

EVALUATION OF RECENT DEBATE

The Gospels do stand without adequate parallel in form and content in the literary world.¹

The Gospels are a subtype of Greco-Roman biography.²

The historical survey in Chapter 1 concluded with various recent attempts comparing the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography. We suggested that either this hypothesis should be put on a sound scholarly footing or exposed as a false trail. In order to undertake proper evaluation of these theories, a thorough study of both the literary theory of genre and of the development of Graeco-Roman biography was necessary. Now that this has been done, we can return to the recent debate better equipped to assess the various contributions. Close analysis of the last twenty years reveals three main periods: the first phase occurred during the 1970s, when the dominant consensus that the gospels are not biography began to be challenged; the second, during the early 1980s, was a response, with some wishing to re-establish the old consensus and others to take it into new pastures; the third phase, towards the end of the decade, gradually increased pressure for the gospels to be seen as some type of biography. We shall examine some leading examples from each phase to evaluate how successful these seem in the light of our study so far.

A The first protests

1 Graham Stanton

The first real voice of protest against the traditional critical consensus against the gospels as biographies came through Stanton's

¹ R. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, p. 216.
² David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 64.

1969 Ph.D. thesis, revised for publication as *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching*. Stanton is clearly aware at many points that he is challenging critical orthodoxy. He discusses pre-Lukan traditions about Jesus (in the speeches in Acts), Luke's own presentation of Jesus, and Paul's preaching and teaching, and argues that all of them demonstrate an interest in Jesus' earthly life, character and activity, reflecting a concern in early Christian preaching 'from a period well before the appearance of Mark'.³ From a comparison of the gospels with contemporary literature, he concludes that they are closest to Graeco-Roman biographical writings and quite distinct from Jewish writings such as the *Pirqe Aboth* or Rabbinic material and from later second-century gospels and gnostic writings. They tell us a 'surprisingly large amount' about the life and character of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴ The early church intended to include such material in missionary preaching, for who Jesus is, is shown by his actions as well as by his words. We cannot escape such biographical material in the New Testament – and it should form part of our preaching today.

Chapter 5, the comparison with ancient biographical writing, is crucial for our concern. Bultmann's position is rejected by demonstrating that many Graeco-Roman βίοι also lack modern presuppositions such as chronology and psychological character development. Stanton's coverage of contemporary literature is very good, referring to the whole range of βίοι from earliest origins, through Satyrus and Plutarch to later authors like Philostratus. Unfortunately he does not follow the argument through to its logical conclusion. Having demonstrated the similarities with Graeco-Roman biographies, he concludes that the gospels must have been considered 'biographical'.⁵ However, on the same page he refers to the 'wholly justifiable insistence that the gospels are not biographies' – while in fact he has removed the justification for this view earlier in the chapter. Throughout the book he is careful to use the adjective 'biographical' of the Jesus traditions, rather than the generic noun 'biography', and he is aware of the difficulties of the modern connotations attaching to the term.⁶ In addition, the book's concern is with the Jesus traditions and their place in New Testament preaching rather than the genre of the gospels themselves. However, to conclude that the gospels are biographical was

³ G.N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching*, SNTSMS 27 (CUP, 1974) p. 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

a major step forward and it would not be long before others would draw the conclusion about biography itself.

Stanton continued his interest in literary theory and gospel studies in his other work such as his 1978 Inaugural Lecture and his work on Matthew.⁷ His recent book on the person of Jesus and the gospels includes a section on 'the gospels as biographies'. This provides a brief survey of the question, from Votaw and Bultmann to Talbert and Shuler, and argues once again that the gospels must not be judged by the criteria of *modern* biography.⁸

2 Charles H. Talbert

C.H. Talbert has been engaged in research into the Graeco-Roman parallels and links with the gospels over an extended period of time, from a discussion of the literary patterns in Luke-Acts, through analysis of the concepts of the 'immortals' and the 'descending-ascending redeemer myth' to his classic work, *What is a Gospel?*. Subsequent work has shown a continuing interest in examining such Graeco-Roman links.⁹

Here we shall consider the flagship for his ideas, *What is a Gospel?*, which received widespread attention and major reviews. It begins with a brief survey of 'The Problem' of the genre of the gospels and previous attempts to solve it. Bultmann's three objections that the gospels cannot be biography because of their mythical and cultic setting and their world-denying eschatological outlook are dealt with in turn, by pointing out the presence of similar

⁷ Stanton, *Interpreting the New Testament Today: An Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of New Testament Studies*, King's College, London, 14th November 1978, pp. 4, 7 and 13; 'Matthew as a Creative Interpreter of the Sayings of Jesus', *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, pp. 273-87.

⁸ G.N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (OUP, 1989), pp. 15-20.

⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, SBLMS 20 (Missoula: Scholars, 1974); 'The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Antiquity', *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 419-36; 'The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity', *NTS* 22 (1976), pp. 418-40; *What is a Gospel?: The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Fortress 1977/SPCK 1978); 'Biographies of Philosophers and Rulers as Instruments of Religious Propaganda in Mediterranean Antiquity', in *ANRW* I.16.2, (1978), pp. 1619-51 - essentially a repeat of much of *What is a Gospel?*; 'The Gospel and the Gospels', *Interpretation* 33 (1979), pp. 351-62; 'Prophecies of Future Greatness: The Contribution of Greco-Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1.5-4.15', in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980), pp. 129-41; 'Once Again: Gospel Genre', *Semeia* 43 (1988), pp. 53-73 with a response by D.P. Moessner, pp. 75-84.

features in much Graeco-Roman biography. Thus, the 'myth' of Jesus is compared with ideas of the 'immortals' and the 'descending-ascending redeemer myth'. The cultic function of the gospels is linked to the social use of Lives of philosophers and rulers within various groups in Graeco-Roman society; Talbert proposes a new classification of Graeco-Roman biography into five types, rejecting Leo's twofold division, and then fits the gospels squarely into this. Finally, Overbeck's suggestion that the early Christians were so eschatologically minded that they could not use worldly literary forms is rejected; the gospels are constructed on a 'compositional principle' of 'inclusive reinterpretation', also used in the production of ancient biography. Thus the form-critical denial of the gospels as biographies rests on insecure foundations; Mark and John are biographies designed to defend the subject against misunderstanding (Type B), Luke-Acts is a 'life of the founder', plus narrative of his successors (Type D), and Matthew is a Life designed to provide the hermeneutical key for the legitimate interpretation of the subject's teaching (Type E).

