

PART ONE

THE PROBLEM

1

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.

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.

'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.

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 *Apollonius 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 preliterary 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 Kunstprosa* (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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Bultmann concluded that no analogy was necessary for this, since it was merely a by-product of the collecting together of the individual units within the oral tradition. This is a scarcely sufficient explanation. There are many different ways of collecting together units of oral tradition. Study of the Homeric traditions considers not only the development of the different stories as individual units, but also the process whereby the whole narrative of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* came together through deliberate selection. Furthermore, the oral development of the Homeric poems does not prevent discussion of the question of the genre of the whole, i.e. epic. Equally, the oral background of the gospels' material does not obviate the need to consider the selection of the units and their overall genre.

Thirdly, this approach led to the eclipse of the author: if oral tradition is considered responsible for both the individual units themselves and also the form of the whole through the kerygma, then the evangelist is seen as little more than a mere stenographer at the end of the oral tunnel. This emphasis, together with Schmidt's comments on the absence of the literary 'I' in the gospels, precluded discussion of any purpose or intention on the part of the evangelists. In fact, as already noted, even Bultmann himself is forced to use the word 'purpose' to describe Mark's significant step in combining the kerygma with narrative tradition about Jesus. Thus it is clear that the evangelist as author, and all that this implies in terms of intention, must be taken into account, and this leads inevitably in the direction of genre.

Finally, the form-critical view emphasized the unique character of the gospels. This may have had important theological implications for Bultmann and others as befitting the narrative of the unique proclamation of the gospel – but from a literary point of view, it is a nonsense. It is hard to imagine how anyone could invent something which is a literary novelty or unique kind of writing. Even supposing it were possible, no one else would be able to make sense of the work, with no analogy to guide their interpretation: 'One cannot imagine a writer successfully inventing a genre for him or herself; for a genre to exist some form of reader recognition, of social acceptance, is necessary.'²⁶

We may conclude, therefore, that much greater attention needs

²⁶ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Unlocking the Text: Fundamental Issues in Literary Theory*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), p. 45; see also, John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 3.

to be given to literary theory, particularly the theory of genre, and to the development of the range and types of first-century literature before credence can be given to form-critical notions that the gospels are *sui generis*.

C Redaction criticism and the return of the author

The intense scholarly activity about individual gospel pericopae over the following decades meant 'the study of the literary genres employed in early Christian writing was for a long period largely ignored'.²⁷ Even into the 1970s, scholars like Kümmel merely repeated the ritual assertion of the gospels' uniqueness: 'In the Synoptic Gospels we meet for the first time a new and distinctive literary genus. Viewed as a literary form, the Gospels are a new creation.'²⁸ However, the general review of form criticism and the rise of redaction criticism through the 1960s led to the eventual reintroduction of questions about genre.

1 The critique of form criticism

The general critique of form criticism came from various sources, putting several areas in particular under scrutiny.²⁹ The analogy between the development of the gospel pericopae and folklore needed reconsideration because of developments in folklore studies: it was less easy to assume steady growth of an oral tradition in stages; significant steps were sometimes large and sudden; the length of time needed for the 'laws' of oral transmission to operate, such as the centuries of Old Testament or Homeric tradition, was greater than that taken by the gospels; even the existence of such 'laws' was questioned.

Second, the form-critical concentration on the individual parts missed the significance of the whole. Further, the transition from individual units of oral tradition into a written document had an

²⁷ Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*, p. 1.

²⁸ W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London, SCM, 1975), p. 37.

²⁹ See, for example: W.D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament* (London: DLT, 1967); E.P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (CUP, 1969); E. Güttgemanns, *Candid Questions concerning Gospel Form Criticism: A Methodological Sketch of the Fundamental Problematics of Form and Redaction Criticism*, trans. W.G. Doty (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979); William G. Doty, 'Fundamental Questions about Literary-Critical Methodology: A Review Article', *JAAR* 40 (1972), pp. 521–7; William G. Doty, 'Linguistics and Biblical Criticism', *JAAR* 41 (1973), pp. 114–21.

important effect on the interpretation of the material; as Kelber put it, 'writing always entails a rewriting of worlds'.³⁰ Literary criticism, therefore, which had come to mean little more than discussion of the sources and units of the gospels, began to include also artistic intention, ability, purpose and so on. Finally, the form-critical approach had the effect of giving the community the active role in the formation of the gospel material, whereas communities tend to be passive with regard to their traditions; the active innovations come on the part of the story-tellers – and thus we are back to the person of the author once more.

