

family resemblance of generic features which identify this group as the genre of βίος. To belong to this family, a work must show at least as sufficient of the common generic features as these works do, within the limits of diversity, and so now we may turn at last to undertake a similar analysis of the gospels.

## 8

## THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

A third hypothesis about the purpose of the gospels that once was quite popular has now been abandoned altogether: The gospels were not written as biographies of Jesus, nor can a biography be extracted from them.<sup>1</sup>

The form of the gospels most closely resembles that of Hellenistic biographies.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that general introductions to the New Testament can assert with confidence and certainty such statements which appear blatantly contradictory indicates the continuing disarray concerning the genre of the gospels. Clearly, the idea of the gospels as biographies certainly has *not* 'been abandoned altogether'. On the contrary, after the dominance of the kerygmatic hypothesis for so long, 'more recent discussion of the genre of the gospel has reopened the question of the gospels as biography, however cautiously'.<sup>3</sup> We have suggested consistently that there are two main causes of this disarray: inadequate literary theory of genre and a lack of understanding of Graeco-Roman biography. Therefore, we have identified a range of generic features and used them to analyse Graeco-Roman βίοι, both on the fringes of the genre and indubitably classic examples. A clear family resemblance has now been established, and so we can proceed with the same exercise on the gospels. Stanton has considered Mark similarly with respect to a number of features, but concludes that several would have 'puzzled readers familiar with the techniques of ancient biographical

<sup>1</sup> John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (OUP, 1986), p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1986), p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Koester, 'From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels', *NTS* 35 (1989), pp. 361-81, quotation from p. 364.

writing': the concentration on Jesus' death, the enigmatic opening and curiously abrupt ending, and the lack of entertaining anecdotes.<sup>4</sup> His consideration of the question using a number of features is a major step forward; whether the slightly pessimistic conclusion is warranted may emerge from our study. We shall take the three synoptic gospels together and subject them to the same analysis we used for Graeco-Roman βίον. Since we are dealing with the genre of the final text, issues such as source criticism, oral tradition and the production of the gospels, which are often the usual preoccupation of gospel scholars, may feature occasionally – but our main focus is the text itself, and the generic features it contains, as the primary means of determining genre.

### A Opening features

#### 1 Title

The Greek titles found in the manuscripts dating from the earliest centuries are variations upon the preposition κατά: e.g., for Luke, MSS B and F have κατά Λουκᾶν, A C and D have εὐαγγέλιον κατά Λουκᾶν, and others τὸ κατά Λουκᾶν εὐαγγέλιον. κατά plus the accusative is not to be seen as equivalent to the normal genitive of the author; thus Plummer says: 'The κατά neither affirms nor denies *authorship*: it implies *conformity to a type*.'<sup>5</sup> A similar range of phrases can be found on manuscripts of Matthew, and Davies and Allison reckon that the title could go back to as early as AD 125.<sup>6</sup> Hengel argues that the unanimity of these descriptions in the manuscripts implies an early date for this formula back into the first century and possibly even to the original distribution of Mark.<sup>7</sup> Koester, however, is not persuaded by this, while Bovon sees the unanimity as a result of canonization.<sup>8</sup> Whether the titles are original or not, they may suggest that the early church grouped the gospels together to a 'type', but they do not indicate the genre.

<sup>4</sup> Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (OUP, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Luke*, ICC, 4th edn (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), p. 1; his italics.

<sup>6</sup> W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 129, n. 90.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Hengel, *Die Evangelienüberschriften* (Heidelberg, Winter, 1984); ET, 'The Titles of the Gospels', in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 64–84, see esp. pp. 66–7 and 83; see also Stuhlmacher's comments in *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, ed. D.L. Dungan, pp. 493–4.

<sup>8</sup> Koester, 'From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels', *NTS* 35 (1989), p. 373; François Bovon, 'The Synoptic Gospels and the Noncanonical Acts of the Apostles', *HTR* 81 (1988), pp. 19–36, see p. 23.

The word 'gospel' itself also needs brief consideration: the noun εὐαγγέλιον has religious and salvific connotations in secular Greek from Homer onwards, and within the Old Testament the verb εὐαγγελίζεσθαι has a theological sense, e.g. Isa. 52.7; 61.1 (LXX). Both noun and verb are common in Paul, occurring some fifty and twenty times respectively, for the preaching of the 'good news' of Jesus Christ. In the synoptic gospels too, this link with preaching is clear, e.g. Mark 1.14, Matt. 4.23 and Luke 20.1.<sup>9</sup> Mark may have had a similar meaning in mind when he began his account of Jesus with the words Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (1.1); Christopher Marshall credits him with expanding the original meaning to include 'the whole historical ministry of Jesus', and says that 'Mark's intention is to suggest an equivalence between the preaching of Jesus and that of the church.'<sup>10</sup> For Hengel, this connection of 'preaching and historical narrative' means that Mark's εὐαγγέλιον is meant to be understood as ancient biography.<sup>11</sup> Such linking of the content of early Christian preaching with narrative about Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection changes the word's use. Baird traces this shift from 'the gospel' in the singular (for the content of early Christian belief) to 'the gospels' in the plural (referring to the written documents) through the early Fathers down to Eusebius. Here too, Koester is not persuaded, preferring to see the use of εὐαγγέλιον for a written document as a 'revolutionary innovation' by Marcion; however, Dormeyer's study of Mark 1.1 argues that this is nothing to do with Marcion, but rather the canonization of Mark's combining the literary and theological content of the gospel into a 'Jesus-Biographie'.<sup>12</sup> The situation regarding the titles of the gospels is thus rather complex, but they suggest that *the books were seen as a literary group together, possibly with a connection with βίος*.

<sup>9</sup> See Burridge, 'Gospel', in *SCM Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*; Lohse, *Formation of NT*, pp. 117–20; Stuhlmacher, *Das Evangelium*, pp. 20–6; J.A. Fitzmyer, 'The Gospel in the Theology of Paul', *Interpretation* 33 (1979), pp. 339–50; Guelich, 'εὐαγγέλιον', *Mark 1–8.26*, pp. 13–14; H. Frankemölle, *Evangelium – Begriff und Gattung*; G. Rau, 'Das Markusevangelium. Komposition und Intention der ersten Darstellung christlicher Mission', *ANRW*, II.25.3 (1985), pp. 2036–257, esp. pp. 2042–72.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, SNTSMS 64 (CUP, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Hengel, 'The Titles of the Gospels', pp. 72 and 83.

<sup>12</sup> Baird, 'Genre Analysis', pp. 395–400; Koester, 'From the Kerygma-Gospel', *NTS* (1989), p. 381; D. Dormeyer, 'Die Kompositionsmetapher "Evangelium Jesu Christi"', *NTS* (1987), p. 464 (see pp. 99–100 above).

