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978-0-521-48363-6 - What are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

Richard A. Burridge

Excerpt

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PART ONE

THE PROBLEM

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HISTORICAL SURVEY

The documents . . . presenting themselves as biographies of the Founder of Christianity (1863)

They cannot be included in the category of biographies (1928)

The gospels are biographies, albeit ancient ones. (1977)¹

The study of the genre of the gospels appears to have gone round in a full circle over the last century or so of critical scholarship. The nineteenth-century assumption about the gospels as biographies is explicitly denied by the scholarly consensus of most of this century. In recent years, however, a biographical genre has begun to be assumed once more. The latest position is naturally not exactly the same as the original one: much water has flowed beneath the critical bridge in the intervening century, and all this must be taken into account. However, the circular impression of something being asserted, denied and then coming back into fashion is not all that misleading. This book attempts to provide a good foundation for the reintroduction of the biographical view of the gospels. We begin, therefore, with a brief survey of the progress of the debate, considering the arguments of several key works from the main important periods: the turn of the century, the middle of this century and recent decades.²

¹ Ernest Renan, *Life of Jesus*, ET (London: Kegan Paul 1893), p. 7; Rudolf Bultmann, 'Evangelien', in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. H. Gunkel *et al.*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1928), vol. 2, cols. 418–22, ET as 'The Gospels (Form)', in *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, ed. J. Pelikan (London: Collins, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 86–92, quotation from p. 87; C.H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 135.

² For brief surveys of the debate, see R.H. Gundry, 'Recent Investigations into the Literary Genre "Gospel"', in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R.N. Longenecker and M.C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 97–114; M.J. Suggs, 'Gospel, genre', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 370–2; Vernon K.

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A **The turn of the century**

1 Ernest Renan (1863)

It was fashionable in the last century to write 'Lives of Jesus', such as that by Ernest Renan. Renan thought it was possible to write a biography of Jesus, beginning with his birth and infancy, his education and the influence of his time and environment (chapters 1–4), and going on through his ministry to the events of his death, concluding with a summary of the essential character of his work (chapter 28). The book's introduction reveals that Renan's main sources are the four canonical gospels, assumed to be biographies, with the evangelists as the biographers of Jesus. Furthermore, the gospels belong to a subgroup of the wider genre of biography: 'They are neither biographies after the manner of Suetonius, nor fictitious legends in the style of Philostratus; they are legendary biographies.' They are to be compared with Lives of saints, heroes or philosophers, in which 'historical truth and the desire to present models of virtue are combined in various degrees'.³ Further, Renan discussed the differences between the synoptic gospels and the fourth. The relationship of John to Jesus is akin to that between Plato and Socrates: the discourses 'represent to us the sermons of Jesus, as the dialogues of Plato render us the conversations of Socrates', and thus John is seen as 'the biographer of Jesus, as Plato was of Socrates'.⁴

2 C. W. Votaw (1915)

Such comparisons of the gospels with contemporary classical biography reached their zenith in Clyde Weber Votaw's article of 1915 in which he set out to place the gospels within the literature of the Graeco-Roman period.⁵ After a very brief introduction to classical literature and the way in which the gospels were used as

Robbins, 'Mark as Genre', *SBL 1980 Seminar Papers* (Chicago: Scholars, 1980), pp. 371–99; R.A. Burridge, 'Gospel', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), pp. 266–8.

³ Introduction, Renan, *Life of Jesus*, pp. 1–34; quotations from p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19 and 130.

⁵ Originally C.W. Votaw, 'The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies', *American Journal of Theology* 19 (1915), pp. 45–73 and 217–49; reprinted separately as *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Graeco-Roman World* (with an introduction by John Reumann) by Fortress Press, Facet Books, in 1970. Page references are to the latter edition.

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'memorabilia' of Jesus by Christians undertaking the task of evangelizing the Graeco-Roman world, he comes to the crucial question of biography. He subdivides this genre into two groups: historical biography, which presents all the dates and facts in an ordered accurate method, and popular biography, intended to acquaint the reader with the subject in a practical or hortatory way. Although the two groups shade into one another, Votaw is convinced that they can be distinguished by their method: accurate history or disconnected memorabilia. The gospels are of the popular variety because of their method and 'the extreme difficulty of recovering the historical Jesus'.⁶ However, to the same group, and for the same reasons, other writings intended to promote the personality and message of three other moral-religious teachers may also be consigned. These are Socrates (469–399 BC), Apollonius of Tyana (c. AD 10–97) and Epictetus (c. AD 50–130). Votaw, therefore, proceeds to compare such works with the gospels, beginning with a brief description, with extracts, of the works by Arrian on Epictetus and Philostratus on Apollonius of Tyana. The similarities and parallels he discovers are put down to their all 'belonging to the same type of literature, namely, popular biography'.⁷