2 Authors and readers

The development of redaction criticism paved the way for the study of the evangelists as creative individuals. Norman Perrin defines it as 'studying the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity'.³¹ Whereas form criticism directs attention to the literary forms of individual pericopae, redaction criticism directs us to the author as *redactor* or editor of the traditional material which came down to him.

Bornkamm applied this approach to the gospel of Matthew: first in a famous study in 1948, he analysed 'The Stilling of the Storm' in Matt. 8.23–7 against its source in Mark 4.35–41 and showed how Matthew was concerned to reinterpret the story in terms of Christian discipleship.³² A few years later, he considered the consequences of such study for Matthew as a whole, and in particular his concern for the church.³³ Conzelmann demonstrated similar creativity in Luke, and his stress on the three periods of *Heilsgeschichte* as the key to Lukan theology has determined much

³⁰ Werner Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 116; see similarly, E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), pp. 16–20.

³¹ Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970), p. 1.

³² G. Bornkamm, 'The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew', in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held (London: SCM, 1963), pp. 52–7.

³³ 'End Expectation and Church in Matthew', in *Tradition and Interpretation*, pp. 15–51. Original German version: 'Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium', in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology. Studies in Honour of C.H. Dodd*, ed. W.D. Davies and D. Daube (CUP, 1956), pp. 222–60.

subsequent work on Luke.³⁴ Finally, Marxsen completed the application of redaction criticism to the synoptic gospels with his work on Mark.³⁵ Naturally the last is the most difficult of the three; assuming Markan priority, Matthew's and Luke's editing of their source reveals something of their theology, purposes and methods. It is clearly more difficult to apply this discipline to texts whose sources are unknown. However, redaction criticism has been applied not just to Mark, but also to Q and to John as it has become part of the standard equipment of New Testament scholars.

If form criticism concentrated on the text and redaction criticism on the authors, increasing attention has been devoted in recent years to the third party – the reader(s). The terms by which such study is known, reader-response criticism or audience criticism, imply a set approach; in fact, it is anything but monolithic and embraces a spectrum of scholars and approaches, pioneered by people like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. Common to them all is a stress on the person of the reader, who is active in the construction of the meaning of the text. There is debate about the 'ideal' reader who can interpret the text perfectly, the 'real' or actual reader, and the 'implied' reader, a mediating concept of a reader with a certain amount of competence able to recognize the clues to the reading encoded in the text. Thus, the reader may be seen as completely 'in' the text, put there by the author, or 'over' the text and able to impose any reading he wishes upon it; a middle position envisages a dialogue between text and reader.³⁶ In biblical studies we must also take into account that the audience may have been listening as a group, rather than assuming the modern habit of private reading.³⁷ Such approaches raise questions about the gospels' possible audience or readers, their background, education and literary knowledge – all of which makes the study of genre and generic expectations even more important.³⁸

³⁴ H. Conzelmann, *Theology of St. Luke*, trans. G. Buswell (London: Faber & Faber, 1960).

³⁵ W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1st edn 1956, 2nd edn 1959); *ET Mark the Evangelist* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969).

³⁶ For a brief introduction, see James L. Resseguie, 'Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels', *JAAR* 52 (1984), pp. 307–24; also Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (Yale: University Press, 1989) and Patrick Grant, *Reading the New Testament* (Macmillan, 1989).

³⁷ See Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*, pp. 84–8.

³⁸ Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark's Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11–12*, *JSNTSS* 33 (SAP, 1989) is a good example of its application to such issues.

3 The implications for genre study

These recent developments have many implications for the study of genre. Once redaction critics had demonstrated that the evangelists were not mindless recorders of the oral tradition, but had creative, *theological* purposes in writing their gospels, then questions about their creative *literary* intentions, including genre, could not be far behind. Curiously enough, Perrin, at the end of his survey of redaction criticism, was content to repeat the form-critical view that the gospels are 'the characteristic and unique literary product of early Christianity'.³⁹ It is perhaps a mark of how secure and well entrenched Bultmann's view of the uniqueness of the gospel genre was that the revival of interest in the authors of the gospels did not immediately and necessarily raise the question of genre. Even into the 1970s scholars like Kümmel and Lohse continued to assert that the gospels were *sui generis* and not to be compared with other ancient literature.⁴⁰ However, by 1978 Petersen was surely right to observe:

Redaction critics are rarely conscious of the consequences of their conclusions for the historical-critical evolutionary theory ... Nevertheless, *the evolutionary theory has collapsed because redaction criticism has pulled the plug on its source of power*. Whereas the theory saw the power of literary formation in a romantic symbiosis of tradition and environment, redaction criticism has relocated this power in authors on the one hand and in genres on the other, with genres now construed as cultural media of communication. Wittingly or not, therefore, redaction criticism has made possible the asking of literary questions about our non-literary writings. Indeed, I suspect that it has made it impossible not to ask them, since outside of biblical studies issues of authorship, composition, and genre are considered to be literary issues.⁴¹

Not everyone, however, took so long to realize these implications and through the door opened by redaction critics for the

³⁹ Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?*, pp. 74 and 78–9; see also his article 'The Literary *Gattung* "Gospel" – Some Observations', *ExpT* 82 (1970), pp. 4–7.

⁴⁰ Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, p. 37; Eduard Lohse, *The Formation of the New Testament*, trans. M.E. Boring, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 119.

⁴¹ Norman R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 18; his italics.

return of the author there began to flow a steady trickle of studies by literary critics on the question of the genre of the gospels, which in time became a flood of suggestions. To these, then, we must now turn for the last part of this survey.

D The search for a genre

1 Aretalogy

Fifty years after Votaw, Smith and Hadas' *Heroes and Gods* set the gospel of Luke alongside Porphyry's *Pythagoras*, Philo's *Moses* and Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*. All four works were described as *aretalogy*, 'an ancient type of biographical writing ... a formal account of the remarkable career of an impressive teacher that was used as a basis for moral instruction'. This often involved the miraculous, at the subject's birth or death or during his life, and included disciples and opponents, often leading to hostility and even martyrdom. Such accounts would be written by disciples or by other teachers to promote their doctrines.⁴² To exemplify such writings, Hadas discussed various heroes from throughout the Greek tradition in part I, and Smith provided translations and summaries of the four works in part II.⁴³ Hadas is conscious of one major difficulty with their thesis, 'that we have no complete text surviving from the past specifically labelled aretalogy', but does not doubt the genre's existence.⁴⁴

2 Trajectories

Robinson and Koester attempted to get away from more static concepts such as 'background' and to draw 'trajectories' of literary types from periods preceding the New Testament through the gospels and beyond into second-century and non-canonical literature.⁴⁵ Robinson began his work in the early 1960s with the relationship of John and Mark, suggesting a 'signs/miracles' source behind Mark, analogous to another behind John, in which Jesus is assimilated to the type of a miracle worker/'divine man' (θεῖος

⁴² Moses Hadas and Morton Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 3.

⁴³ See also Morton Smith, 'Prolegomena to A Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels and Jesus', *JBL* 90 (1971), pp. 174–99.

⁴⁴ Hadas and Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, p. 60; see also the preface, p. xiii.

⁴⁵ J.M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

ἀνῆρ); in an attempt to redress the balance, the gospels become a kind of 'aretalogy in reverse' or 'aretalogical parody'.⁴⁶ Koester also picks up the link with aretalogy and Jesus as θεῖος ἀνῆρ in his attempt to place the genre of the gospels.⁴⁷ The issue of genre is also applied to Q by Robinson, with the suggestion that it belongs to the genre of λόγοι σοφῶν, the Sayings of the Sages.⁴⁸

3 Evaluation

Here at least gospel genre is being placed within the web of contemporary literary relationships. Even if these attempts were not completely successful, they encouraged other work in similar directions, as well as some severe criticisms.⁴⁹ The latter have centred around the actual existence of the two major concepts, aretalogy and the 'divine man', and whether the analogies proposed between these concepts and the gospels are actually true. The absence of any examples of the genre of aretalogy was noted by Hadas himself, and this was picked up in the criticisms by Kee and Tiede: Tiede's dissertation begins 'there appears to be no unified picture of what constituted an aretalogy in the ancient world' and questions whether in fact we can talk of it as a literary genre at all.⁵⁰ The adjective 'aretalogical' may better describe

⁴⁶ Robinson, 'Problem of History in Mark, Reconsidered', *USQR* 20 (1965) pp. 131-47; 'The Johannine Trajectory', in *Trajectories*, pp. 232-68; 'On the Gattung of Mark (and John)', in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 1 (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), pp. 99-129.

