

Why is the genre of the gospels an important issue for the interpreter?

Human beings are meaning-makers by nature. They seek to make sense of their world and communicate something of themselves to those around them. A key method for making meaning in the world is to categorise the things around us; this enables us to generalise and make meaningful statements about a group of phenomena. The basic tool for this categorising project is that of language; zoologists use it to categorise animals, chemists use it to categorise chemical substances, students of literature use it to categorise that literature. If category mistakes are made, then interpretative errors follow: just think of the man who discovered that the lion is a kind of cat and decided to get one as a household pet!

An important category for literature is that of genre, and much time and effort has been spent considering the genre to which the canonical gospels might belong. The task before us is not to contribute to the debate about the genre of the gospels as such (although some discussion is unavoidable), but to critically assess the extent to which genre is an important category for the interpreter. To achieve this purpose I will firstly examine the concept of "genre" as a literary category, then critique some attempts to assess the genre of the gospels (particularly Burridge's argument for that of Graeco-Roman βίος),¹ and finally I will argue that the hermeneutical pay-off of gospel "genre criticism" does not justify the amount of discussion produced.

Language is the central tool of human communication.² It is "a self-contained whole and a principle of classification".³ It is full of convention and idiom and

1 Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Eerdmans, 2004)

2 Of course, humans also communicate through art and music and "body-language", but language is the clearest attempt to transmit concrete meaning.

3 F. De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. W. Baskin (rev. ed; London: Fontana, 1978), p. 9.

constantly evolves and develops as new situations are encountered. Of course, for linguistic communication to be effective requires both speaker and listener to be conversant with such things. Knowledge of a language enables the interpreter to quickly analyse words and differentiate between varying functions. Verbal cues enable the identification of the kind of language being used which facilitates interpretation; a trivial example would be the English speaker who hears the words, "Knock, knock", and rather than being confused by the unexpected double imperative responds, "Who's there?" and expects a joke. Anyone in command of a language may also intuit the meaning of a new convention or idiom by reference to pre-understood categories.

Written communication is a special case. When something is written a hermeneutical gap is formed between the communicator (writer) and the one receiving the communication (reader). Meaning is no longer expressed in dialogue, with its opportunity for clarification and negotiation of terms; an author "encodes" meaning into the written form in the trust that the reader will be able to "decode" and thus understand appropriately. This distance between reader and writer had lead some literary theorists to dismiss the role of the writer in the making of meaning from texts, as Frye suggests:

It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception.⁴

The details of such literary theory are beyond the scope of this essay, but if genre is to be a useful category for the study of the gospels at all then we must assume that the evangelists has at least some kind of meaning to communicate and that we have at least some opportunity to receive that

4 Northrop Frye, cited in E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 1.

meaning from their texts.⁵

However, the problem of how to bridge the hermeneutical gap still remains; this is where genre becomes a useful category as "part of the structure operative in the distance between a reader and a text which needs to be mastered in order for understanding and interpretation to take place".⁶ This is not to be understood as a rigid series of rules for writing, but more as an implied contract between reader and writer laying out a set of expectations which the communication should follow.⁷ These expectations refer not to individual sentences or sections, but to the work as a whole; they anticipate a certain shape to the literature in its completeness.⁸

This "generic contract" is neither descriptive of literature nor prescriptive, as the "set of expectations" is not strict. Therefore one does not expect two pieces of poetic literature to share exactly the same properties, instead a more useful analogy is Wittgenstein's "family resemblance"; not all in the same family look identical, but there are certain similarities between them.⁹ Furthermore, one might use the idea of a family tree to suggest that works closer together in a family may share more resemblances than distant cousins. The helpfulness of genre is its ability to place literature into a context within the wider literary world. To use the family tree, when one is "meeting" a piece of literature, having previously "met" some of its close relations, one is more likely to make sense of it and its conventions. By contrast, when thrust into an unfamiliar literary world the conventions will seem alien and sense will be harder to find.

As a basic outline this should be enough to explain the way in which a genre might function in interpretation. However, three brief caveats ought to be raised. Firstly, it is important to emphasise the flexibility of genres. The

5 See chapter 1 of Hirsch, *Validity* for a defence of authorial intention.

6 Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, p. 31.

7 *Ibid*, p. 33.

8 Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 71-7.

9 ***Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 32***

understanding of genre as interpretative contract leads to a problem of boundaries. In order to avoid being trite and thus meaningless a genre must be sufficiently narrow to enable some relevant comparison to be made between generic contemporaries. However, a genre cannot become so narrow that its membership becomes too small to be useful. Genre thus comes with a certain system of levels; a broad genre like the "novel" may be broken down into sub-genres such as the "spy novel" or the "historical novel" or the "romantic novel". It follows that when categorising a work of literature there is inevitably a certain trade-off between size of genre and usefulness in comparison.