The closest parallel, however, is that between Socrates and Jesus, and also between the writings of their disciples: the second part of the article compares the gospels with Plato's *Dialogues* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. They all share a common motive – to restore the reputation of one executed by the state – and a common core of historical information about their subject, but this is provided by a portrait rather than a photograph, overlaid with reflection and interpretation. Furthermore, the time interval between the death of the subject and the writing of the accounts is approximately the same. The differences – that the Socratic literature is more extensive and that the gospels have been written down in a language different from that spoken by their subject – do not prevent the parallel.

3 Evaluation

Both authors attempt to relate the gospels to Graeco-Roman biography. Such setting of the gospels within the literary relation-

⁶ Votaw, 'The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies', pp. 5–8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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ships of their day must be applauded. However, apart from the obvious difficulty that Renan and Votaw wrote before the insights of form criticism, there are problems with both their understanding of genre theory and their handling of Graeco-Roman biography.

The literary theory of genre requires careful consideration of how works may be described as belonging to a shared genre. Renan sees his own *Life of Jesus*, nineteenth-century ideas of biography and Graeco-Roman Lives as all being the same thing. Votaw never asks how genre may be defined; parallelism of subject-matter, particularly of Jesus and Socrates, together with a shared purpose is sufficient for these works to belong to the same type of literature. The criteria are thus all to do with content; questions about literary form or analysis of structure are hardly discussed, if at all. The disparity between the length of the gospels and that of the *Apollo-nius of Tyana* or the Socratic literature does raise questions about these works belonging together. Votaw's concerns are more about overall, general impressions to be gained from the works, rather than generic considerations of a technical nature. If the gospels are to be identified with these biographies, much more attention will need to be given to analysis of form and structure and to what actually constitutes genre.

Graeco-Roman biography includes works of a wide range of types, subjects and dates. Subdivisions within this range need to be accurately defined. Renan's distinction is again in terms of content, particularly the historical veracity or legendary nature of the work. Votaw's historical and popular biographies are identified also in terms of the historical objectivity of the works. Whether any ancient biographies would qualify for inclusion in the first group with its modern stress on critical research is debatable. Further, the stress on content and overall impression of the subject means that works of a clearly different genre, e.g. Plato's *Dialogues*, which are philosophical treatises, can be considered as biographies for the purposes of comparison with the gospels.

Thus, much more consideration needed to be given both to the literary theory of genre and to the nature of Graeco-Roman biography if Renan's and Votaw's comparison of the gospels with such works was to prove profitable. However, developments in German scholarship meant that it would be over fifty years before these comparisons would be considered again within critical orthodoxy.

B The rise of form criticism

The development of form-critical approaches turned the focus of attention away from the evangelists as authors to the oral transmission of units of gospel tradition. We cannot document here this massive shift in the interpretation of the gospels as a whole, but will consider the two main contributions to the question of gospel genre which established the consensus for the next fifty years, namely, that they are unique, *sui generis* pieces of literature.

1 *Urliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*

Unlike Renan and Votaw, Norden (1898) saw no parallels and thought the gospels were something new and different from contemporary literature.⁸ Wendland (1912) anticipated Votaw's historical v. popular distinction with a different stress: Graeco-Roman biography depended upon the author's literary personality and intention. However, the process of collecting and assembling units of oral tradition, lying behind the gospels' composition, prevented such literary concerns. The evangelist thus became more of a popular story-teller and collector with no personal individuality, and the parallels for the gospels should be sought among similar products of oral tradition, such as the Homeric literature or the stories in the Pentateuch.⁹

Overbeck (1882) also stressed the preliterate development of the gospels with the term *Urliteratur* for the New Testament books, lying between the oral material of the primitive Christian communities and later, truly literary writings of the patristic period.¹⁰ Dibelius (1919) differentiated between formal 'literary' works, produced by the conscious intention of an author, and the end product of popular tradition and story-telling. The gospels 'are unliterary writings' (*Kleinliteratur*). 'They should not and cannot be compared with "literary" works' (*Hochliteratur*).¹¹ Such a process of oral tradition has a radical effect on the question of the

⁸ E. Norden, *Die antike Kunsiprosa* (Stuttgart: Teubner, repr. 1958), vol. 2, pp. 480–1.