Despite the probability that Talbert is responsible for the paradigm shift away from form-critical notions of the gospels' uniqueness, *What is a Gospel?* is full of difficulties in both of our key areas. First, Talbert's use of classical material is rather suspect, with some *idiosyncratic* interpretation of the primary texts to which he refers and little use of secondary literature either on the texts or on the field in general. Thus Aune describes him as a 'blindfolded man staggering across a mine-field'.¹⁰ This illustrates the problems of interdisciplinary study: some of Talbert's 'parallels' are dubious on closer study.

However, his classification of Graeco-Roman biography is a welcome new approach to the problem of how to distinguish suitable subgenres of βίος. Although he divides βίοι on the grounds of 'cultic' or 'social' functions, in fact, the differences are more those of *purpose* - and this rigid approach does not allow for the fact that many βίοι had several purposes, and would thus fit in several of his category types. This problem manifests itself when Mark and John turn out to be of the same type, while Luke and Matthew end up as something different. If some other generic

¹⁰ David E. Aune, 'The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C.H. Talbert's *What is a Gospel?*' in *Gospel Perspectives II: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R.T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 9-60; quotation from p. 17.

features were taken into account, rather than just purpose and social function, this strange result would not occur. This brings us to his handling of genre theory: there is insufficient attention given to how genres and 'types' are determined. Page 11 has a few sentences on Hirsch, Fowler, and on Wellek and Warren, and Chapter 1 concludes with a brief excursus attempting to distinguish biography from history and romance (pp. 16–17), but there is little use of this theoretical background to control the rest of the book.

Finally, *What is a Gospel?* is essentially a negative argument: Bultmann's rejection of the biographical genre of the gospels is dismissed because other ancient βίοι were equally mythic, cultic and world-denying. This does not positively establish the biographical genre of the gospels. In the end, *What is a Gospel?* does not tell us what a Gospel is; it just destroys the arguments of earlier critics who thought it is not biography. Thus, *What is a Gospel?* is unsatisfactory on several grounds, especially its handling of the classical material and its use of literary theory. However, it would be unjust to end on these negative comments. In Talbert's favour it must be said that here we have a real attempt to relate the gospels to the world of classical literature. If, in the end, it fails because of flaws in methodology and understanding, at least the attack on the old view of the genre of the gospels and the consideration of the world of Graeco-Roman literature opened a way for others to pursue.

3 Philip L. Shuler

Shuler's Ph.D. thesis about the genre of all three synoptic gospels was published as a book on the genre of Matthew;¹¹ the later sections on Mark and Luke were omitted, though the reason for this is not made clear. Whereas Talbert's work was essentially negative, dismissing Bultmann's objections, Shuler tried to mount a positive case to establish the genre of the gospels as being a subgroup of biography, which he calls encomium or laudatory biography. He too begins with a useful survey of previous work,

¹¹ P.L. Shuler, 'The Synoptic Gospels and the Problem of Genre', Ph.D. Dissertation McMaster University, 1975; revised for publication as *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); his paper 'The Genre(s) of the Gospels' for the 1984 Jerusalem symposium *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, ed. D.L. Dungan (Leuven: University Press, 1990), pp. 459–83, with a response from Peter Stuhlmacher, pp. 484–96, summarizes the Ph.D. material on all three synoptic gospels, plus a brief look at John.

looking at C.W. Votaw, K.L. Schmidt, M. Hadas and M. Smith, and C.H. Talbert. The second chapter is in two parts: first he has some discussion of the theory of genre, and then he sets out to demonstrate the existence of his chosen genre of 'encomium/laudatory biography'. From various classical writers' prefaces and statements he argues for a clear distinction between encomium and history, which is then fleshed out by reference to later rhetorical writers' discussion of the rules and techniques of encomium. The genre can be recognized by three features: the *aim* of praising the subject, the *techniques* of amplification and comparison, and the use of various set *topoi*, such as period, ancestry, character, virtues and so on. Chapter 3 provides various examples of the genre: Isocrates' *Helen*, *Busiris* and *Evagoras*; Xenophon's *Agésilas*; Philo's *De vita Mosis*; Tacitus' *Agricola*; Lucian's *Demonax*; Josephus' autobiographical *Life*; and the *Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus. From this collection, he argues for a common pattern of shared purposes, techniques and *topoi*.

Then he turns to Matthew and considers the birth and death *topoi*, and the techniques of a lack of concern for geography, thematic arrangement, amplification of the *topoi* and the comparison of Jesus with those around him; Matthew's purpose is to state the identity of Jesus as Son of God, to elicit praise and to provide a paradigm for the disciples' emulation. Thus the book concludes that Matthew reveals 'a striking number of affinities with the encomium biographical genre and its shared conventions – enough to justify Matthew's classification within this genre'; Matthew has 'consciously or unconsciously appropriated a ubiquitous literary type'. The thesis has further detailed discussion in a similar vein of Mark and Luke and reaches the same conclusion.¹² This is a good example of how to demonstrate a positive case for the relationship of the gospels with Graeco-Roman literature. Unfortunately, there are various difficulties which mean that the final result is less than compelling.

First, although Shuler's treatment of genre theory (pp. 24–34) is a significant advance on Talbert's, it has its limitations and does not have sufficient effect on the rest of the book. For instance, although in the theory section he suggests that genre is a dynamic pattern, his generic proposal of a fixed written form is far too rigid, especially when he tries to suggest that a wide range of diverse works dating over half a millennium apart are all members of the same narrow

¹² Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, pp. 108–9; 'The Synoptic Gospels', pp. 317–20.

genre. Genre is better understood as a developing and flexible cluster of features, all of which need to be taken into account. Shuler considers only *topoi*, certain techniques, and purpose – and these are hardly determinative on their own. The techniques of amplification and comparison are used throughout classical literature, so their appearance in encomium biography and in the gospels does not show that they belong to the same genre. Other features are ignored, whereas consideration of size would have pointed out the significant difference between the short works of Isocrates and the extremely long *Apollonius of Tyana*, while the mode of representation would have raised the relationship of Isocrates' oral speeches being in the same tight genre as a carefully written biography.