## 2 Opening formulae/prologue/preface

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, and we have noted how common consideration of the γένος of the subject is in βίοι. The extent of Mark's opening is debated: 1.1, 1.1–8, 1.1–13 or 1.1–15 have all been suggested. Koester sees the opening phrase as a possible scribal insertion; there is nothing to indicate that εὐαγγέλιον is a 'designation of Mark's entire work'. Guelich, however, accepts that εὐαγγέλιον refers to the 'content of the literary work that follows', but prefers to see ἀρχή as just the 'beginning' of the opening section (vv. 1–15), rather than applying to the whole work. Christopher Marshall takes vv. 14–15 as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, rather than the end of the opening section; like the first verse, they are crucial: 'vv 1,14,15 together provide an introduction to the entire ministry of Jesus.'<sup>13</sup> Whatever its extent, Mark's opening section is not a formal prologue or preface. However, Luke's Preface, 1.1–4, is usually seen as a significant attempt to relate his work to contemporary Graeco-Roman literature. Loveday Alexander's detailed study suggested affinities with prefaces in Greek scientific monographs, although such affinities do not negate the 'biographical content of the Gospel and Acts'.<sup>14</sup> The classicist, George A. Kennedy, also points to the Preface, with its 'fine periodic sentence' as evidence that 'Luke in the Gospel comes close to being a classical biographer'.<sup>15</sup>

If we compare the synoptic gospels with our βίοι, we note that Matthew goes straight into the subject's ancestry, like Nepos and Plutarch; Mark, however, like Xenophon, begins with just one

<sup>13</sup> Koester, 'From the Kerygma-Gospel', *NTS* (1989), p. 370; Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, pp. 3–12, quotation from p. 9; Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, pp. 36–56, quotation from p. 37; see also F.J. Matera, 'The Prologue as the Interpretative Key to Mark's Gospel', *JSNT* 34 (1988), pp. 3–20.

<sup>14</sup> L. Alexander, 'Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing', *NovT* 28 (1986), pp. 48–74; quotation from p. 70; see also her 1977 Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 'Luke-Acts in its Contemporary Setting, with Special Reference to the Prefaces (Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1)'.  
<sup>15</sup> G.A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 107–8; see also, Fitzmyer, *Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 287–302 for the Preface and contemporary literature, and pp. 172–4 on διήγησις in v. 1 as a 'quasi-title'; V.K. Robbins, 'Prefaces in Greco-Roman Biography and Luke-Acts', *SBL 1978 Seminar Papers*, vol. 2, ed. P.J. Achtemeier (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 193–207; Terrance Callan, 'The Preface of Luke-Acts and Historiography', *NTS* 31 (1985), pp. 576–81.

sentence, while some of Plutarch's *Lives* start straight in (e.g. *Timoleon* 1). Luke's use of a preface can be paralleled in Lucian and Philo, who have a paragraph each, and in Isocrates, Tacitus and Philostratus, who all have a more extended prologue. Thus the various beginnings of the synoptic gospels reflect the range of possibilities for βίοι with respect to an opening sentence or preface.

Also, like most Graeco-Roman βίοι, Mark and Matthew include the name of their subject at the very start:

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]. (Mark 1.1)  
Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ. (Matt 1.1)

These sentences also allude to the beginning of the Old Testament: Mark's ἀρχή is reminiscent of its opening words and Hebrew title, *b<sup>e</sup>reshith* (ἐν ἀρχῇ LXX), while Matthew's βίβλος γενέσεως picks up ἡ βίβλος γενέσεως in Gén. 2.4 and 5.1 (LXX) and the Greek title, *Genesis*. Further Old Testament allusion appears with Matthew's υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ and Mark's quotation in 1.2–3. Luke mentions the name at the annunciation (1.31) and the birth (2.21), but it becomes prominent at the start of the main narrative in 3.23 and 4.1. This compares with the use of the subject's name after prologues in *Evagoras* (12 or 21), *Apollonius of Tyana* (I.4) and *Agricola* (4.1). So we can relate the opening features of the synoptic gospels to βίοι in that *Matthew and Mark begin with the subject's name, while Luke has a formal preface, with the name occurring later at the start of the main narrative.*

**B Subject**

## 1 Analysis of verb subjects

There is often debate about the 'real' subject of the gospels: for example, Guelich argues 'in short, does the evangelist view his task to write a "biography" or to set forth the Christian message about what God was doing in and through Jesus Messiah? Is the ultimate focus not on God rather than on Jesus?'<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Sanders and Davies note that 'in the Gospel of Luke, there is a lack of focus on the hero . . . It is not a biography of Jesus but a story of God bringing salvation to his people . . . It is God who is the dominant

<sup>16</sup> Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, p. 191.

force.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, as with our βίοι, analysis of the verb subjects will help us to discern where the 'focus' is and who is the 'dominant force'.

Manual analysis of Mark's gospel reveals immediately our 'skew' effect: Jesus himself is the subject of about a quarter of the verbs (24.4%) and a further fifth occur on his lips, in his teaching or parables (20.2%). These results are very close to Satyrus' where Euripides was the subject of 25.8%, with 17.5% occurring in quotations from his plays. We have the same concentration on the subject: no other individual scores above 1%. Several groups feature: all the references to any individual disciple, and to them as a group, total an eighth (12.2%), while all those to whom Jesus ministered, talked or healed together make up a tenth (9.3%). The Jewish leaders, scribes, Pharisees and Chief Priests are the other significant group, accounting for 5%, while the rest may be termed indefinite or miscellaneous subjects (see Figure 12, Appendix, p. 271).<sup>18</sup>

Matthew and Luke have similar results, with Jesus dominating the narrative as the subject of over a sixth of the verbs (17.2% and 17.9% respectively); once again, no other individual features, but we have the same groups: disciples (8.8% and 8.3%), those who received ministry from Jesus (4.4% and 7%), and the priests, scribes and Pharisees (4.4% and 3.4%). The amount of verbs contained in Jesus' teaching and parables is more or less doubled from Mark's 20.2% to 42.5% in Matthew and 36.8% in Luke (see Figures 13 and 14, Appendix, pp. 272–3). The extra material comes mainly from their shared tradition, referred to as 'Q', consisting mostly of 'sayings' and teaching.<sup>19</sup> Matthew tends to collect it all together in five main blocks of teaching, while Luke uses it more widely, but especially in his travel section (9–19). Luke's score for the spoken material is less because, unlike Matthew, he does attempt to provide a *narrative* setting for the blocks of teaching, such as Jesus delivering the speech as a result of being asked a

<sup>17</sup> Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 288; compare 'what the author is primarily interested in presenting is *not* "what sort of person" Jesus is, but rather what sort of action God is effecting through this person', D.P. Moessner, 'And Once Again, What Sort of "Essence"? A Response to Charles Talbert', *Semeia* 43 (1988), p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> These figures are based on the full text of the gospel down to 16.20; if one analyses only 1.1–16.8, the effect is to diminish the percentages for Jesus and the disciples by a decimal point or two, which has no significant effect upon the results.

<sup>19</sup> On the genre of Q, see Chapter 10, page 248 below.

question, or responding to a situation. This is typical of philosophical dialogues and βίοι of philosophers, and may be evidence, therefore, of Luke's attempt to conform his gospel more closely to βίοι, especially philosophical ones. Certainly, these large figures for Jesus' teaching need not prevent the gospels being βίοι. On the contrary, they reveal that approximately half the verbs in the synoptic gospels are taken up with Jesus' words and deeds.

These figures are a clear indicator of a strong biographical tendency in the gospels. They cannot 'prove' that they are βίοι any more than did the results for other works with a biographical interest, such as the *Cyropaedia* or *Memorabilia*; however, these latter works lacked the other features of βίοι and so do not belong to the genre. We must await our consideration of these other features before reaching a final decision about the gospels, but it is evident already that *the gospels belong with other works of a clear biographical interest*.

## 2 Allocation of space

### X: *Content analysis of Matthew's gospel*

Chapters	Verses	Topic	Percentage of work
1–2	48	Prologue and infancy	4.5
3–4	42	Preparation and beginnings	3.9
5–7	111	Sermon on the Mount (Discourse)	10.4
8–9	72	Ministry	6.7
10–11 <sup>1</sup>	41	Mission of disciples (Discourse)	3.8
11 <sup>2</sup> –12	79	Ministry and conflict	7.4
13 <sup>1</sup> –5 <sup>2</sup>	52	Parables of the Kingdom (Discourse)	4.9
13 <sup>5</sup> –17	136	Ministry and Peter's Confession	12.7
18	35	Christian community (Discourse)	3.3
19–23	195	Journey to Jerusalem	18.2
24–25	97	Eschatology (Discourse)	9.1
26–28	161	Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection	15.1
<i>Totals:</i>	1069		100.0%

The allocation of space within the gospels is one reason often cited against them being biographies. It is pointed out that we are told little or nothing of the first thirty or so years of Jesus' life, and then there is the large concentration of space devoted to his death.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, p. 19.