⁹ P. Wendland, *Die urchristlichen Literaturformen*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: 1912), pp. 266ff.

¹⁰ F. Overbeck, 'Über die Anfänge der patristischen Literatur', *Historische Zeitschrift* NF 12 (48) (1882), pp. 417–72.

¹¹ M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933); ET *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. B.L. Woolf (London: James Clarke, 1971), pp. 1–2.

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personality of the author(s): because many anonymous individuals are involved, we cannot talk of the work as belonging to the personality of any one; rather, it is the development of the tradition itself which is the dominant factor.

2 Karl Ludwig Schmidt

In 1919, Schmidt demonstrated that the differences between the synoptic gospel accounts can be seen most clearly in the links or seams by which the various stories are joined. From this he concluded that these units, or pericopae, circulated independently within the oral tradition and were then strung together, like so many pearls on a piece of string, by the evangelist.¹² It is clear that this leaves very little room for any concept of authorial intention, purpose or literary pretensions – and thus the question of the genre of the whole work is replaced by a concern for the particular form of each individual pericope.

However, it was his seminal article in 1923 for the *Festschrift* for Hermann Gunkel's sixtieth birthday which really set the tracks for the next four decades.¹³ Schmidt began by dismissing Votaw's suggestions, drawing upon Wendland's comments about the literary personality of the author, which is present even in Xenophon or Arrian, but absent from the gospels. The parallelism of the gospels with the *Memorabilia*, noted by Votaw, is superficial, nothing other than the similarity of Jesus and Socrates. The difference is clear: the former are *Kleinliteratur*, but Xenophon is *Hochliteratur*. A search of contemporary Greek, Jewish, oriental and Rabbinic literature reinforces the argument that the gospels are a form of folk literature and the evangelist 'a naive folk story-teller' ('ein naiver Volkserzähler').¹⁴

His own suggestion about the place of the gospels in the history of literature begins with the uncompromisingly ringing declaration that the gospel is basically 'not *Hochliteratur*, but *Kleinliteratur*, not the product of an individual author, but a folk-book, not

¹² K.L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzsch und Sohn, 1919), reprinted (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964).

¹³ K.L. Schmidt, 'Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte', in *EYXAPIΣTHPION: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, ed. Hans Schmidt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1923), vol. 2, pp. 50–134.

¹⁴ Schmidt, 'Die Stellung der Evangelien', pp. 55–76, quotation from p. 75.

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biography, but cult-legend'.¹⁵ On the other hand, Graeco-Roman biographies belong to *Hochliteratur* because of their conscious literary intention; even a book like Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana* shows clearly the self-conscious personality of the author.¹⁶ The gospels cannot be compared with such works; instead, other parallels must be sought among examples of *Kleinliteratur*. Those suggested include the German folktales of Dr. Faustus, legends about saints and monks, St Francis, and the great Maggid of the Hasidim. These comparisons lead us a step further, to the 'cultic character' of such traditions, stories passed on within groups or communities, for the sake of their own beliefs and expectations.¹⁷

Thus Schmidt put forward three important arguments, which militate against any discussion of the gospel genre: the distinction between *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*, with the gospels being the latter and finding their parallels among oral folktales, the absence of the literary 'I' on the part of the evangelists, and the stress on setting their production and transmission within a cultic community. On this basis, questions may well be asked about the form of the individual units, but not the genre of the gospel as a whole.

3 Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann's work ensured that this approach to the genre of the gospels dominated the scholarly consensus. It is seen most clearly in *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (second edition 1931) and in his article of 1928 on the gospels. He built on these assumptions in *Theology of the New Testament*, and the Supplement of 1962 to *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, although updating the bibliography, does nothing to alter the view expressed in the vital concluding pages.¹⁸ From such a consistent approach, Bultmann's views on three areas, the analogies to the gospels, the development of their overall form, and its uniqueness, can be documented easily.

First, Bultmann considers the setting of the gospels in their contemporary literary environment and comes to the conclusion

¹⁵ Schmidt, 'Die Stellung der Evangelien', p. 76: 'nicht Hochliteratur, sondern Kleinliteratur, nicht individuelle Schriftstellerleistung, sondern Volksbuch, nicht Biographie, sondern Kultlegende.'