Secondly, although at first his handling of classical material seems much more satisfactory than Talbert's, the ample quotation from primary texts is all from Loeb translations, and there is little use of secondary literature, commentaries and articles. It is doubtful whether this genre of 'encomium biography' can be said to exist at all. Shuler quotes five authors' prefaces and statements to demonstrate their awareness of the 'dichotomy between history and biography', but closer analysis shows some confusion of the terms 'encomium', 'βίος' and 'history'. Shuler wriggles on the hook somewhat, declaring that 'it is unlikely that this different terminology indicates separate genres'.¹³ Furthermore, we demonstrated in the last chapter, with respect to Shuler's choice, that authors' prefaces and programmatic statements are notoriously unreliable in determining exact genre. In fact, few classicists would agree with the identification of these works as 'encomium biography', if indeed the genre exists in the first place. Even when Shuler makes use of classicists' work, he can be very selective: in his attempt to argue that Tacitus' *Agricola* is 'epideictic oratory' within this genre of encomium biography, he claims the support of the Oxford commentary: 'generally speaking . . . we are in agreement with the assessment of R.M. Ogilvie and Ian Richmond'; there then follows a composite quotation made up from pages 11, 12, 14 and 20 of Ogilvie's Introduction. In fact, in the sections Shuler missed out, Ogilvie specifically denies what Shuler is trying to prove: 'Still less should we be misled into seeing the *Agricola* as a special kind of "biographical encomium" or as a literary variant of the funeral

¹³ Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, p. 42.

laudation'.¹⁴ Such mishandling of the secondary literature by Shuler does not inspire confidence.

Thirdly, the attempt to fit Matthew, or all three synoptics, into this genre just reveals the differences between them. It rests on demonstrating that they too exhibit the same features. Shuler equates the *purpose* of rhetorical praise of an individual with Matthew's intention to elicit a response of faith – but these are not really the same. He concentrates on Matthew's birth and death/resurrection *topoi*, but the full range of Jesus' life and ministry must be included. The shared *techniques* of a lack of concern for geography and thematic arrangement of material are common to most other ancient genres; Matthew's use of 'amplification' is also different from the rhetorical technique, and Jesus is not explicitly 'compared' with John the Baptist or the Pharisees, in the manner of Plutarch's σύγκρισεις.¹⁵ Similar comments might also be made about his handling of Mark and Luke in his Ph.D. thesis. A larger range of generic features, especially those predominantly linked with biography, needs to be considered before the gospels can be identified with βίαι.

Sadly, therefore, we cannot accept Shuler's identification of Matthew and the synoptics as 'encomium biography'. If Shuler had managed to demonstrate both the existence of this genre and that the gospels belonged to it, then we would indeed have derived great hermeneutical benefit from his work. Unfortunately, however, his brave attempt to grapple with literary theory and the classical material fails because of his over-rigid understanding of the genre and his highly selective approach to both ancient biography and to the gospels. One is reminded of Procrustes' hospitality arrangements for his guests: once Shuler has finished chopping Matthew to fit into encomium biography, I no longer recognize the victim – and I am none too sure of the existence of the bed!

Thus, throughout the 1970s a lot of useful work was done to establish links between the gospels and Graeco-Roman literature, and the idea began to gain ground. However, weak literary theory and poor handling of the classical material meant that none of these attempts succeeded.

¹⁴ Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, p. 75; Ogilvie and Richmond, *Agricola* (OUP, 1967), pp. 12–13.

¹⁵ For fuller discussion of Plutarch's use of comparison, see C.B.R. Pelling, 'Synkrisis in Plutarch's Lives', in *Miscellanea Plutarchea*, ed. Frederick E. Brenk and Italo Gallo, *Quaderni del Giornale Filologico Ferrarese* 8 (1986), pp. 83–96.

B The response

By the start of the 1980s, there was building up a frequently, if not always cogently, argued case for a biographical genre of the gospels. The 1982 Tübingen Symposium, *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, gave detailed attention to the matter. Papers on the individual gospels raised some questions of genre: Martin Hengel asked whether Mark was a collector or theologian, looking at the influence of accounts of Moses on Mark; the shift in the use of the term εὐαγγέλιον from Paul's understanding to describe the whole story of Jesus may be derived from Peter. Graham Stanton saw Matthew as a creative interpreter who is not trying to create a new genre; if Mark is a εὐαγγέλιον, so is Matthew. Howard Marshall suggested that Luke wrote Luke-Acts as a two volume historical account, drawing on his predecessors for the first half and contributing the additional concept of the story of salvation in the church. Finally, James Dunn compared John and the synoptics: it is striking that he 'felt it necessary to retain the format of a *Gospel*'.¹⁶ Thus all four contributions stressed the intimate connection of the four canonical gospels, but we must consider in detail two further contributions specifically on genre and Graeco-Roman biography.

1 Robert Guelich

Guelich's article begins with a brief discussion of genre and whether the gospels are *sui generis*. The various theories about their genre are either analogical – those which provide parallels, or derivational – that the gospels are unique and derive their genre from how they came into being. The many and varied analogies in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature, including Talbert's and Shuler's suggestions, are unconvincing. Next he considers the unique school, Dibelius' evolutionary hypothesis and Güttgemann's critique, and then Dodd's kerygmatic solution; Dodd is vulnerable on the existence of the basic outline of the kerygma. Since the written kerygma idea is the most promising, Guelich tries to provide a more adequate version. Mark applies εὐαγγέλιον to the

¹⁶ Peter Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, WUNT 28 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), containing *inter alia*: 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, quotation from p. 338.

whole work (1.1) as well as to Jesus' own preaching (1.15). This shift from the more usual Pauline use of εὐαγγέλιον as just the death-resurrection-return nexus to equate the conceptual eschatological gospel with the narrative gospel is actually very Jewish; it lies not in Mark's creativity, but in the tradition itself. Acts 10.34–43, which he believes to be pre-Lukan, possesses exactly the same framework and material. *Formally*, the framework of the gospels is the narrative of Jesus' ministry and Passion, and they contain the *material* of the kerygma – that God has acted in Jesus Christ. Thus, 'the literary gospel ultimately represents the Church's gospel in narrative form'.¹⁷ This approach is restated briefly in Guelich's recent *Commentary*, where he is prepared to use the word 'biographical' of the gospels; however, he concludes: 'Formally, then, these gospels belong to the broad category of hellenistic biography . . . materially, they are *sui generis*.'¹⁸