A second caveat following from the problem of boundaries comes from the problem of mixed-genre and borderline literature. Some work may fit comfortably in its generic pigeon-hole, but some may be more awkward. A useful parallel is that of zoological taxonomy. Before the days of the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm the job of the zoologist was essentially that of a cataloguer of the unchanging species created by God. However, the recognition of evolutionary development means that not all species fit comfortably into the categories assigned to them, they may be neither one thing nor another. The corollary here is that when discussing a work in relation to its genre one must also consider how well the work fits its generic category. A close fit will produce more relevant discussion than a difficult fit.

The final caveat is the important distinction between "genre" and "mode". In Burridge's terms, "whereas genre can be described in terms of a noun, mode is better seen adjectivally".¹⁰ That is to say that while literature may be given a genre, within the literature itself meaning can be expressed in different modes. Therefore one does not have to be reading a "tragedy" to have "tragic" elements, nor does it follow that non-poetic literature cannot have "poetic" moments. The corollary is that identification of a piece of literature as existing within a certain genre does not excuse the interpreter from identifying the various modes

¹⁰Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, p. 40.

used within that literature and then making appropriate moves to understand the mode within the genre.

How might the question of genre be applied to the gospels? The first thing to recognise is that they cannot possibly be entirely *sui generis* if they are to retain any meaning.¹¹ If the gospels are in a genre on their own then there is no comparable literature available so the generic contract does not materialise; to read the gospels would then be like knowing a language but without understanding any of its literary conventions. Thus as Hirsch notes, even if an author wishes to express an unusual meaning the interpreter's probable set of expectations must be taken into account.¹² Without a genre literature has no anchor with which might be held in the framework of human meaning-making. In addition to this, just as genres are often unconsciously inferred in interpretation they can equally be unconsciously applied in writing.¹³ To construct a *sui generis* piece of literature would be akin to constructing a new language.¹⁴ Only with a conscious effort could an attempt be made at *sui generis* writing, but then one could not expect anybody to understand it. The point here is that to argue that the gospels are completely *sui generis* is to argue for gospels that are incomprehensible.

Burridge makes much of this line of argument and uses it to dismiss people like Bultmann whom he accuses of arguing for just such an understanding of the gospels.¹⁵ Yet clearly Bultmann does *not* think the gospels to be incomprehensible. This seems to be a case of late 20th century literary criticism anachronistically applying its own categories to earlier scholars. When Bultmann describes the "gospel" as a literary category which had previously never appeared in the history of literature or calls them a "unique phenomenon" it

11 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

12 Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 80.

13 Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, p. 42.

14 Of course this has been done, Esperanto and Lojban are just two examples.

However, even these have traces of existing languages within them.

15 Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 9-12.

does not follow for him that they are incomprehensible.¹⁶ Similarly, when he says that, "it is hardly possible to speak of the Gospels as a literary genus",¹⁷ he is not thereby affirming that, in line with Burridge's categories, they are thus meaningless. This conflict seems to have arisen from a different set of assumptions about the nature of the gospels. Given that genre is not a prescriptive category it is clearly the case that literature can be composed in novel and heretofore unknown forms. Genres can be mixed and modified in order to suit a writer's purpose;¹⁸ as such, while nothing can be strictly *sui generis*, it is not the case that no literature can be in a unique form.¹⁹

The main focus of Burridge's book is to place the gospels within the category of Graeco-Roman βίος.²⁰ This attempt at genre criticism on the gospels will be given the most attention as it appears to be the closest thing to a consensus position at the current time.²¹ He identifies this genre as a flexible category "nestling between history, encomium and moral philosophy with overlaps and relationships in all directions" which occurs naturally in communities that exist around a charismatic leader/teacher.²² The genre can be identified by a combination of a number of common features which, while not always used or identically used, build up enough of a "family resemblance" to justify the grouping.²³ Such features might include the title or subject of the work;

16Rudolf Bultmann, "The Gospels (Form)" in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making* vol. I (London: Collins, 1969), pp. 87, 89.

17Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), p. 374.

18Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 45-7.

19David Aune notes examples of comparably "unique" Graeco-Roman literature which has also given rise to dispute over genre: "The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels" in R. T. France & David Wenham (eds.) *Gospel Perspectives* vol. II (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 10-11, 46.

20The term "biography" is avoided as a distinction is maintained between the classical "life" (βίος) and the modern "biography" which is not comparable to the gospels. (Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 60-1).

21See his chapter evaluating the book's reception printed in the second edition: "Reactions and Developments" in *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 252-307.

22Ibid., pp. 65, 76.

23Ibid., pp. 107-8.