⁴⁷ Koester, 'One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels', in *Trajectories*, pp. 158-204, especially 'Jesus as the Divine Man (Aretalogies)' pp. 187-93.

⁴⁸ Robinson, 'Logoi Sophon: On the Gattung of Q', in *Trajectories*, pp. 71-113.

⁴⁹ See among others: P. Achtemeier, 'Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae', *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 265-91; Achtemeier, 'The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 198-221; Achtemeier, 'Gospel Miracle Tradition and the Divine Man', *Interpretation* 26 (1972), pp. 174-97; H.D. Betz, 'Jesus as Divine Man', in *Jesus and the Historian: Written in Honor of Ernest Cadman Colwell*, ed. F.T. Trotter (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 114-33; O. Betz, 'The Concept of the So-called "Divine Man" in Mark's Christology', in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honour of Allen P. Wikgren*, ed. D.E. Aune (Leiden: 1972) pp. 229-51; J.B. Cobb, 'Trajectories and Historic Routes', *Semeia* 24 (1982), pp. 89-98; D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: 1964); H.C. Kee 'Aretalogy and Gospel', *JBL* 92 (1973), pp. 402-22; Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (London: SCM, 1977); M.E. Boring, *Truly Human/Truly Divine: Christological Language and the Gospel Form* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1984), pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ D.L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker*, SBLDS 1 (Missoula: Scholars, 1972), p. 1.

certain tendencies in ancient literature, rather than using 'aretalogy' as a genre.

Tiede also suggests that the image of the 'divine man' is a composite one, combining elements of the miracle-worker with the philosopher-teacher, but that such a composite is not found in any one person. Holladay goes even further, arguing that the whole concept has become counter-productive: θεῖος ἀνῆρ cannot simply be equated with a miracle-worker, nor does it mean someone who is a god; only in the sense of someone who is in a general way 'of God' does it have any usefulness. Finally, Gallagher rejects the links between divine men, aretalogy, biographical texts and religious propaganda, and denies that there was one single, simple Hellenistic conception of θεῖος ἀνῆρ – the variety of possible concepts and suggested candidates reflect the diversity of Hellenistic society.⁵¹

Thus, an inadequate theory of genre has allowed too easily an assertion of the existence of aretalogy as a genre, rather than just a tendency, and an insufficient study of the first-century context led to the transformation of the useful concept of a 'divine man' into an all-embracing paradigm. Attempts to solve the genre of the gospels through aretalogy and trajectory, therefore, have failed to win widespread critical assent.

4 The Jewish background

Three main areas of Judaism have been investigated for parallels to the gospels: Old Testament literature, midrash and Rabbinic biography. The most common parts of the Old Testament have been the Moses legends and the Pentateuchal traditions: thus Baker compares the sequence of the narrative about Jesus in the gospels with that of Moses, while Hobbs sees Exodus as a source of 'models' for Mark, comparing the 'six days' of Mark 9.2 with those of Exodus 24. Kline notes the similar combination of teaching and narrative material within a covenantal context and sees a structural parallel with Exodus, which he calls 'the Gospel of Moses', whereas for Glasswell it is the idea of fulfilment in history which provides the link between Matthew and the Pentateuchal tradi-

⁵¹ Tiede, *Charismatic Figure*, pp. 244-9; C.R. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism: A Critique*, SBLDS 40 (Missoula: Scholars, 1977), pp. 241-2; E.V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician?* SBLDS 64 (Scholars, 1982), pp. 173-80.

tions.⁵² For still others, the parallel is to be found within the Elisha legends or patterns of late Old Testament prophecy.⁵³

Michael Goulder has picked up earlier suggestions that the gospels are lectionaries, designed to be read in worship,⁵⁴ and argued that they were composed according to the principles of midrash: Mark is a midrashic work following Old Testament works, designed to run over half a year, whereas Matthew is a midrash on Mark, and Luke follows on from Matthew.⁵⁵ It is difficult to demonstrate the existence of such works within primitive worship, and the narrative itself is not always in suitable blocks. In addition, Philip Alexander has concluded that Goulder's appeal to midrash as the explanation of Matthew's redaction of Mark is 'highly questionable' and difficult to fit into the usual methods and rules of midrash. Similarly, R. T. France has disputed how widespread midrashic techniques were in the first century AD, while Leon Morris has turned his previous criticisms of lectionary hypotheses by Carrington and Guilding against Goulder also.⁵⁶ Graham Stanton's investigation of the Jewish background has produced the concept of Matthew as a creative interpreter or exegete, elucidating or expanding the tradition; similarly David