Thus Guelich suggests that searching for generic parallels and literary relations in the ancient world, Jewish or Greek, is not helpful; preferring the kerygmatic hypothesis, he argues that not only do the individuals units and pericopae come from the oral tradition, but so does the actual framework and generic identity. Sensitive to the theoretical point that unique genre is a contradiction in terms, he says that 'the gospels are unique' only means that they form their own literary genre of four or so. However, this pushing of the origins of the genre back into the oral tradition itself, like the old form-critical approaches, runs into problems. The idea that sermons such as Acts 10.34–43 'formally' provide the framework of the narrative account is difficult: form is much more than just framework, and a written document of prose narrative of some 10,000–20,000 words is quite different from an oral sermon of a few verses – and thus we have a different genre. As for such sermons also providing the 'material', the idea that 'God was at work in Jesus' life, death and resurrection' is also central to the Pauline epistles – but that does not make them of the same genre as the gospels. So, much more thought about the theory and nature of genres is required.

Secondly, Guelich's *sui generis* concept depends on his conclusion that there were no adequate parallels for the gospels in either the Jewish or Graeco-Roman literary worlds. To move deftly from

¹⁷ Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, pp. 183–219; quotation from p. 213.

¹⁸ Robert Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. xix–xxii.

pointing out the shortcomings of Talbert and Shuler to a total dismissal of βίος as a parallel is not a logically compelling step. Just because their unsatisfactory grasp of classical biography and literary theory does not make a persuasive case does not mean that a case cannot be made. It is very unlikely that the gospels have no relations with contemporary literature and Guelich's modified acceptance of 'broad biography' in his *Commentary* demonstrates this.

2 Albrecht Dihle

There is also some interdisciplinary input from Albrecht Dihle, whose work on classical biography has already been mentioned.¹⁹ He begins by observing that concepts of literary genre apply only to a small fraction of what is written, and that the gospels have been read in a biographical manner for centuries, despite warnings to all those beginning New Testament study *not* to do so. Since they contain a narrative framework unlike the Jewish traditions of, for example, *Pirqe Aboth* or the Qumran material on the Teacher of Righteousness, he considers whether Greek biography may have provided a model. Dihle's account of Greek biography suggests that the basic determining factor is an interest in individuals for moral purposes. Plutarch is the best example of this moral biographical interest. The apparent similarities in the gospels are not enough for them to belong to such a clearly defined genre. They lack the basic anthropological presupposition of a shared human nature between hero and reader out of which the hero's ascent to moral perfection is a spur to the reader's own life; this is not applicable to the incarnate Son, perfect from the start. There is some literary contact with Greek ideas of history, especially in Luke, and the gospels may be termed biography, but not the specific Greek literary genre.²⁰ Eventually, therefore, this contribution from a classical scholar with a background in biography yields a negative result.

Once again, we will consider this argument from the two aspects of literary theory and the understanding of Graeco-Roman biography. First, Dihle's analysis is lacking any discussion of genre

¹⁹ Dihle, *Studien*; Dihle, 'Die Evangelien und die griechische Biographie', in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, pp. 383–411; shortened version in *Zeit. Theol. Kirche* 80 (1983), pp. 33–49.

²⁰ 'die spezifisch griechische Kunst der Biographie', *ibid.*, p. 406.

theory. Instead, we get assertions which demonstrate that Dihle sees genre in very strict terms: for a text to be ordered within a genre, certain prerequisites *must* be met, ('müssen sehr viele Voraussetzungen erfüllt sein'). This means that only a small fraction ('einen kleinen Bruchteil') of what is written can be put into literary genres. The word 'biography' can be used in two ways, 'terminologisch und unterterminologisch', and biographical accounts can be written without using the strict genre.²¹ Such an understanding of genre reflects the old *Hochliteratur* v. *Kleinliteratur* debate. However, our previous analysis has demonstrated how difficult it is to distinguish levels of literature and written texts from one another in this fashion. The inability to produce a sharp and clear distinction reflects rather a spectrum of written communication from the sublime to the ridiculous, and questions of genre can and need to be raised at all levels. One can ask about the genre of the text on a sauce bottle label, for instance.

The second criticism follows from the first; this tight, rigid concept of genre affects all of Dihle's understanding of Graeco-Roman biography. The biggest difficulty with this is that Plutarch seems to end up as the sole example of the literary genre of biography. Biography, for Dihle, is more than just an account of a life; there has to be a moral purpose as with Plutarch, and this link goes back to the Peripatetic tradition itself. Unfortunately, the embarrassing lack or fragmentary nature of other examples leads Dihle to the pessimistic conclusion that Plutarch has to be the only complete model left standing.²² Not only will the gospels not conform to this genre, but neither will most of the other examples of ancient βίοι.²³ So here we have an argument which is both *perverse* and *circular*. Biography is defined by Plutarch's βίοι, and then all other βίοι are tested against this narrow concept and found not to be the same as Plutarch, and thus they are not biography. In fact, it is doubtful whether even all Plutarch's βίοι would pass the test, since not all of them are dominated by his moral concerns. At this point, therefore, the whole of Dihle's argument collapses. The gospels are *not* being compared with Greek biography; the gospels and the rest of Greek biography are being compared with one understanding of Plutarch – and found to be different. That they

²¹ Dihle, 'Die Evangelien', pp. 383–4.

²² 'eines einzigen großen Trümmerfeldes, aus dem nur Plutarchs Biographien als vollständige Denkmäler herausragen', *ibid.*, p. 394.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

belong together with these other βίοι as some form of biography other than the strict genre is accepted by Dihle on several occasions (e.g. p. 406). Given our understanding of genre as applying right across written communication and our understanding of Graeco-Roman biography as an ill-defined genre nestling between history, moral philosophy, encomium, politics, story-telling and the rest, then the genre is reopened both for the rest of Graeco-Roman biography and the gospels.