"internal" features such as the metre, length, structure and scope; or "external" features such as the motifs employed, the social settings of the work or the authorial intention.²⁴

By examining various example of the Graeco-Roman βίος Burrige loosely identifies the generic features as follows. The "life" to be discussed is usually identified at the outset, both in the title and the opening words of the prose proper.²⁵ This person then forms the subject of the work as a whole as recognised the frequency of the subject being in the nominative case or offering direct speech.²⁶ Some βίοι tend to offer a chronological account of their subject, others treat the subject more thematically, but the subject is always in view.²⁷ They are almost always in prose form and of medium length, suitable for public oratory.²⁸ Their content is made up of a wide variety of literary forms, including (among others) anecdotes, sayings, discourses and stories.²⁹ Most demonstrate the use of oral or written sources and show a certain freedom in their use of them (moreso than the historiographer).³⁰ Characterisation is usually done through the subject's words and deed rather than through direct analysis; the understanding is that words and deeds imply the character.³¹

Topics examined may include ancestry, birth, education, great deeds, virtues and death;³² the purposes for writing vary greatly, including encomium, exemplarism, information giving, entertainment, preservation of memory, teaching, apologetics and polemic.³³ They often appear to be written for the educated classes although they do not limit themselves as such.³⁴ The survey of literature includes both pre- and post-

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-123.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30, 146-8.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1, 158-9.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 131-3, 135-6, 159-163, 165-6.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 134-5, 164-5.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 137-8, 167-8.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9, 168-70.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40, 170-2.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 141-2, 173-5.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 145-7, 180-3.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 145, 179-80.

Jesus Graeco-Roman βίῳ and thus builds up a picture of what kind of features one might consider notable if one were looking for a family resemblance in a first century piece of literature. From here Burridge finds exactly these kinds of features in the gospels and so concludes that they are best aligned with such βίῳ.³⁵

Let us assume for a minute that Burridge is right. Let us assume that if one was forced to pick an established genre in which to categorise the gospels then the Graeco-Roman βίῳs would be the best option.³⁶ Given the emphasis placed on genre as an important hermeneutical factor one would expect a considerable pay-off in terms of insightful interpretation. Sadly, this does not seem to be the case. Christopher Tuckett's review of the book closes by musing: "This book may produce a sea-change in the problem of the genre of the Gospels. Whether it produces a sea-change in contemporary interpretation of the Gospels remains to be seen".³⁷ The remainder of this essay will focus on the impact reading the gospels as βίῳ has on their interpretation and show that the results are minimal. If the closest thing to a gospel genre can be shown to have little hermeneutical value then the answer to the question at hand must be: it is not very important.³⁸

One possible hermeneutical import is warned against by Burridge himself. One might be tempted to assume that if the gospels are βίῳ then it follows that they are also historical. However, Graeco-Roman βίῳ are not to be read as "history" as such; yes, there is a historical basis, but it cannot then be inferred that all events documented are "historical". To return to the final caveat offered on ***page four***, genre

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 185-232.

36 For the record I think Burridge makes a good case for classifying the gospels as βίῳ, but that is neither here nor there at the present time.

37 Christopher Tuckett, review of "What are the Gospels?" in *Theology* no. 96 (1993), pp. 74-5.

38 There are no alternatives to Burridge's proposal with any real consensus; the current argument is between "gospels as βίῳ" and "gospels as essentially incomparable to contemporary literature". Thus if Burridge fails then the importance of genre for the gospels fails.

does not dictate mode. A βίος may well include significant elements of myth and legend and the job of the interpreter is to identify the relationship between myth and history within the object of study; genre will not help except in the broadest of terms.³⁹

It seems fair to allow Burrridge himself to demonstrate the way his thesis enables better interpretation. This is attempted in popular form in his "Four Gospels, One Jesus?".⁴⁰ His introductory discussion of genre leads him to concentrate on the focus of βίοι on their subject so describes them as "Christology in narrative form".⁴¹ With this key he then seeks to exegete the canonical gospels. Space restrictions do not permit me to discuss his exegesis of all four gospels, but hopefully a brief discussion of his treatment of Mark will demonstrate my concerns. In the 30 pages devoted to exegesis of Mark only four times is reference made to genre. Twice the reference is merely to note parallels between Mark's account and other βίοι,⁴² which leaves just two places in which he uses genre to inform exegetical questions. On one occasion he warns against using a narrow kind of βίος (the aretology) and prefers the broader definition he uses.⁴³ The only place genre really makes a difference is in relation to Mark's portrayal of the disciples; if, says Burrridge, Jesus is kept at the centre of the gospel then the questions we ask about the disciples are not "What were the disciples like?" but "What kind of master is Jesus to follow?".⁴⁴ The latter is certainly an important question to ask but he actually infers this question from the context of the abruptness of Mark's ending, only adding a generic note as an apparent afterthought. Thus, for all the promise of a clearly recognised genre, the actual results are something of a damp squib.