XI: *Content analysis of Mark's gospel*

Chapters	Verses	Topic	Percentage of work
1 <sup>1</sup> -13	13	Preparation and beginnings	2.0
1 <sup>14</sup> -3 <sup>6</sup>	66	Ministry in Galilee	9.9
3 <sup>7</sup> -6 <sup>6</sup>	119	Call of disciples and ministry	17.9
6 <sup>7</sup> -8 <sup>26</sup>	113	Mission and blindness of disciples	17.0
8 <sup>27</sup> -10	113	Journey to Jerusalem	17.0
11-13	114	Ministry in Jerusalem	17.1
14-16 <sup>8</sup>	127	Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection	19.1
Totals:	665		100.0

XII: *Content analysis of Luke's gospel*

Chapters	Verses	Topic	Percentage of work
1 <sup>1-4</sup>	4	Preface	0.4
1 <sup>5</sup> -2	128	Infancy narratives	11.1
3-4 <sup>13</sup>	51	Preparation and beginnings	4.4
4 <sup>14</sup> -9 <sup>50</sup>	275	Ministry in Galilee	23.9
9 <sup>51</sup> -19 <sup>27</sup>	406	Journey to Jerusalem	35.3
19 <sup>28</sup> -21	106	Ministry in Jerusalem	9.3
22-24	179	Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection	15.6
Totals:	1149		100.0%

fact, our analysis of βίοι revealed that the first thirty or forty years of a subject's life can be dealt with very briefly, or even omitted, while the death-scene is usually exaggerated. Matthew and Luke devote just over 15% of their text to the events of the Last Supper, Trial, Passion and Resurrection, while Mark has rather more, 19.1%.<sup>21</sup> If these figures are compared with those given to their subject's last days and death by Plutarch (17.3%), Nepos (15%), Tacitus (10%) and Philostratus (26%), then the gospels' allocation of space does not look out of place or puzzling. Of course, the concentration on Jesus' death involves more than just the amount of space describing it; the Cross dominates the whole of Mark, for example, with the various predictions of the Passion. Nonetheless, this is not very different from some Graeco-Roman βίοι; the death

<sup>21</sup> The figures in the tables are calculated on the basis of verses, which do vary in length; however, the alternative method, using the number of lines of Greek text, was also tried and produced results which differed only very slightly.

of Jesus is as important in understanding his significance for the evangelists as the battle of Mons Graupius was for Agricola (which was given 26%) or the Persian campaign for Agesilaus (given 37%).<sup>22</sup> This means that *the evangelists' concentration on the Passion and death of Jesus can no longer be used as an argument against the gospels being βίοι.*

C **External features**1 **Mode of representation**

The synoptic gospels are in prose narrative. They may have an oral tradition behind them and have been read in public; Mark's primitive Greek may have the occasional oral cadence, but even so, the final written texts are clearly prose works. Metre does not apply therefore. Furthermore, narrative is the best description of the prose: it is not drama, though there are some dramatic elements, nor dialogue, like Satyrus' *Euripides*, although dialogue is contained within the gospels. They are not speeches, like the *Evagoras*, or sermons, although they may exhibit some rhetorical, oral or proclamatory features. Finally, the narrative is mainly continuous; some of the links between sections may be vague or tenuous, but overall the narrative seems intended as a continuous whole. While the gospels may not be as continuous as Lives of statesmen or generals, like Agricola, they are more continuous than those of philosophers, like the *Demonax* with its string of unconnected episodes. Thus *the mode of representation of the synoptic gospels is prose narrative of a fairly continuous nature, like historiography or βίοι.*

2 **Size**

According to Morgenthaler, Matthew has 18,305 words, Mark 11,242 and Luke 19,428<sup>23</sup> – and this puts them clearly within the medium-length category. This rules out some suggestions for the gospels of genres which lie outside this category. For instance,

<sup>22</sup> Note also that a quarter of Acts (24.7%) is taken up with Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his various hearings and final detention in Rome (Acts 21.17-28.31): 'The space devoted to Paul's arrest and examinations shows the importance attached to these by Luke, and may be compared with the space allotted in the Gospels to the events of Passion Week', F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2nd edn (London: Tyndale, 1952), pp. 390-1.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zurich: Gotthelf, 1958), Table 3, p. 164.

Kelber suggests that the gospels are to be viewed as 'written parable', while Donahue says that the parables 'give shape, direction, and meaning to the Gospels'.<sup>24</sup> Since parables are often less than 100 words long, and even one as long as the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.11–31 is below 400, they are clearly a short genre: indeed, brevity is part of the essence of their function. Talk of parables 'extended' to 10,000–20,000 words misunderstands how generic features function. This is not to deny, of course, that there may be much of the 'parabolic' about the story of Jesus. However, this is the wider level of mode, as defined in Chapter 2 above, rather than the specific level of genre. The same applies to suggestions that the gospels are tragedy or tragicomedy.<sup>25</sup> Again, there may be elements of the tragic or tragicomic in the gospels, but these genres are smaller than our texts – as well as possessing other generic features, such as a mode of dialogue and structure of scenes and choruses not in the gospels. We would do better to search for a genre for the gospels among works of medium length. In fact, Matthew and Luke are comparable to the longest of Plutarch's *Lives*, such as *Alexander* or *Antony*, while Mark is similar to Plutarch's average length for his βίοι of 10,000–11,000 words. *Size is thus another shared feature between the gospels and βίοι.*

### 3 Structure

Most gospel commentaries begin with an elaborate chart of the structure. Here, we are concerned with overall sequence: all three synoptic gospels begin the main narrative with the Baptism of Jesus by John, although it is prefaced by birth stories in Matthew and Luke, and all three conclude with the Passion story, Jesus' death and the subsequent events. Martin Kähler's dictum that Mark is a Passion story with an extended introduction is commonly quoted:<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Kelber's section 'The Gospel as Written Parable' in *Oral and Written Gospel*, pp. 117–29 preferring parable to aretology or biography as the genre of the gospels; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. ix; see also, James G. Williams, *Gospel Against Parable* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) and his 'Parable and Chreia: From Q to Narrative Gospel', *Semeia* 43 (1988) pp. 85–114; Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, pp. 332–9 is not convinced.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. G.G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* or Dan O. Via's *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament*; see p. 22 above.

<sup>26</sup> M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 80, n. 11.

however, to see over 80% of a work as mere introduction is rather unbalanced, giving insufficient importance to these earlier sections, and is unsatisfactory as an explanation of genre. In between the Baptism and the Passion, all three gospels include a large amount of material concerned with Jesus' ministry. Many commentators deny any connection with biography: so Kümmel says, 'Mk has no biographical-chronological interest'.<sup>27</sup> Such a disjointed approach to Mark is open to lectionary or liturgical theories of genre, seeing the text in terms of units for public reading.<sup>28</sup> Others disagree: thus Nineham accepts that 'he has produced what is, so far as *form* is concerned, a connected historical narrative' with 'a corresponding chronological sequence'. Also, Bilezikian comments 'a consensus has emerged according to which the author of the Gospel intended to write a sequential and progressive narration,' since examination of the links and seams indicates 'that the author was not just copying stories but that he was writing a story'.<sup>29</sup>

Our analysis of the content of the synoptic gospels in the tables above shows that the narrative appears as a chronological account, unfolding from the Baptism to the Passion via Jesus' ministry with its popular success and official opposition. Also, all three have a geographical progression from ministry in Galilee to Jerusalem, most clearly marked in Luke's account.<sup>30</sup> Such a basic chronological structure is not dissimilar from those in βίοι: it is less marked than the datable sequence of *Lives* of generals like Agricola or Agesilaus, but more structured than the loose string of anecdotes in the *Demonax*; similarly, Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* is a collection of stories arranged by theme, such as his communication with animals (23–26) or miracles (27–30). Into their basic chronological

<sup>27</sup> W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, p. 85; see also, 'Mark's order is not . . . determined by a biographical-chronological interest', Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1976), p. 33; 'Mark has no interest whatever in precise chronology. . . not by the desire to write a biography', E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (London: SPCK, 1971), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. the ideas of Carrington or Goulder, discussed on p. 20 above.