3 F. Gerald Downing

Although he agrees with Talbert and Shuler against the form-critical *sui generis* view of the gospels, Downing nonetheless believes the search for a distinctive genre for the gospels to be mistaken. Instead, he has suggested frequently that important analogies between the gospels and Graeco-Roman literature are to be found in a search for shared motifs.²⁴ In rejecting the 'unique' hypothesis, he has a marvellous picture of a small group of early Christians gathered to listen to Mark being read for the first time, never having heard such an extended string of stories before and saying: 'This is *sui generis*.'²⁵ However, no parallel genre has been found, nor is one likely to be found: the attempt is 'mistaken and misleading'.²⁶ Instead, the search for recurrent patterns of shared motifs is likely to prove more fruitful.²⁷ These motifs include such things as the subject's birth, precocity, calling, great deeds and death. From this analysis, he concludes that the selection of motifs made by the evangelists follows a pattern common in the first-century world; similarly, early Christian preaching would have seemed similar to that of the Cynics.²⁸

²⁴ F. G. Downing, 'Contemporary Analogies to the Gospels and Acts: "Genres" or "Motifs"?', in *Synoptic Studies*, JSNTSS 7, pp. 51-65; 'Cynics and Christians', *NTS*, 30 (1984), pp. 584-93; 'Ears to Hear', in *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. A.E. Harvey (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 97-121; 'The Social Contexts of Jesus the Teacher: Construction or Reconstruction', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 439-51; *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First Century Tradition*, JSOT Manuals 4 (SAP, 1988); see also his work, *Strangely Familiar* (published by the author privately, 44, Cleveland Rd., Crumpsall, Manchester, M8 6QU) for full analysis of these shared features.

²⁵ Downing, 'Ears to Hear', p. 97; see also, 'Contemporary Analogies', pp. 51-2.

²⁶ Downing, 'Contemporary Analogies', p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-4; 'Ears to Hear', p. 108.

²⁸ For Jesus and Cynics, see also Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 67-9; C.M. Tuckett, 'A Cynic Q?', *Biblica* 70 (1989), pp. 349-76 dissents.

Downing is well read in the classical material, and his common motifs and analogies are most illuminating. However, such motifs are all to do with *content*; he has little to say about the overall *form* of the whole, or genre of a work. Also, his list has a certain natural obviousness about it; one may come up with a similar pattern because that is the natural way to describe a person's life and significance, rather than to fulfil a literary pattern. Downing has not accounted for the genre of the whole; the same list of motifs could occur in a speech, or letter, or biography, all of which could be used to describe someone. The fact remains that these are all different genres, using the same material. Once again, our concept of genre as derived from many features is important. A common pattern of motifs is certainly one feature we shall be looking for; but used as a sole control, it is incapable of distinguishing different genres.

4 Mary Ann Tolbert

Finally among those who have responded to the biographical proposal without agreeing with it, mention should be made of Tolbert's recent work on Mark. Her goal is 'to articulate an interpretation of the whole Gospel of Mark using the perspectives of literary criticism'.²⁹ She does this in two parts: a general consideration of the text and its setting, followed by a sequential analysis of the gospel itself. It is a stimulating attempt to consider Mark both in a framework of modern literary criticism and also within its original historical and cultural context, and is thus akin to the present study. Her section on the genre of Mark is particularly relevant: she begins with a brief discussion of genre as a 'set of shared expectations' between author and audience; both the attempts to rule out genres for the gospels because of a lack of generic fit and proposals of precise genres for them fail because they 'misconstrue the nature of genre'. There can be no unique genres by definition, but genres are 'fluid patterns'.³⁰ Turning to the genre of Mark itself, she asserts that 'no extant ancient texts, written prior to the composition of the Gospels, display any obvious overall resemblance', although she is prepared to allow for similarity of later works such as Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*.³¹ While βίος is most often proposed as Mark's genre, 'it

²⁹ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

generally charts the entire course of life from birth to death' and Mark does not. Mark is a mix of aretalogy, biography and memorabilia, but much less sophisticated. It belongs to the category of *popular literature* open to a wide spectrum of society (as in Votaw's distinction rather than Schmidt's *Kleinliteratur*) with similarities to the ancient novel, such as the *Alexander Romance* and the work of Xenophon of Ephesus.³²

From the perspective of our two-pronged critique of genre theory and ancient literature, all credit must be given to Tolbert for her material on genre: her analysis of how it functions and why previous attempts to solve gospel genre have failed is very similar to the conclusions we have already drawn. However, more is needed on ancient literature: the similarities between Mark and ancient novels are to do with language, style and plot, but genre involves more than these. Indeed, she accepts that Mark is not an ancient novel, but rather belongs in popular literature with the novel. 'Popular literature', however, is not a genre, but a level which includes works from many genres. Nor is it true that nothing resembling Mark predates him, or that βίος covers the 'entire course of life', as we shall show in due course. Thus, despite some excellent analysis, Tolbert's conclusion that Mark is popular literature does not solve the problem of the genre of the gospels.

Thus the response to the suggestion that the gospels are in the genre of Graeco-Roman biography has criticized correctly the shortcomings in the work of Talbert and Shuler. However, here too problems of methodology, literary theory and treatment of the classical texts abound. The way is still open for the biographical hypothesis, if it can be securely established.

C The new orthodoxy?

Our historical survey concluded that assumptions that the gospels are or contain biographical material are increasingly common.³³ This is despite the fact that none of the proposed arguments of scholars like Talbert and Shuler have found widespread accept-

³² Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, pp. 59–79; see also, Marius Reiser, 'Der Alexanderroman und das Markusevangelium', in *Markus-Philologie*, ed. H. Cancik, *WUNT* 33 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), pp. 131–63.

³³ See Chapter 1, note 64 above; and for similar assumptions by a classicist, 'What is early Christian literature? An outsider's view', unpublished paper delivered at King's College, London, 19 November 1985 by Prof. Averil Cameron.

ance. We need to consider, finally, some major contributions, mostly from Germany and America, which appeared at different points over the last decade proposing a biographical genre for the gospels.