⁵² Dom Aelred Baker, 'Form and the Gospels', *Downside Review* 88 (1970), pp. 14–26; Edward C. Hobbs, 'Norman Perrin on Methodology in the Interpretation of Mark', in *Christology and a Modern Pilgrimage: A Discussion with Norman Perrin*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Missoula: SBL/Scholars, 1974), pp. 53–60; Meredith G. Kline, 'The Old Testament Origins of Gospel Genre', *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975), pp. 1–27; M. E. Glasswell, 'St. Matthew's Gospel – History or Book', *Communio Viatorum* 24 (1981), pp. 41–5.

⁵³ Raymond E. Brown, 'Jesus and Elisha', *Perspective* 12 (1971), pp. 85–104; Heinrich Kraft, 'Die Evangelien und die Geschichte Jesu', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 37 (1981), pp. 321–41.

⁵⁴ Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the Marcan Gospel* (CUP, 1952); W. D. Davies, 'Reflections on Archbishop Carrington's "The Primitive Christian Calendar"', in *The Background of the NT*, ed. Davies and Daube, pp. 124–52; Aileen Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (OUP, 1960).

⁵⁵ Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974); *The Evangelist's Calendar: A Lectionary Explanation of the Development of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1978); *Luke: A New Paradigm*, (SAP, 1989).

⁵⁶ Philip S. Alexander, 'Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament', *ZNW* 74 (1983), pp. 237–46 and 'Midrash and the Gospels', in *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, ed. C. M. Tuckett, JSNTSS 7 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 1–18, quotation from p. 13; R. T. France, 'Jewish Historiography, Midrash, and the Gospels', in *Gospel Perspectives III: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), pp. 99–127 and Leon Morris, 'The Gospels and the Jewish Lectionaries', *Gospel Perspectives III*, pp. 129–56.

Orton calls him a scribe, both faithful to the old and productive of the new (Matt. 13.52).⁵⁷

Alexander is also responsible for a clear and helpful survey of the evidence for biographical material within the Rabbinic tradition.⁵⁸ He examines the classification of the different types, the development and literary aspects of the anecdotes and their function within Rabbinic society, with a cautious underplaying of the kind of 'heroification' rampant in many studies on aretology and divine men. After a brief comment on the historicity of the anecdotes, he compares them with the gospels and concludes: 'There are no Rabbinic parallels to the Gospels as such. This is by far the most important single conclusion to emerge from this paper.' This result is surprising, given the biographical precedents within the Old Testament (Moses and David) and the wealth of Rabbinic anecdotal material, but he concludes that no Rabbi held 'the central position that Jesus held in early Christianity'. The benefits from such a comparative study are a renewed stress on the *written* style and nature of the gospels, as opposed to the more oral Rabbinic material, and the raising of various questions about the analytical techniques commonly employed by gospel critics. For the origin of the gospel genre, however, Alexander concludes that we must look elsewhere and suggests the Graeco-Roman world.⁵⁹

5 The Graeco-Roman milieu

Renewed interest in the Graeco-Roman milieu has appeared in both the USA and Europe. The SBL *Task Force on Gospel Genre* produced several important papers in the early 1970s: Petersen stressed the necessity of genre criticism for literary interpretation; Baird enumerated twelve different genres to be found within the gospels, but claimed that the overall combination of them was

⁵⁷ G. N. Stanton, 'Matthew as a Creative Interpreter of the Sayings of Jesus', in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983), pp. 273–87; David E. Orton, *The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ideal*, JSNTSS 25 (SAP, 1989).