<sup>29</sup> D.E. Nineham, *St. Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 36; Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel*, p. 14; for Mark's structure, see E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), pp. 100–8 and 128–33, and H. Anderson, *Mark*, pp. 32–40; for Matthew, see Johnson, *Writings of NT*, pp. 173–6 and Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, pp. 58–72: a 'chronological sequence' with teaching 'inserted'.

<sup>30</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke*, pp. 162–71 on Luke and his use of geography; for history, see also pp. 171–92 and H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber, 1960).



structure, all three evangelists insert other material arranged topically: thus Matthew has the five discourses of chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18 and 24–25, and Mark groups parables together in chapter 4 and has the mini-apocalypse of 13. Luke collects together some teaching in the Sermon on the Plain in 6.12–49 or on the ‘Journey to Jerusalem’, or the Parables of the Lost in 15. Such insertion of topical material into a chronological structure is very common in βίοι, especially those of philosophers or teachers, like Moses or Apollonius of Tyana. *The gospels’ exterior framework of a chronological sequence with topical material inserted is thus a structure typical of Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

#### 4 Scale

The scale of the synoptic gospels is narrowly defined, focussing upon one individual. Jesus is nearly always centre-stage: other characters appear in order to relate with him, in discussion or controversy, or to receive healing from him, or for their needs to be met. On the rare occasions when Jesus is absent from the narrative in person, the characters are still discussing him and what they are going to do about him; see, for example, Herod in Mark 6.14–16 or the discussion about the arrest in Mark 14.1–2. This focus extends even to individual pericopae, as Bornkamm says: ‘The circle of light is always sharply defined. The description of those who appear in it is limited to the essential.’<sup>31</sup> This is true of the whole narrative; a wider scale comes in Luke’s second volume, Acts – although even here, the focus is still upon certain key individuals, especially Peter and Paul, rather than attempting a comprehensive history of the early church. However, the gospels themselves *all restrict their scale to the person of Jesus in a manner typical of βίος literature.*

#### 5 Literary units

The use of anecdotal stories, variously termed ἀποφθέγματα or παραδείγματα, from Aristotle onwards has already been noted.<sup>32</sup> Bultmann identified various forms in the gospels: *apophthegms* – subdivided into controversy or scholastic dialogues and bio-

<sup>31</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> See Momigliano, *Development*, pp. 72–3, see p. 173 above; also, R.F. Hock and A.N. O’Neil, *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric* (SBL, 1986); on chreiai and education, see Beavis, *Mark’s Audience*, pp. 25–31.

graphical apophthegms; *sayings* – teaching, prophetic, apocalyptic, legal, or ecclesiastical; *miracle stories*, *historical stories* and *legends*. Dibelius preferred the terms *paradigms*, *tales*, *legends*, *myths* and *exhortations*. Vincent Taylor pioneered the English terms *pronouncement-stories*, *miracle-stories* and *sayings*, stressing the link with ‘story’.<sup>33</sup> During the 1970s, the SBL Pronouncement Story Work Group under Robert Tannehill studied the use of these literary units in both the gospels and in other Greek, Jewish and Christian literature, culminating in the publication of various essays in *Semeia* 1981. The terms employed for such units include apophthegms, chreiai and pronouncement-stories: their interchangeability is demonstrated by Tannehill’s *Semeia* article ‘Varieties of Synoptic Pronouncement Stories’ appearing in only a slightly revised form as ‘Types and Functions of Apophthegms in the Synoptic Gospels’ in *ANRW*.<sup>34</sup> Tannehill defines the unit thus: ‘A pronouncement story is a brief narrative in which the climactic (and often final) element is a pronouncement which is presented as a particular person’s response to something said or observed.’<sup>35</sup> Such units, together with parables and teaching material, are the basic building blocks of the synoptic gospels’ central sections, followed by the Passion narrative, a complete unit with its own narrative structure and chronology.

We have seen how βίοι are also composed of stories, anecdotes, sayings and speeches. Lucian, in particular, makes great use of pronouncement-type stories in the *Demonax*: the central section is composed of short stories (50–100 words), which begin with Demonax meeting someone and lead up to a wise or witty pronouncement from the sage.<sup>36</sup> The SBL group examined *Demonax* and Philostratus’ *Apollonius*, as well Plutarch and Philo for comparable units: Robbins analysed 200 pronouncement stories in Plutarch’s *Alexander*, *Caesar*, *Demosthenes* and *Cicero* alone;

<sup>33</sup> Bultmann, *History*; Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*; Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, (London: Macmillan, 1933), see esp. pp. 29–30 and 63–87.

<sup>34</sup> R. Tannehill, ‘Varieties of Synoptic Pronouncement Stories’, *Semeia* 20 (1981), pp. 101–19, and ‘Types and Functions of Apophthegms in the Synoptic Gospels’, *ANRW* II.25.2 (1984), pp. 1792–829 – see especially the very similar conclusions with the terms changed, pp. 117 and 1826.

<sup>35</sup> R. Tannehill, ‘Varieties’, *Semeia* (1981), p. 1; for an analysis of Pronouncement Stories in Mark, comparing the lists of Bultmann, Taylor and Tannehill, see Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, pp. 379–84; also, pp. 172–207.

<sup>36</sup> For a comparison of *Dem.* 27 with Mark 2.15–17, see Mack, *Myth*, pp. 181–3; see also, Cancik, ‘Bios und Logos’ pp. 121–4.

more recently, Robbins has teamed up with Mack to compare chreiai with various synoptic units.<sup>37</sup> We do not need to enter here the complex analyses of the different types of such stories by Tannehill, Mack and Robbins, except to note that similar types are found in both the gospels and in βίοι. Overall therefore, we may conclude that *the combination of stories, sayings and speeches found in the synoptic gospels is very similar to the basic literary units used by βίοι.*

## 6 Use of sources

It was common in prefaces to βίοι to mention any sources used, e.g. Philostratus' and Philo's references to oral and written sources. Luke's Preface also mentions both written accounts (διήγησιν) which many (πολλοὶ) have attempted to compose, and also oral sources, including eyewitnesses (αὐτόπται) and the preachers of the oral kerygmatic tradition (ὑπηρέται τοῦ λόγου) (1.1–4). Much has been written about the sources of the gospels and their relationships, the so-called Synoptic Problem.<sup>38</sup> I assume Markan priority and that both Matthew and Luke used Mark, plus their own material and some shared tradition, which may be conveniently labelled 'Q' but without that necessarily implying that it was all one single document or source. However, whatever solution is used, the consequences for our study are the same: namely, that the evangelists had access to oral and written sources, including notes, collections and in some cases another gospel, from which they selected and edited their material.