1 Hubert Cancik

Cancik's articles make no mention of Talbert, Shuler or any other attempt to consider the problem later than Stanton's *Jesus of Nazareth*;³⁴ if they were produced in isolation from the debate, their conclusion is all the more interesting. The first essay, 'Die Gattung Evangelium', is an attempt to place the gospels within the framework of ancient literature. Mark is written with a clear historiographical structure; with references to places, times and people, and contains narrative and teaching; thus, the obvious genre is βίος. The form critics pointed out the lack of full treatment, childhood stories, psychological development and so on in the gospels; however, these aspects are also missing from other ancient βίοι. Cancik concludes, therefore, that Hellenistic and Roman readers would have seen Mark as 'Biographie Jesu', if somewhat exotic ('eine ziemlich exotische').³⁵ However, Jews, God-fearers and proselytes would recognize another link, to the Old Testament prophetic writings: 'Jesus was also a prophet. Mark is also a prophetic book.' The gospel, and indeed the New Testament itself, is a book between two worlds, but the non-Jews, for whom Mark was writing, would have understood it as '*Leben Jesu*'.³⁶ Because of the importance of the Passion story in Mark, Cancik spends the rest of the article looking at martyrology and at the death of Nero according to Pliny's and Suetonius' accounts. The second essay, 'Bios und Logos', consists mainly of an analysis of Lucian's *Demonax* and concludes with a list of the similarities and differences between Lucian and Mark. All the features required by the form critics for biography, yet lacking in Mark, are also lacking in the *Demonax*, which nonetheless bears the title of a βίος.

These two articles clearly bear out much that we have said so far. It is a pity that they do not engage with the rest of the debate

³⁴ H. Cancik (ed.), *Markus-Philologie*, *WUNT* 33 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), containing *inter alia*: 'Die Gattung Evangelium. Markus im Rahmen der antiken Historiographie', pp. 85–113; 'Bios und Logos. Formengeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukians "Leben des Demonax"', pp. 115–30; also, Marius Reiser, 'Der Alexanderroman und das Markusevangelium', pp. 131–63.

³⁵ Cancik, 'Die Gattung Evangelium', p. 96. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

beyond the early 1970s; as it is, Cancik's comparison of the gospels with βίοι does not take us much beyond Stanton, nor is there any real treatment of genre theory. However, they are another support for the βίος theory.

2 Klaus Berger

The most comprehensive recent treatment of genre and the New Testament is Berger's massive contribution to *ANRW*, complete with a huge bibliography.³⁷ Berger considers all the possible genres in New Testament literature, as well as an introductory section on methodology and genre theory. The section on 'Biographie' begins with a useful table listing the whole range of Graeco-Roman βίοι from the fifth century BC (Skylax) to the fourth AD (Iamblichus and the *SHA*). From all this analysis, Berger draws various conclusions: that there are various ways of classifying ancient biography; nearly all biography has some relationship with encomium; the use of sayings is common in Hellenistic biography; the 'typical' is more important than the individual; biography has a strong element of fiction; the beginning and end of a βίος are chronological, but not necessarily the rest; 'call' narratives are common; lives of politicians, poets and philosophers were well known; biography often had an apologetic character and was related to the depiction of leaders; and that its relationship to history varied during the period. After all this comes a brief summary of Talbert's critique of Bultmann. Berger concludes that the gospels are to be explained from the ancient genre of biography, itself dependent on encomium; the gospels are closest to *Lives of philosophers*, with Matthew and Luke having an additional tendency towards that of a king. This conclusion is also borne out in his study of other related genres, aretology, *exitus illustrium virorum* and *ultima verba*, and evangelium.³⁸

This brief analysis of Graeco-Roman βίοι provides an excellent survey for those unfamiliar with classical literature, and Berger derives many helpful observations from it. Unfortunately, the final conclusions are little more than a summary of Talbert, with all his shortcomings. However, Berger firmed up his conclusions a little in

³⁷ Berger, 'Hellenistische Gattungen im NT', *ANRW*, II.25.2, (1984), pp. 1031-432, indexes pp. 1831-85.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 'Aretologie', pp. 1218-31; 'Biographie', pp. 1231-45; '*Exitus illustrium virorum* und *ultima verba*', pp. 1257-9; 'Evangelium', pp. 1259-64.

his later work; after discussing Shuler, Dihle and Guelich, and other various possible links with Graeco-Roman biography and Jewish traditions, Berger suggests a biographical genre for the gospels, although without a full demonstration of his case.³⁹

3 Dormeyer and Frankemölle

The same volume of *ANRW* also contains a major article by Detlev Dormeyer and Hubert Frankemölle, both of whom published books subsequently which repeated large amounts of the article, with some further expansion.⁴⁰ Frankemölle concentrates on the concept of 'gospel', looking at the use of εὐαγγέλιον in both the New Testament and later writings, as well as at its Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman usage. It is the development of the word from the kerygmatic concept of the good news about Jesus to the narrative gospel which concerns him; Dormeyer also discusses this and sees εὐαγγέλιον as belonging to the epideictic genre, *Prunkrede*, as a subgenre of ancient biography.⁴¹ Dormeyer's major contribution is his exhaustive analysis of the study of the genre of the gospels from patristic times to the Enlightenment and then on through form and redaction criticism to the current debates. Here he considers both literary approaches of text-linguistics and structuralist understandings and also the various attempts to place the gospels within differing genres. Aretology, drama and the novel are all included, followed by more detailed treatment of biography; in addition to the work of people like Talbert, Shuler and Berger on Hellenistic biography, Dormeyer draws attention to Old Testament 'Idealbiographie' and the work of Baltzer on biographical

³⁹ Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984); esp. 'Evangelium und Biographie', pp. 346-57.

⁴⁰ D. Dormeyer and H. Frankemölle, 'Evangelium als literarische Gattung und als theologischer Begriff. Tendenzen und Aufgaben der Evangelienforschung im 20. Jahrhundert, mit einer Untersuchung des Markusevangeliums in seinem Verhältnis zur antiken Biographie', *ANRW* II.25.2, pp. 1543-1704; D. Dormeyer, *Evangelium als literarische und theologische Gattung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989); H. Frankemölle, *Evangelium - Begriff und Gattung: ein Forschungsbericht* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988); *ANRW* II.25.2 also contains H. Köster, 'Überlieferung und Geschichte der frühchristlichen Evangelienliteratur', pp. 1463-542 and D.L. Tiede, 'Religious Propaganda and the Gospel Literature of the Early Christian Mission', pp. 1705-29.