⁵⁸ Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus: A Survey of the Evidence', in *Synoptic Studies*, pp. 19–50; quotation p. 40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1; note also: 'The Rabbinic world, however, provides no parallel for the overall work we call Gospel', *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*, ed. Francis Martin, SBL Resources for Biblical Study 22 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), p. 19; similarly, Rabbi Michael Hilton and Fr. Gordian Marshall OP, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SCM, 1988) compares only individual gospel units with Rabbinic material, not the overall form of the gospels.

unique; Doty saw the definition of genre in relational terms and that a work's genre is to be found in the structure of the whole work; Georgi, writing from within an aretological approach, thought that 'Mark consciously presents the record of Jesus in analogy to the philosopher-vita'.⁶⁰ Throughout the next decade, many and various attempts were made to find parallels and analogies with Graeco-Roman literary genres: Barr looked at the Socratic Dialogues, Bilezikian at Greek Tragedy, Du Plessis at historical monograph and biographical narrative, Roland Frye at dramatic history (as seen in Plutarch, Shakespeare and Shaw), Praeder at the ancient novel, Standaert at the canons of rhetorical discourse and Via at the concept of tragi-comedy.⁶¹ The issues of the authors and genres of the gospels have clearly returned determined to make up for the neglect of the previous fifty years.

Finally, we come at long last to the point where the critical wheel has turned full circle, to the comparison of the genre of the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography. In all his work, Charles H. Talbert is keen to establish links between the gospels and Graeco-Roman literature, especially biography. The fullest discussion of his view is in *What is a Gospel?* in which he responds to Bultmann's objection that the gospels cannot be biography and proposes a new classification of the main examples of Graeco-Roman biography and fits the gospels squarely into this.⁶² Writing at the same time as Talbert,

⁶⁰ Norman R. Petersen, 'So-called Gnostic Type Gospels and the Question of the Genre "Gospel"', Working Paper for the Task Force on Gospel Genre, (SBL, 1970); *SBL Proceedings 1972: Book of Seminar Papers for 108th Annual Meeting*, ed. Lane C. McGaughey, vol. 2 contains: J. Arthur Baird, 'Genre Analysis as a Method of Historical Criticism', pp. 385-411; William G. Doty, 'The Concept of Genre in Literary Analysis', pp. 413-48; Dieter Georgi, 'The Records of Jesus in the Light of Ancient Accounts of Revered Men', pp. 527-42, quotation from p. 541.

⁶¹ David Laurence Barr, 'Towards a Definition of the Gospel Genre: A Generic Analysis and Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels and the Socratic Dialogues by means of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy', Ph.D. Diss. Florida State University 1974; Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Isak du Plessis 'Die genre van Lukas se evangelie', *Theol. Evang.* 15.1 (Pretoria: 1982), pp. 19-28; Roland Mushat Frye, 'A Literary Perspective for Criticism of the Gospels', in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 2 (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), pp. 207-19; Susan Marie Praeder, 'Luke-Acts and the Ancient Novel', in *SBL Seminar Papers* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. 269-92; B.H.M.G.M. Standaert, *L'Évangile selon Marc: composition et genre littéraire* (Zevenkerken: Brugge, 1984); Dan O. Via, Jr., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁶² C.H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Fortress 1977/SPCK 1978); full details of the rest of the work of Talbert and the other scholars mentioned below will be found in our discussion in Chapter 4 below.

Philip Shuler also proposed a biographical genre for the gospels; he argued for the existence of a subgroup of biography, encomium or laudatory biography, with examples of this genre, and then suggested how the gospels could be fitted in as well.⁶³ Although neither Talbert's nor Shuler's work has been accepted in its entirety, they have helped to produce a massive sea change in the interpretation of the gospels. Assumptions that the gospels are biographies or contain some biographical material or features are increasingly common.⁶⁴ Gerald Downing agrees with Talbert and Shuler against the Bultmannian *sui generis* view of the gospels, but believes the search for a distinctive genre to be mistaken. Instead, very important analogies between the gospels and Graeco-Roman literature are to be found in a search for shared *motifs*.⁶⁵

Other suggestions about the gospels and Graeco-Roman biography have been coming out of Germany. Berger's discussion of New Testament genres included a section on biography and the same volume of *ANRW* also included relevant articles by Köster, Dormeyer and Frankemölle.⁶⁶ The symposium at Tübingen in 1982 had papers on the individual gospels which raised questions of genre - Hengel on Mark, Stanton on Matthew, Marshall on Luke, and Dunn on John - as well as two further contributions specifically on genre and Graeco-Roman biography: Guelich attempted to re-introduce the 'unique' point of view, arguing that the gospels have no real analogies in either Jewish or Graeco-Roman literature. Meanwhile, the classicist, Albrecht Dihle, provided a detailed coverage of the development of Graeco-Roman biography; he is clear about the general biographical character of the gospels, but less prone to classify them with the specific Greek literary genre of

⁶³ P.L. Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

⁶⁴ See, for example, V.K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 1-5; Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*, pp. 262 and 327-28; Laurence Cantwell, 'The Gospels as Biographies', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), pp. 193-200; W.S. Vorster, 'Kerygma/History and the Gospel Genre', *NTS* 29 (1983), pp. 87-95; Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 75-6; Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, pp. 37-9; Martin, *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*, pp. 19-24; B. Lindars, *John* (SAP, 1990) p. 26 and *The Study and Use of the Bible*, ed. John Rogerson, Christopher Rowland and Barnabas Lindars (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988), p. 237.