This ability to select and edit a wide range of sources is similar to the use of sources by writers of βίοι. Redaction criticism has freed us from seeing the evangelists as mere slaves of the oral tradition; instead, they are creative theologians and literary artists who took their source material and turned it into the gospel *according to* their

<sup>37</sup> V.K. Robbins, 'Classifying Pronouncement Stories in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*', *Semeia* (1981), pp. 29–52; B.L. Mack and V.K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> See W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 38–80 for a statement of the consensus Two-/Four-Source view; W.R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1st edn 1964 or 2nd edn 1976) for an attempt to overturn this; C.M. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis: An Analysis and Appraisal*, SNTSMS 44 (CUP, 1983) for a defence; and M.D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (SAP, 1989) and M.S. Enslin, 'Luke and Matthew: Compilers or Authors?' in *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2358–88 for other attempts.

understanding: 'in its present form, Matt. owes much to the editorial activity of the author who shaped his source material into a unified Gospel'; 'the picture Luke wanted to paint'.<sup>39</sup> *Thus the freedom to select and edit sources to produce the desired picture of the subject is another feature shared by both the gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

## 7 Methods of characterization

A biographer must tell us about his subject's constitution – both physical and mental – and show how it made him the man he became – he must explain what made his subject 'tick'. But on all such matters St Mark and the other Evangelists are completely silent. It is a striking fact that they tell us nothing whatsoever about Our Lord's appearance, physique, and health, or, for that matter, about his personality . . . From the point of view of the biographer the sheer *amount* of information the Evangelists give us is quite inadequate.<sup>40</sup>

The absence of direct character analysis in the gospels is one of the traditional arguments against the gospels being biographies. However, we have seen that this requirement is a modern predilection; the ancient method was to display character through deeds and words. This is precisely what we find in the evangelists' characterization of Jesus. Luke describes this twofold method clearly when he says that his gospel deals with 'all that Jesus began to do and teach' – ποιεῖν τε καὶ διδάσκειν (Acts 1.1). So the evangelist's picture of Jesus is built up through stories and anecdotes, particularly about how he reacted to those who came to him, as well as by recounting his words. Thus we see his love through his care and ministry to those in pain or need (e.g. Matt. 9.36); his wisdom in outwitting those who try to trap him with clever questions (Mark 12.13–34). His power is revealed in his control of nature and the supernatural, disclosing his identity: 'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?' (Matt. 8.27), and it is revealed also by the demonic: 'I know who you are, the Holy One

<sup>39</sup> F.V. Filson, *St. Matthew*, 2nd edn (London: A. & C. Black, 1971), p. 10; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, p. 258; see also, Hilton and Marshall, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SCM, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Nineham, *St. Mark*, p. 35; see also, Bultmann, *History*, p. 372, and Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, p. 37; see p. 10 above.



of God' (Mark 1.24). Similarly, the evangelists portray the other characters through their reaction to Jesus: the disciples, constantly misunderstanding him; the crowd, enthusiastic in welcome, decisive in rejection; the provincial governor, interested in the prisoner, but giving in, 'wishing to satisfy the crowd' (Mark 15.15). Such indirect characterization by word and deed is not unique to the gospels, but common in ancient literature, including βίοι. Therefore *the gospels' so-called 'lack of character development' can no longer be used as an argument against their being βίοι.*

## 8 Summary

The external, structural pattern of the gospels is clear: they are works of prose narrative of medium length, with an apparently chronological structure into which topical material is inserted, written on a fairly narrow scale focussed on Jesus, composed from different literary units of stories and sayings selected from both oral and written sources in order to portray the central character of Jesus through his deeds and words and the reactions of others to him. Not all of these generic features are unique to βίοι literature; but *the overall combination of them reflects the same family resemblance as was seen in our study of Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

### D Internal features

#### 1 Setting

The geographical settings of the synoptic gospels include the countryside in and around Galilee, local towns, the wilderness, and locations in and around the city of Jerusalem, such as the High Priest's house, the Garden of Gethsemane and, of course, the Temple. We move to these settings, however, by following Jesus. The dramatic settings are similarly determined, with Jesus centre stage and the focus of the action; thus, most scenes involve Jesus plus other people who are there because of him. We have didactic settings, where he is teaching his disciples or the crowds; settings of conversation, dialogue or even controversy between Jesus and those who come to him; and active settings, where he is performing a miracle or mighty deed – but he is always the focus of the setting. *This personal focus of the work's settings on an indi-*

*vidual, rather than a place or topic, is also a feature of βίοι literature, and so here we have another generic link between the gospels and βίοι.*

#### 2 Topics

Shuler stresses *topoi* as one of his three indicators of genre, applying the lists of Quintilian, Hermogenes and Theon to Matthew.<sup>41</sup> Such lists are designed for school use in rhetorical and encomiastic exercises, rather than for writing, and they are later than most of our works. Therefore, caution is advisable in making use of them: instead, we shall apply the same analysis to the gospels as was used for βίοι.

- (a) *Ancestry:* Despite some knowledge of Jesus' family (6.3), Mark begins with John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. Matthew and Luke include genealogies tracing Jesus' descent back to Abraham (Matt. 1.2–17) or to Adam (Luke 3.23–38).<sup>42</sup> Equally, mention of Bethlehem in Matt. 2.5–16 and Luke 2.4–15 is similar to the frequent mention of the subject's home town at the start of βίοι, particularly if the town linked the subject with a famous hero of the past, such as David.
- (b) *Birth:* Mark has no mention of Jesus' birth. We noted that the birth was also omitted in the *Agesilaus*, *Atticus*, *Cato Minor* and *Demonax*, so it is not an essential feature for βίοι. Matthew and Luke do record it, with the various well-known stories of angels, magi and shepherds, Matt. 1.18–2.23 and Luke 1.5–2.40.<sup>43</sup>
- (c) *Boyhood and education:* Luke's story of the twelve-year-old Jesus debating with the teachers in the Temple leads up to his first pronouncement by Jesus, and typically it concerns devotion to his Father's business (2.41–52). Such use of a single childhood anecdote to prefigure the adult's life is common in βίοι, as we saw in the accounts of Evagoras, Agricola and Cato. Bultmann likens the story to Philo's account of Moses' outstripping his teachers (*Moses* 1.21) and to Apollonius'

<sup>41</sup> Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, pp. 53–6 and pp. 92–8.

<sup>42</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke*, pp. 488–505 for discussion and bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, SS, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977).

soaring above his teachers like a young eagle, (*Vit. Ap.* I.7).<sup>44</sup> Kennedy sees this anecdote as evidence of 'some awareness . . . of biography' in Luke's treatment.<sup>45</sup>

- (d) *Great deeds*: These usually form the bulk of the narrative of a βίος, and the synoptic gospels are no exception. All three include stories of his miracles and mighty acts which caused people to wonder at him. Like βίοι of philosophers and teachers, so here sections of the synoptic gospels are devoted to Jesus' teaching, sometimes brought together to form a larger sermon or discourse. The significance of deeds and words for the character of a religious leader is made explicit by Cleopas' comment that Jesus was 'a prophet mighty in deed and word', ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ, (Luke 24.19).
- (e) *Virtues*: The synoptic gospels do not have systematic analysis of Jesus' virtues in the manner of *Agesilaus* III-XI, *Atticus* 13-18 or Suetonius' *Caesars*; rather, as with our other βίοι, Jesus' virtues emerge through stories which display his compassion for the crowd who were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6.34), or his concern for the outcast by his touching a leper, 'moved with pity' (Mark 1.41), or his quick mind to avoid the questioner's trap (Mark 12.17). Such indirect display of the subject's virtues is common in βίοι.
- (f) *Death and consequences*: Kähler's description of the gospels as a Passion narrative with extended introduction, if wrong about genre, is correct about the crucial significance of the Passion. It is clear from the continuity of the narrative with details of time and place that 'the Passion narratives are the earliest sustained accounts of Jesus' memory, indicating that the part of Jesus' life most requiring interpretation was its last hours'.<sup>46</sup> The concentration on the subject's death has been shown to be common in βίοι; it was particularly important for Plutarch to explain Cato's death in detail, because of his apparent failure.<sup>47</sup> So too here, the declaration of Jesus' innocence by the centurion overseeing his death (Luke 23.47, compare Caesar's comment in *Cato Minor* 72) or the burial in

<sup>44</sup> Bultmann, *History*, pp. 300-1.