⁴¹ Dormeyer, 'Die Kompositionsmetapher "Evangelium Jesu Christi, des Sohnes Gottes" Mk.1.1. Ihre theologische und literarische Aufgabe in der Jesus-Biographie des Markus', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 452-68; see also, Helmut Koester, 'From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels', *NTS* 35 (1989), pp. 361-81.

material about the prophets.⁴² Markan Christology, as seen in the titles Son of God, Christ, Son of Man, and Teacher, displays this biographical tendency. The gospels are not new or unique works, ('eine unabhängige Neubildung'); the combination of faith and preaching about Jesus with narrative of his earthly life (form and content of the gospel) is the great accomplishment of the evangelists, which makes their work into a new biographical subgenre, ('die neugeschaffene biographische Untergattung "Evangelium"').⁴³

These are substantial pieces of work which have made important contributions to the debate through the full analysis of all the relevant scholars and approaches. However, they have no treatment of literary theory of genre and very little handling of examples of ancient literature and βίοι. While their conclusions may well be correct, therefore, they cannot be viewed as conclusively established until this work has been done.

4 Barr and Wentling

The collection of papers from the SBL Seminar on Luke-Acts 1979–83 contains a comparison of Luke-Acts with classical biography.⁴⁴ Barr and Wentling's paper consisted of three main sections: it began with some brief discussion of genre theory, including a rejection of the concept of *sui generis* works and evaluation of Talbert's critique of Bultmann. The middle section analysed the 'Conventions of Classical Biography', including the type of hero, the purpose of the work, its literary manner, the external pattern, the internal organization, the focus on the subject's character, and the presentation of the material in the third person; within these conventions, there was wide scope for diversity. Thirdly, these criteria were applied to Luke-Acts, and similarities and differences were discovered: the hero is not a noble person; the addition of

⁴² Dormeyer, *ANRW* II.25.2, pp. 1574–8, and *Evangelium*, pp. 168–73; K. Baltzer, *Die Biographie der Propheten* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975).

⁴³ Dormeyer, *Evangelium* p. 194; *ANRW* II.25.2, p. 1601.

⁴⁴ David L. Barr and Judith L. Wentling, 'The Conventions of Classical Biography and the Genre of Luke-Acts: A Preliminary Study', in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the SBL Seminar*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984), pp. 63–88; a pre-1982 date is implied by the footnote on p. 80 that Shuler's *A Genre for the Gospels* 'appeared too late to be considered in this essay' – though they should have considered his Ph.D. thesis. Interestingly, Barr's own 1974 Florida Ph.D. Dissertation compared the synoptic gospels with Socratic Dialogue, see Chapter 1, n. 61 above.

Acts takes the focus beyond the subject, and the scale is larger; the use of appropriate language has links with classical writers; the external pattern does not fit with the classical conventions of series or pairs of βίοι; the internal organization is similar; the apologetic purpose is in some tension with historical concerns. Despite the differences, the authors conclude ancient audiences 'would have heard it with some of the same expectations with which they heard biographies'.⁴⁵ The paper concludes with some tables analysing Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Nepos' *Great Generals*, Philo's *Moses*, Plutarch's *Demosthenes* and *Cicero*, Tacitus' *Agricola*, Suetonius' *Augustus*, Lucian's *Demonax* and, of course, Luke-Acts. The following criteria are used for the analysis: title, language, date, length, sources, point of view, type of hero, characterization, divine traits, technique, pattern, purpose and aesthetic intent.

This paper is an interesting addition to the biographical hypothesis. Its general approach and methodology (similar to that upon which this present study was already proceeding) seem to be correct. However, it has several difficulties which make it less compelling, quite apart from the preliminary nature of the study and its brevity – thirteen pages of text, plus tables, will not overturn half a century of scholarly consensus. The first problem is caused by the study being done on Luke-Acts as an entity. Many of the differences with Graeco-Roman biography, such as the external organization, the wider focus and scale beyond the subject, follow from including Acts in the analysis. If Luke alone were compared, these differences would fall away.

Second, the categories chosen for analysis are rather mixed: formal or structural features, such as language, date or 'pattern', are placed with content-based features, such as 'type of hero' or 'divine traits' without any attempt to distinguish the different levels at which these operate. Further, some of the categories, e.g. 'technique', are very vague and need fuller discussion before they can yield clear results. Finally, the analysis has not made it clear that some of the works do *not* belong to the genre of classical biography: the *Apology* is a speech, the *Crito* and *Phaedo* are philosophical dialogues, and the exact genres of the *Memorabilia* and *Agricola* are disputed among classicists. That these can appear in the table with no generic *dissimilarities* being noted does not give confidence that Luke-Acts is also in the genre of classical

⁴⁵ Barr and Wentling, 'The Conventions of Classical Biography', p. 76.

biography. This unease about the handling of the classical material is compounded further by the paucity of reference to classical scholarship. The analysis of the 'Conventions of Classical Biography' needs proper earthing in the literature to make it secure. The sense of insecurity is not helped by the blatant error contained in the 'language' column of the tables: Plutarch did *not* write in Latin, but Greek!

As a preliminary study, this paper has much to commend it. Within a short space, a lot of ground is covered and a sensible methodology for comparing the gospels with Graeco-Roman βίοι is undertaken. However, a fuller and much more accurate treatment is necessary if the attempt is to be successful.

5 David E. Aune

David Aune's interest in both the relationship of the New Testament to the world of classical literature and also in the specific area of gospel genre has been clear for many years.⁴⁶ We will consider here *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* as the fullest recent statement of his views. Aune's general approach is twofold: he analyses a genre within both Graeco-Roman and Jewish literary traditions and then he applies this to the biblical books. The genre of the gospels is considered with respect to literary and non-literary parallels; he analyses and dismisses kerygmatic and lectionary hypotheses, and discusses ancient biography, both Graeco-Roman and Israelite-Jewish. From a study of the form, content and function of the gospels, especially Mark, he concludes that they are 'a type of ancient biography'. Luke-Acts is thought to be different, because of the two-volume nature of the work; so this is compared with ancient historiography and declared to be 'general history'. Finally, the same approach is applied to the epistles and Revelation.