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114

¹⁸ R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, revised edition with Supplement, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972); 'The Gospels (Form)'; *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (London: SCM 1952), esp. vol. 1, pp. 86ff.

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that there are no parallel works. Against Votaw, he is particularly concerned to rule out any question of a link with the genre of biography, since the gospels have 'no interest in historical or biographical matters' such as Jesus' human personality, origin, education or development, or his appearance and character. Then he follows and reproduces Schmidt's arguments about *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*: the lack of cultivated techniques and the absence of the authors' personalities mean that they are not 'major' or 'grand literature'.¹⁹ There is a tenuous link with the genre of memoirs and Lives of the philosophers because of the shared feature of gathering together dialogues and episodes, but the gospels' mythic and cultic background, together with their absence of historical or scientific concerns, means that the parallel is unacceptable. Instead, he turns to *Kleinliteratur* and picks up Schmidt's suggestions about Faust, St Francis and so on. Even these are not true parallels: the gospels' cultic background is one of worship of Jesus as Son of God and Lord, rather than the admiration of the hero as in the other cases.

The second issue concerns the development of the form of the gospels and how this unique literature came to be produced. The overall plan of *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* is clear: part I considers 'The Tradition of the Sayings of Jesus', and then part II discusses 'The Tradition of the Narrative Material'; part III, 'The Editing of the Traditional Material', shows how the two traditions are brought together finally into the gospel form. Thus the overall form of the gospels is an accidental result of the fusion of sayings and narrative by Mark: 'This in fact marks the purpose of the author: *the union of the Hellenistic kerygma about Christ . . . with the tradition of the story of Jesus*'.²⁰ This statement seems to contradict the points above about the absence of any author or authorial purpose. However, although Bultmann says that Mark is responsible for the form of the gospel – 'It is in Mark that *the Gospel type* is first to be met' – it is clear that the real origin is to be found in the kerygma: 'Thus the kerygma of Christ is cultic legend and the *Gospels are expanded cult legends*'.²¹ Similarly, in *Theology of the New Testament* he says, 'there develops out of the kerygma *the literary form: Gospel*. Its oldest exemplification is for us the

¹⁹ Bultmann, *History*, pp. 371–2; 'Gospels', p. 87. English translations have *Hochliteratur* variously as grand/major and *Kleinliteratur* as minor/lesser literature.

²⁰ Bultmann, *History*, pp. 347–8; Bultmann's italics.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 369 and 371; Bultmann's italics.

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Gospel of Mark.²² Bultmann then sets out seven stages in the development of this literary type from the kerygma of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the production of a gospel.

Finally, this all means that the gospels 'are a unique phenomenon in the history of literature', 'an original creation of Christianity'.²³ This becomes the standard form-critical view that the gospels are *sui generis*. In fact, Bultmann concludes that we cannot even talk in terms of genre for the gospels: in answer to the question, 'Can it be described as an unique literary genus?', he argues that the gospels are so 'completely subordinate to Christian faith and worship' that 'it is hardly possible to speak of the Gospels as a literary genus; the Gospel belongs to the history of dogma and worship'.²⁴ These sentiments are the last sentences of Bultmann's mighty *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. They are also the last words on the question of the genre of the gospels for nearly half a century.

4 Evaluation

Crucial to both Schmidt and Bultmann was the distinction between *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur*. The two types of literature are seen in very rigid terms – and ne'er the twain shall meet. Any attempt to ask literary questions about the gospels, and in particular, their genre, is automatically precluded in advance. However, it is unlikely that such rigid boundaries can be maintained in first-century literature; literary distinctions are more flexible. Votaw's distinction between 'popular' and 'historical' biography, whatever else its difficulties, at least had the merit of allowing for a continuum of development from one to the other. The form critics' distinction merely has the effect of removing the gospels from any discussion of their context within the first century on the grounds that they do not share some predetermined literary aspirations. However, as Suggs has pointed out: 'The alleged lack of literary expertise on the part of the evangelists is not a valid objection . . . books of any genre may be poorly written.'²⁵ Much more detailed and accurate study of the various genres, types and levels of first-century, and especially Graeco-Roman, literature is needed.

The second question concerns the form of the gospel as a whole:

²² Bultmann, *Theology*, p. 86; Bultmann's italics.

²³ Bultmann, 'Gospels', p. 89; *History*, pp. 373–4.

²⁴ Bultmann, *History*, p. 374. ²⁵ In his *IDB* article, Supplement, p. 371.