<sup>45</sup> Kennedy, *NT Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 32; for a full discussion, see Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 47-51.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *Writings of NT*, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> See p. 77 and 164-6 above; Pelling compares the posthumous 'rehabilitation' of a hero in tragedy, *Antony*, p. 323; see also, Aune, *Greco-Roman Literature*, pp. 122-3.

a rich man's tomb with costly spices might be an attempt to offset the ignominy of the death. As well as describing the tomb and final honours, the gospels have the additional stories of the Resurrection. Sanders compares this with the appearance of Apollonius of Tyana after his death (*Vit. Ap.* VIII.31).<sup>48</sup>

*The synoptic gospels display, therefore, a similar range of biographical topics to that already noted in βίοι.*

### 3 Style

The synoptic gospels, like all the New Testament, are written in a Greek rather different from both classical Attic and that of much contemporary literature. However, since Deissman's pioneering work early this century the study of increasing numbers of letters, papyri and manuscripts of the first century AD has shown the prevalence of a simple Greek 'common' to the eastern Mediterranean - and hence known as 'Koiné'. The New Testament books are written in various forms of Koiné, with some clear Semitic influence, while other alleged Semitisms now appear common in contemporary Greek.<sup>49</sup> Mark is often castigated for the poor quality of his Greek style. It is clumsy and with little connection between sections: eighty-eight sections begin paratactically merely with καί, which also links sentences or clauses together endlessly; each new story begins 'immediately', εὐθύς; and there are nineteen examples of no linking at all, asyndeton. He is very fond of the historic present, using it 151 times. Despite these and other technicalities, Mark's style retains an urgency and directness which has its appeal: 'These linguistic usages are not out of place in *koiné* Greek, and lend to the account a kind of simple, direct vividness which has been lost in the polishing and editing of the material carried out by Matthew and Luke.'<sup>50</sup> Maloney's examination of Markan syntax has confirmed Semitic influence, while showing that some features are common in Hellenistic writing; Reiser has compared Mark's language and style with that of the *Alexander Romance*, while Beavis has shown from a comparison with

<sup>48</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 320; see also, Petzke, *Die Traditionen*, pp. 183-7.

<sup>49</sup> See J.W. Voelz, 'The Language of the New Testament', pp. 893-977; M. Wilcox, 'Semitisms in the New Testament', pp. 978-1029; and S. Segert, 'Semitic Poetic Structures in the New Testament', pp. 1433-62, all in *ANRW* II.25.2 (1984).

<sup>50</sup> H.C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 50-1.

contemporary literature that a 'Graeco-Roman reader would have regarded Mark as a well-constructed book with some nice literary touches to lighten its rough prose style'.<sup>51</sup>

Matthew tends to improve Mark's Greek, shortening the stories and replacing the omnipresent *καί* with the more acceptable *δέ*. Moule describes him as someone with a sound grasp of Greek and a considerable vocabulary, but capable of Semitisms; Davies and Allison remind us he could have been bi- or trilingual – and a competent but unexciting style would fit in with this.<sup>52</sup> St Jerome described Luke as 'inter omnes evangelistas graeci sermonis eruditissimus' (*Ep. ad. Dam.* 20.4.4), and he is capable of a wide range of styles: there is the literary Greek of the Preface, followed by the Semitic or Septuagintal flavour of the infancy stories, or the style of Acts becoming less Semitic as the narrative moves away from Jerusalem into the Graeco-Roman world. Like Matthew, he improves Mark's style, but with a greater command of Greek constructions and a wide vocabulary, from both Septuagintal and contemporary settings. Even if Hobart's attempt to demonstrate links with medical vocabulary is less accepted today, much of Luke's style and vocabulary does feature in contemporary treatises and monographs.<sup>53</sup>

We have already seen how Plutarch avoided Attic literary archaizing, and noted the popular nature of Satyrus and Lucian. Despite some Semitic influence, the style of the synoptic gospels is within the range of contemporary Koiné, and probably similar to popular βίοι no longer extant. *Thus the style of the gospels should not be seen as a feature peculiar to themselves.*

#### 4 Atmosphere

The synoptic gospels have a rather serious atmosphere, befitting important religious works. The tone is serious: although there is humour in Jesus' teaching, it is clear that what is being communicated is important to the writer, and he believes it should be to the

<sup>51</sup> E.C. Maloney, *Semitic Interference on Markan Syntax*, SBLDS 51 (Scholars, 1980); Marius Reiser, 'Der Alexanderroman und das Markusevangelium', WUNT 33 (1984), pp. 131–63; Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, JSNTSS 33, pp. 42–4.

<sup>52</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd revised edn (London: A. & C. Black, 1981), pp. 276–80; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, p. 73; see pp. 72–96 for full discussion.

<sup>53</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke*, pp. 107–27 for discussion and bibliography; also A. Plummer, *Luke*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 4th edn 1901), pp. xli–lxvii is still worth reading.

reader also. The mood varies according to the action – joy at the birth or a healing, sadness at rejection, impending doom at the arrest or trial, excitement mixed with fear at the Resurrection, but it is usually connected directly with Jesus as the central character: what affects him affects the mood and therefore the reader. The attitude towards the subject is one of reverence and respect, without the desire to praise overtly in the manner of encomium. Likewise, the attitude towards the reader is inviting and expectant of a response, but without the direct apostrophe, hectoring or pleading with the audience in an encomiastic way – so we doubt the link which Shuler makes with encomium. Finally, the values depicted are those of a religious community, with a concern for ethical content and, in Matthew at least, for instructions about relationships within that community. *This somewhat serious and respectful atmosphere, tinged with praise and worship, is reminiscent of the atmosphere of some of our βίοι*, notably the *Agricola* and Philo's *Moses*, as opposed to the lightness of Lucian or Satyrus.

#### 5 Quality of characterization

The evangelists' selective redaction of their sources has allowed them to paint the portrait of Jesus as they understood him, indirectly through his deeds and words. As regards the quality of characterization in βίοι, we saw a tendency towards the typical and even the stereotypical, but noted that through the actual stories and anecdotes a much more 'real' feel for the character could be obtained. The same pertains to the characterization of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. First, of course, we are talking of *portraits* of Jesus, rather than pictures or photographs; there is an inevitable element of interpretation brought in by the evangelist through his redaction. In doing this, there is a tendency for the typical to emerge, as we found with Tacitus' portrait of Agricola as the good soldier-general, or with Lucian's depiction of Demonax as a typical street philosopher. The portraits drawn by the evangelists are well known: Mark's Jesus is rather enigmatic and secretive, rushing around doing things 'immediately', a miracle-worker, yet one who talks about suffering and who eventually dies terribly alone and forsaken. Matthew shows a Jewish Jesus in continuity with Israel, the 'new Moses' who delivers his teaching from the Mount and reinterprets the Law. Luke, on the other hand, stresses the 'man for others', with his concern for the outcasts and the lost, for

Gentiles, women and the poor, who dies with words of forgiveness for his executioners and acceptance of the criminal crucified with him. In developing these portraits, the element of the typical is clear, and contributes to the production and reinterpretation of both words and deeds.