As always, we will consider our two main areas. Aune's knowledge of ancient literature is very good, but his useful little

⁴⁶ D.E. Aune, 'Septem sapientium convivium (Moralia 146B–164D)', in *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature*, ed. H.D. Betz (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 51–105; 'Magic in Early Christianity', *ANRW*, II.23.2 (1980), pp. 1507–57; 'The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C.H. Talbert's *What is a Gospel?*', in *Gospel Perspectives II* (SAP, 1981); 'The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography', *Mosaic* 20 (1987), pp. 1–10; *Graeco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. Aune, SBL Sources for Biblical Study 21 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), esp. pp. 107–26 on Secundus; *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988).

survey of Graeco-Roman biography (pp. 29–36) is rather lost in all the other material of Chapter 1; it needs much fuller treatment, taking account of some of the work on biography cited in our discussion above, especially that by Geiger and Pelling, and a wider setting within its own literary environment of historiography and encomium. The definition of biography as 'a discrete prose narrative devoted exclusively to the portrayal of the whole life of a particular individual perceived as historical' is asserted rather than proven.⁴⁷ The stress on 'the whole life' would rule out both the gospels and many ancient biographies.

Secondly, a more detailed coverage of genre theory would help. He defines a genre as 'a group of texts that exhibit a coherent and recurring configuration of literary features involving form (including structure and style), content, and function'.⁴⁸ New Testament literature is then compared with examples of the relevant genre, analysed by form, content and purpose. This represents a significant advance on anything previously studied and goes some way along the lines suggested by our study of genre theory earlier. However, there are still other important generic features which Aune does not consider, both structural features, such as size, scale, prose or metre, and content-based features, such as titles, opening sentences or prologues, settings and occasions. These would help to identify genre more accurately.

Finally, whereas Barr and Wentling concluded that Luke-Acts could be fitted into the genre of biography, Aune believes quite the opposite; Mark, Matthew and John are all 'a subtype of Graeco-Roman biography', 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'.⁴⁹ As we noted with Talbert, this is an odd result; some other way of dealing with the problem of the two-volume nature of Luke-Acts needs to be found: perhaps Luke itself could be one genre, and Acts another, related genre. Furthermore, given the usual view of the difference between John and the synoptics, more attention should be devoted to the genre of the fourth gospel if Aune wishes to group it with the others.

This book is an excellent introduction to the literary world of the New Testament, written in an approachable style without footnotes

⁴⁷ Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13; there is also some helpful consideration of the methodological problems in genre criticism of the gospels on pp. 22–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

and likely to become essential reading for all beginning New Testament study. However, the lack of full annotated documentation and the necessary brevity of treatment of some key areas will not establish the case positively and finally for the biographical genre of the gospels to become the new scholarly consensus and orthodoxy. That task still remains to be done.

6 E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies

Sanders' and Davies' general introduction to *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* includes several chapters concerned with genre. Chapter 2, 'Genre and Purposes', shows how the gospels do not conform to modern notions of biography, but points out the different criteria of accuracy used by ancient writers, as well as the difficulties writers like Luke had and their effect on chronology and geography. Chapters 17, 18 and 19 consider the genre of the synoptics in turn. Matthew is compared with both Hellenistic and Jewish biographies (e.g. *Apollonius of Tyana* and Philo's *Moses*) and some similarities and differences are noted; they conclude 'the most satisfactory definition of the genre is "a theodicy about creation and recreation"'.⁵⁰ Mark and Luke are then found to be of the same genre, despite Luke's greater links with Hellenistic biography and historiography.⁵¹

It is good to see genre and Graeco-Roman literature given extensive attention; however, there are problems in the treatment of both. To conclude that the genre of the gospels is 'theodicy' without any indication of what its generic features might be or whether this is a recognizable genre to ancient or modern readers is not really very helpful. Most of the similarities noted with Graeco-Roman literature are to do with content: the parallels between the activities of Jesus and Apollonius without regard to the works' differences of size or presentation (let alone the later date) will not establish a shared genre. 'Theodicy' is not a genre, but can be expressed in many genres, from prophecy to apocalyptic, from hymns to drama. Once again, much greater attention to genre theory and to Graeco-Roman literature is needed.

⁵⁰ E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989), p. 265.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 275 and 296.

Conclusion

We have now come to the end of the first part of our study, the survey of the problem of the genre of the gospels and the attempts to solve it. It may be helpful at this point, therefore, just to draw a few threads together. In Chapter 1 the historical survey ranged from nineteenth-century ideas about the link of the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography, through the dominance of the form-critical consensus that they were *sui generis* works, to the more recent suggestions made about the gospels' genre. It became apparent that only an interdisciplinary study involving gospel studies, literary theory of genre and proper understanding of literature which was contemporary with the gospels could provide a satisfactory answer. In Chapter 2, therefore, we attempted to provide an adequate coverage of the literary theory of genre. This showed that genre functions as a flexible set of expectations affecting both author and reader; the proper recognition of genre is absolutely basic to the interpretation and appreciation of written communications. This means that the gospels cannot be *sui generis*, but must be set within the web of literary relationships of their own day. Accordingly, Chapter 3 considered the use of genre within classical scholarship, particularly as it relates to the genre of βίος (as it is better termed than 'biography' with all its modern connotations). βίος nestles between various neighbouring genres such as history and encomium; its development was traced from its origins in early travelogue and speeches, through the Alexandrian and Roman periods, to its late imperial shift into mediaeval biography and hagiography. Finally, in this Chapter 4 some evaluation of recent debate about the gospels as biography has been attempted. Although the idea has become increasingly common that the genre of the gospels may indeed have a link with Graeco-Roman biography, most proposals have failed because of problems in methodology or genre theory, as well as lack of a proper understanding of classical literature.

I undertook this study initially because, as someone with a classical background, I was unimpressed with the arguments put forward by New Testament scholars, especially in America, to demonstrate the biographical genre of the gospels. Therefore a negative result was expected, exposing the biographical hypothesis as untenable. However, as the work has developed, I have become increasingly convinced that, despite the poor quality of many of the

arguments for this hypothesis, it is indeed the right one and that the gospels are part of the genre of ancient βίος literature. Therefore, we must now turn our attention away from the negative task of assessing the work of others and background considerations, to the positive need to establish a case for this hypothesis which rests on the firm foundations of literary theory and classical biography which have been laid down so far.

PART TWO

THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

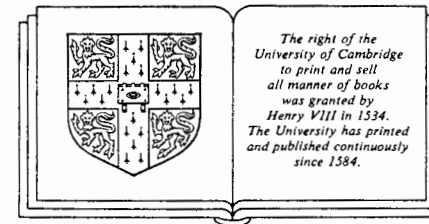
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