⁶⁵ F.G. Downing, 'Contemporary Analogies to the Gospels and Acts: "Genres" or "Motifs"?' in *Synoptic Studies*, ed. Tuckett, pp. 51-65.

⁶⁶ K. Berger, 'Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament', in *ANRW* II.25.2 (1984), pp. 1031-432 and 1831-85; H. Köster, 'Überlieferung und Geschichte der frühchristlichen Evangelienliteratur', pp. 1463-542; D. Dormeyer and H. Frankemölle, 'Evangelium als literarische Gattung und als theologischer Begriff', pp. 1543-704.

biography as seen in the works of Plutarch.⁶⁷ Lastly, David Aune's interest in both the general setting of the New Testament within the Graeco-Roman literary world and in the specific issue of the genre of the gospels is clear from all his work. Aune argues for the biographical genre of Mark, Matthew and John, but Luke-Acts is seen as a little different. Relating the genres of New Testament books to their Graeco-Roman counterparts is central for their interpretation.⁶⁸

Conclusion

This historical survey has followed the discussion about the genre of the gospels through some 125 years of critical scholarship. We have gone around in an apparent circle with the same books now being cited as parallels analogous to the gospels as when we started. The conclusion is obvious therefore that, whatever might have been the case during the long reign of hypotheses about the oral kerygma and the uniqueness of the gospels, the more recent situation is that no one theory has really commanded widespread support. However, it is currently coming back into fashion to suggest some form of biographical genre for the gospels, despite the difficulties and criticisms of this view. It is of crucial importance that either the biographical hypothesis be given a proper scholarly footing or else exposed as a false trail.

As this survey has unfolded, we have seen that there have been two major areas of vulnerability affecting most theories: their handling of the literary theory of genre on the one hand and their understanding of the development of the various types of literature and literary relationships contemporary with the gospels on the other. If this is correct, it might explain some of the difficulties, since what is being suggested is a very demanding interdisciplinary study involving three vast and complicated disciplines: gospel studies, literary theory, and the literature of the Jewish and

⁶⁷ Peter Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), containing: R. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', pp. 183-219; M. Hengel, 'Probleme des Markusevangeliums', pp. 221-65; G.N. Stanton, 'Matthew as a Creative Interpreter of the Sayings of Jesus', pp. 273-87; I.H. Marshall, 'Luke and his "Gospel"', pp. 289-308; J.D.G. Dunn, 'Let John be John: A Gospel for Its Time', pp. 309-39; A. Dihle, 'Die Evangelien und die griechische Biographie', pp. 383-411.

⁶⁸ David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988).

Graeco-Roman worlds. The secondary literature in each of these fields is enormous, and the expert from one discipline who strays into another is prey to any number of potential hazards. Nonetheless, the attempt must be made if an answer is to have any chance of succeeding with a reasonable degree of support. In order to exercise some control on the size of the three disciplines, we shall limit gospel studies here almost exclusively to the four canonical gospels, and contemporary literature to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, since this is the analogy currently gaining favour. First, however, we must establish a good grasp of the literary theory of genre and the development of biography in the Graeco-Roman world; in the light of these two elements, a critique of the more recent attempts, detailed above but not yet evaluated, can then be undertaken. The second part of this study will offer a methodology whereby selected works of Graeco-Roman biography can be compared with the gospels in order to establish whether the gospels may indeed be included within the genre of biography.

What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

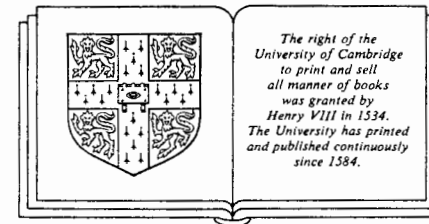
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