However, having said all this, we cannot leave the discussion merely with the stereotype. That there is a 'real' character which comes through the portraits and the stories is clear from the millions of different people in different situations who, nonetheless, believe that they 'know' this man and try to run their lives as 'he' would wish. Again, this character is communicated by word and deed: by the pithy, paradoxical saying and the short, teasing story as much as by the forgiving acceptance of the sinner and the compassionate healing of the sick. *The tension between the real and the stereotype in the synoptic gospels is thus not dissimilar from characterization in other βίαι.*

#### 6 Social setting and occasion

The anonymous and traditional nature of the gospels gives us no clear idea of their social setting, geographical provenance or the occasion(s) which prompted their production. Everything has to be gleaned from hints within the texts themselves, which is why this section remains an internal feature. Unfortunately, the hints are so tenuous that there is great debate among gospel scholars over these matters. Traditionally, the social setting of the early Christians was seen as rather lowly; increasingly, however, this is being reconsidered. Kennedy has proposed 'a primarily urban, lower middle class', and Meeks suggests that the early Christian communities included a broad range of social strata, though probably not the extreme top or bottom levels.<sup>54</sup> From the text itself, Mary Beavis has tried to reconstruct a picture of the educational and cultural background of both Mark and his audience, making many links with Hellenistic society.<sup>55</sup>

Mark is traditionally supposed to have written his gospel in

<sup>54</sup> *The Relationships among the Gospels: An Inter-Disciplinary Dialogue*, ed. W.O. Walker, Jr. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978), p. 185; see also, Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Yale: University Press, 1983), and John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986); further discussion of this issue can be found in Chapter 10, pp. 251–4 below.

<sup>55</sup> Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, pp. 13–44.

Rome, acting as the 'interpreter' of Peter, according to the statement of Papias preserved by Eusebius in *HE* III.39.15; some still hold to this provenance, such as Best, while others have suggested places all over the Mediterranean: Kee prefers 'rural and small-town southern Syria'. Guelich concludes that the internal evidence for authorship, date and place is simply insufficient for any decisions to be made.<sup>56</sup> Matthew's gospel is notable for its Jewish flavour, but here too the date and place of composition and its setting in relationship to both contemporary Judaism and early Christianity is debated: the most common solution involves a setting in Antioch around the time of the 'Birkath ha-Minim' insertion into the Jewish liturgy and the separation of church and synagogue about AD 85, though some prefer somewhere east of the Jordan, such as Pella where the Jerusalem church fled in about AD 66 (Eusebius *HE* III.5.3).<sup>57</sup> Luke's account seems to imply a setting outside Palestine in a more Gentile environment; again, a link with Antioch has been suggested, but nowhere is really agreed, although a date of around 85 does seem likely.<sup>58</sup>

There is a similar diversity of suggestions about the occasion which led to the composition of the synoptic gospels. Mark may have been prompted by the death of Peter, or other eye-witnesses during Nero's persecutions, or by the Jewish revolt and/or the fall of Jerusalem, by the delay of the Parousia or by his group's conviction of its imminence, or by some internal need of his community.<sup>59</sup> Similar suggestions have been made for Matthew, plus others about the relation of his community to Judaism. Luke-Acts has been seen as part of the brief for the defending counsel at Paul's trial (hence why Acts finishes before Paul's death).<sup>60</sup> Other suggestions include the delay of the Parousia,

<sup>56</sup> Petr Pokorný, 'Das Markusevangelium: Literarische und theologische Einleitung mit Forschungsbericht', in *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 1969–2035, see especially pp. 2019–22; Best, *Mark*, pp. 21–36; Kee, *Community of the New Age*, pp. 77–105; Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, pp. xxv–xxxii and xl–xliii.

<sup>57</sup> A full list of suggested locations is discussed by Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, pp. 138–147; see also, G.N. Stanton, 'The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel', in *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 1889–1951, see esp. pp. 1941–3.

<sup>58</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Luke*, pp. 35–62; Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), pp. 6–15.

<sup>59</sup> Best discusses these suggestions in *Mark*, pp. 21–36; Morton Enslin goes for the fall of Jerusalem in his 'Luke and Matthew', *ANRW* II.25.3, p. 2363.

<sup>60</sup> A.J. Matill, Jr., 'The Purpose of Acts: Schneckenburger Reconsidered', in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and R.P. Martin, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), pp. 108–22; see also his 'The Jesus–Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts', *NovT* 17 (1975), pp. 15–46.

internal debate about Paul in early Christianity, external debate with the Romans about the legality and acceptability of this new religion and many others.<sup>61</sup> Orchard's recent suggestion is that Matthew was the gospel of the Jerusalem church AD 30–44, Luke was the product of the 50s crisis over Paul's Gentile churches and that Mark, the latest of the three, is based on lectures in Rome by Peter comparing Matthew and Luke!<sup>62</sup> The only sensible conclusion to draw from this diversity is that the texts themselves do not contain sufficient information for us to know the specific settings and occasions which prompted their production, except for a general desire to tell others about Jesus, who he was, what he did and what happened to him in the end. It seems likely that their setting is further down the social scale than our other examples, but perhaps not as far down as used to be thought and certainly not beyond the reach of βίολι, which had a variety of possible settings. At the very least, therefore, *there appears to be nothing about this generic feature preventing them being βίολι*.

### 7 Authorial intention and purpose

Here too, we find a range of proposals put forward by gospel scholars; we shall follow the same analysis as for βίολι:

- (a) *Encomiastic*: Shuler tries to claim the gospels as 'encomium biography' and therefore argues that the gospels seek to 'elicit praise' of Jesus from the reader.<sup>63</sup> While this is true to a certain extent, the kind of 'praise' sought within a religious community is rather different from that of an encomiast at a public funeral; furthermore, the attitude of the gospels to both subject and reader has little of the atmosphere of encomium.
- (b) *Exemplary*: The secondary purpose of encomium – to provide a model for the audience to follow – does have more possibilities for the gospel, and Shuler refers to the intention of the evangelists to elicit a response of faith, as well as praise. 1 Peter 2.21 specifically points to Christ as an example to

<sup>61</sup> See further, R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*; or, W.W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1975); Fitzmyer, *Luke*, pp. 8–11 and 57–9.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics: Why Three Synoptic Gospels?* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 229–79.

<sup>63</sup> Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, pp. 103–6, on Matthew's purpose; see also his 1975 Ph.D. dissertation, pp. 221–4 (Matthew), 255–9 (Mark) and 292–8 (Luke).

follow, and the most obvious gospel for this is Matthew, whose intention to provide a 'paradigm' for discipleship is noted by many redaction critics.<sup>64</sup>

- (c) *Informative*: Best is unsure about this intention, declaring that Mark 'was not written to provide historical information about Jesus', even though it does do so. Lindars, however, is clear: as the church moved out, away from the eyewitnesses, who were dying anyway, 'public demand to satisfy curiosity about Jesus . . . was bound to arise'; in fact, 'the motive of pious curiosity' also helps to account for items such as the infancy narratives. Moule believes that Luke was 'intended primarily to "tell the story" – and that for the outsider'.<sup>65</sup>
- (d) *Entertainment value*: Luke, at least, had some literary aims: the quality of his prose in the Preface, his carefully balanced parallels of Jesus, Peter and Paul stretching over the two volumes, the geographical progression to Jerusalem in the first volume and then away to Rome in the second, all show something of his ability. While this may be a secondary aim most of the time, occasionally he is prepared to give it fuller rein, as in the storm and shipwreck of Acts 27. If the gospels were designed to be read aloud, possibly in their entirety, their content and structure needed to be sufficiently interesting to hold the audience's attention.<sup>66</sup>
- (e) *To preserve memory*: If the deaths of many of the first generation and eyewitnesses played a part in stimulating the production of the gospels, then this motive could also be there. However, the belief that Jesus was not dead, but risen and alive among his people, would have made any attempt to 'preserve his memory' rather different from that of, say, Lucian or Xenophon.
- (f) *Didactic*: A common aim of βίολι of philosophers or religious teachers, this is a major purpose here also. Thus Moule sees the gospels as 'ancillary to the preaching', and Best sums up all Mark's purposes as 'pastoral', to teach and to build up his