It is notable that Burrridge builds his strongest

39 Burrridge, *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 259-60. See also pp. 64-7.

40 Burrridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1994)

41 *Ibid.*, p. 8. See also *What are the Gospels?*, pp. 248-50.

42 Burrridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, pp. 58, 61.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

hermeneutical case upon the only really common factor between the gospels and contemporary βίαι: focus on the subject. However, this observation does not pass without some objection from a philosophy of history perspective. The Jewish (and, subsequently, Christian) view of history is highly directional, it is a continuous movement towards a goal, it is the story of God's relationship with creation; history, in itself, is meaningful.⁴⁵ For the Greeks, however, history was more cyclical in nature; it had no absolute value in itself, its interest lay in its ability to speak into the present in order to inform the future.⁴⁶ Thus, while Graeco-Roman βίαι might be characterised as focussed on their subject, the gospels cannot be said simply to follow. The gospels are inherently eschatological, they are infused with idea that Jesus is a turning-point in history; Matthew in particular demonstrates a great fondness for demonstrating the manner in which so much of Israel's history comes to fulfilment in this one man. The gospels arise from communities "already united in upon the belief that Jesus is the Christ" and is thus decisive in history.⁴⁷ Thus while the literary subject is Jesus, the interest in Jesus is more to do with what he represents in terms of God's action in the world.

Ultimately we do well to note that the gospels make no attempt to self-identify as an established literary form. The term "gospel" is an early designation and may indicate that Christian communities wanted to maintain a distance between Jesus and the subjects of βίαι.⁴⁸ That Burridge should have to cast such a broad generic net in order to catch the gospels should hint at something, as should the ability of commentators to find the living Jesus in the gospels without reference to contemporary literature. The nature of the

45 Chaturvedi Badrinath, *Finding Jesus in Dharma* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 166.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 167. See also Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949), Chapter XI.

47 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1949), pp. 163-4.

48 Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000), p. 49.

generic contract as implied always leaves it open; Mary Tolbert emphasises this:

Readers will actualize the role of the reader implied by a text according to their own historical situation and context. If the gospels are to continue as *living* texts, then modern readers must always be able to interpret them in the light of current theological reflection and discourse.⁴⁹

Why is the genre of the gospels an important issue for the interpreter? Firstly, there is the literary question of how genre functions in interpretation. While a contractual set of expectation is a useful analogy, it is easy to overplay the extent to which genre explicitly informs interpretation; for Hirsch to say that "all understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound" is misleading.⁵⁰ The answer to a large degree also depends on how closely the gospels can be aligned with an established genre, for any comparison is only useful between similar objects. A homely analogy from the world of orienteering may best illuminate the question. Let us say that interpretation is like orienteering; loosely speaking the genre of the literature to be interpreted might be equated to the type of the area to be covered according to the map. Just as the genre might suggest the kind of literary features one may expect to find, the map's type suggests geographical features. Not all of the literary features will appear as expected, nor will all the geographical features; some completely unexpected features might make an appearance. The point is that while these categories are useful for preparation they are of limited use when actually engaged with the task; nothing excuses the hiker from paying close attention to what the map actually says in order to navigate, nor can the interpreter do anything but pay close attention to what is written in order to understand.

The gospels are stories of a man who made a habit of turning expectations on their head. In geographical terms they offer a strange new landscape and whoever walks them with too confident an expectation of what should be found may easily miss the really important features. While genre may help in establishing the broadest outline of the gospels, it will rarely be of much use to the interpreter when the terrain becomes completely unfamiliar.

⁴⁹Mary Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 57.

⁵⁰Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 76.

Bibliography

- Aune, David E., "The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C. H. Talbert's *What is a Gospel?*" in R. T. France & David Wenham (eds.) *Gospel Perspectives* vol. II (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 9-60.
- Aune, David E., *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1987)
- Badrinath, Chaturvedi, *Finding Jesus in Dharma* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 166.
- Bultmann, Rudolf, "The Gospels (Form)" in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making* vol. I (London: Collins, 1969), pp. 86-92.
- Bultmann, Rudolf, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972)
- Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1994)
- Burridge, Richard A., *What are the Gospels?* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Eerdmans, 2004)
- Gundry, Robert H., "Recent Investigations into the Literary Genre 'Gospel'" in Longenecker and Tenney (eds.) *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 97-114.
- Hengel, Martin, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000)
- Hirsch, E. D., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967)
- Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949)
- Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Faith and History* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1949)
- Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin (rev. ed; London: Fontana, 1978)
- Talbert, Charles. H., *What is a Gospel?* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1977)
- Tolbert, Mary Ann, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989)
- Tuckett, Christopher, review of "What are the Gospels?" in *Theology* no. 96 (1993), pp. 74-5.