. If the early church had not been interested in the person and earthly life of Jesus, it would not have produced βίοι, with their narrative structure and chronological framework, but discourses of the risen Christ, like the Gnostic 'gospels', instead. As Bilezikian comments, 'the very existence of the Gospel, and that of Matthew and Luke after Mark, bears witness to the importance attached to the historical Jesus by the early church'.³⁸ Stanton demonstrated that the early church was interested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in its preaching and teaching, and our conclusions about the βίος genre of the gospels reinforce this.³⁹ The centrality of the person of Jesus arising from the βίος genre of the gospels needs to become the central key to their interpretation: Christology, the portrait by each evangelist, affects every area. As Kysar says concerning John's Christology, 'the simple fact that the evangelist has chosen to express himself through the means of a gospel indicates that there is a real historical human life at the root of the central character of his witness. If flesh is irrelevant to the evangelist or if the revealer in no sense really took upon himself fleshly existence, why did the evangelist write a *gospel*?'⁴⁰

Similarly, the βίος genre of the gospels affects the 'Quest for the Historical Jesus', with particular respect to the use of sources by

³⁷ Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography', p. 41, see p. 21 above; see also Hilton and Marshall, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 13.

³⁸ Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel*, p. 140.

³⁹ Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*; see esp. pp. 186–91.

⁴⁰ Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, p. 191, his italics; similarly, Boring sees Christology as crucial for Mark's genre, *Truly Human/Truly Divine*, pp. 88–9.

writers of βίοι. The selectivity allowed for an author to produce his portrait of the subject will form part of the redaction critical approach; however, because this is a Life of an historical person written within the lifetime of his contemporaries, there are limits on free composition. Jack Kingsbury notes this mixture of variety with limits in his suggestion of one gospel about God's saving activity in Jesus in four editions, 'that the early church opted for a plurality of gospels within limits and that it also set considerable store on preserving intact the distinctiveness of each one'.⁴¹ Robert Morgan sees this plurality of gospels as a positive theological opportunity for their interpretation: none of them is the sole Gospel, inviting us to 'faith images of Jesus' over which the canonical gospels act 'both as a stimulus and a control'.⁴² Similarly, Stanton concluded that the biographical interest of the early church in the person of Jesus should act as a spur to contemporary evangelism and preaching, which also need to be based on the life and character of Jesus.⁴³ *It is our contention that this βίος nature of the gospel genre should also restore the centrality of the person of Jesus.*

Conclusion

We began this study with some surprise that such a basic question for the interpretation of the gospels as their genre had not been satisfactorily resolved. Furthermore, we suggested that the biographical hypothesis should either be exposed as a false trail or given a proper, scholarly footing through an interdisciplinary study involving literary theory and Graeco-Roman biography. In fact, such an approach has now demonstrated from an analysis of many generic features that both the four canonical gospels and Graeco-Roman βίος exhibit a clear family resemblance. The genre of βίος is flexible and diverse, with variation in the pattern of features from one βίος to another. The gospels also diverge from the pattern in some aspects, but not to any greater degree than other βίοι; in other words, they have at least as much in common with Graeco-Roman βίοι as the βίοι have with each other. Therefore, the gospels must belong to the genre of βίος.

Finally, we have outlined some generic and hermeneutical impli-

⁴¹ J.D. Kingsbury, 'The Gospel in Four Editions', *Interpretation* 33 (1979), pp. 363–75.

⁴² Robert Morgan, 'The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels', *Interpretation* 33 (1979), pp. 376–88, quotations from p. 386.

⁴³ Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 190–1.

cations of this result. The four canonical gospels belong together as βίοι Ἰησοῦ, unlike the non-canonical gospels, many of which have lost the generic features of βίος. Furthermore, nothing in the social setting of the gospel texts, writers and audiences prevent them being interpreted as βίοι. Finally, this genre of βίος has distinct hermeneutical implications for the gospel studies, reaffirming the centrality of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

John 20.30–31

What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

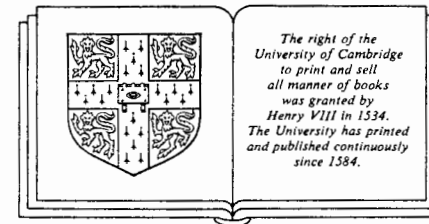
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