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Bornkamm's study, 'The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew', see p. 14 above; also Aune, 'The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography', *Mosaic* 1987, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Best, *Mark*, pp. 51–2; Lindars, *The Study and Use of the Bible*, p. 235; C.F.D. Moule, 'The Intention of the Evangelists', in his *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> See Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, pp. 124–30.

readers in the faith.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Stanton declares that Matthew is 'primarily concerned to set out the story and significance of Jesus in order to encourage and exhort Christians in his own day', while Hill sees the purpose of the work as something 'from which to teach and to preach'. Luke overtly declares his purpose to help Theophilus to know the reliability (ἀσφάλεια) of what he has been taught (1.4), and Martin argues that 'this expression of intention . . . must be taken seriously'.<sup>68</sup>

- (g) *Apologetic and polemic*: Probably the most common purpose of βίοι in our examples was their use in debate and argument. The titles of Weeden's works on Mark demonstrate this polemical purpose – 'The Heresy that Necessitated Mark's Gospel' and *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* – as Mark struggled against a false view of Jesus as a miracle/wonder-worker.<sup>69</sup> Bilezikian also sees polemic in Mark, directed against the Twelve and traditional Jewish Christianity in the struggle of the 'Gentile-oriented church'; Moule sees this as the backdrop provoking the production of gospel material, while Hill applies this to Matthew's gospel which 'seeks to convince, to instruct and to refute'.<sup>70</sup> As we have just seen, Luke-Acts may have been used as apologetic for Paul at his trial or, more likely, in the later Jewish/Gentile Christian debate, or as apologetic for Christianity itself to a wider Roman audience.

As with other βίοι, it is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to restrict the synoptic gospels to just one purpose. Bilezikian talks of Mark's 'multi-pronged approach' which 'could well have served concurrently a number of purposes, some didactic, others apologetic, polemic, doctrinal, evangelistic, ecclesiological, apocalyptic, etc.', and the same goes for Matthew and Luke.<sup>71</sup> However, the

<sup>67</sup> Moule, *Birth of NT*, p. 10; Best, *Mark*, pp. 51–4, 93–9; see also, Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, pp. xl–xliii.

<sup>68</sup> Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, p. 78 and see also his article 'Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel' in *ANRW II.25.3*, esp. p. 1938; Hill, *NCBC Commentary*, p. 43; Martin, *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> T.J. Weeden, 'Heresy' in *ZNW* 59 (1968), pp. 145–58, reprinted in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. W. Telford (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 64–77; Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>70</sup> Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel*, p. 145; Moule, *Birth of NT*, pp. 68–106; Hill, *NCBC Commentary*, p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> *Liberated Gospel*, p. 141; see Stanton on Matthew's 'varied' purposes, 'Origin and Purpose', *ANRW II.25.3*, p. 1941 and Ward Gasque similarly on Luke-Acts, *A History of the Criticism of Acts*, p. 303.

range of possible intentions is similar in both extent and content to that proposed for βίοι. Furthermore, the clearest intentions seem to involve didactic and apologetic purposes, probably the most common aims of βίοι also. These aims do not determine the 'gospels' genre by themselves; other genres are used for polemic or apologetic, such as Paul's use of Epistles. However, within the overall context of this study, *this congruence of aims between the synoptic gospels and βίοι is another indication of a shared genre.*

## 8 Summary

The synoptic gospels share the βίος pattern of internal features: the geographical and dramatic settings are focussed on Jesus, and selection is made from the usual biographical topics. The style and social setting are probably more down-market than our other examples, but they have a similarly serious and respectful atmosphere. The quality of characterization is a mix of the real and stereotype, while the range of purposes is also similar, especially the didactic and apologetic. *Overall, therefore, the mixture of internal features is familiar from our study of βίοι.*

## Conclusion

It used to be common among New Testament scholars to talk of 'Mark's Unique Literary Contribution' in creating 'a new genre of literature for which, as a whole, there was no precedent'.<sup>72</sup> More recently, however, it has been increasingly suggested that the gospels do not look 'especially strange among all the different kinds of biographical compositions during the Hellenistic era'.<sup>73</sup> Our study has shown that they do share many common biographical features with Graeco-Roman βίοι. The next question, therefore, concerns how many shared features are necessary to make a genre. Davies and Allison accept that 'the gospels do share motifs and themes which also play important rôles in hellenistic biography', but go on to assert that 'common elements do not require a

<sup>72</sup> H.C. Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels*, 2nd edn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 139; see similar comments by E. Schweizer, *Mark* (London: SPCK, 1970), p. 23; W.R.F. Browning, *St. Luke*, 3rd edn (London: SCM, 1972), pp. 17–18; R. Guelich, 'The Gospel Genre', in *Das Evangelium*, p. 213.

<sup>73</sup> V.K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 4.



common genre'.<sup>74</sup> We have proposed that the genre of a text is best determined by a wide range of generic features contained within it and that for a work to belong to a genre it needs to display at least as many of these features as other examples do – the 'family resemblance'. We have built up a clear picture of the genre of Graeco-Roman βίοι and the pattern which emerges from a study of their generic features. Using the same sequence of generic features to analyse the synoptic gospels has yielded the following results:

- (i) The gospels lack any title which might indicate βίοι, but Luke begins with a formal Preface, while Mark and Matthew commence with the subject's name – both of which are common opening features in βίοι.
- (ii) Manual analysis has shown the same pattern of dominance of verb subjects as was found in Graeco-Roman βίοι: Jesus is the subject of a large number of the verbs, with a further portion occurring in his parables and teaching. All three synoptic gospels devote a large amount of their text to his Passion and death; however, such an uneven allocation of space to the subject's important period is common among βίοι.
- (iii) As regards external features, the synoptic gospels have a similar mode of representation, size, structure and scale to those found in βίοι; further, they use a similar range of literary units, selected from oral and written sources to provide characterization indirectly by word and deed, as is the case in ancient βίοι.
- (iv) Among internal features, the settings, topics, atmosphere, quality of characterization and range of purposes are roughly comparable; the style and social setting are probably further down the social scale than our βίοι, but it is likely that other βίοι were available at these levels which have not survived.

Thus, there is a high degree of correlation between the generic features of Graeco-Roman βίοι and those of the synoptic gospels; in fact, they exhibit more of the features than are shown by works at the edges of the genre, such as those of Isocrates, Xenophon and Philostratus. This is surely a sufficient number of shared features for the genre of the synoptic gospels to be clear: while they may well

<sup>74</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, p. 4, n. 9.

form their own subgenre because of their shared content, **the synoptic gospels belong within the overall genre of βίοι**. Finally, therefore, we need to ascertain whether this result also pertains to the Fourth Gospel, to which we now turn.

# What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

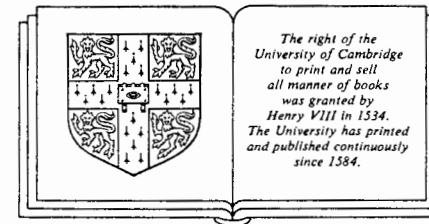
**RICHARD A. BURRIDGE**

*Lazenby Chaplain and  
Part-time Lecturer in Theology and Classics  
University of Exeter*

1997

BU. 95

12/10/92 50 EAC



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE  
NEW YORK PORT CHESTER  
MELBOURNE SYDNEY