



Richard A.
Burridge
Foreword by
Graham Stanton

A Comparison with
Graeco-Roman Biography
Second Edition

What Are the Gospels?

Burridge, Richard A.

What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography

Second edition

Introduction by Graham Stanton

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Pp. xiv + 366. Paper.
\$34.00. ISBN 0802809715.

Mitchell G. Reddish
Stetson University
DeLand, Florida 32723

What Are the Gospels? was originally published in 1992 as a revision of Burridge's doctoral thesis under the supervision of P. Maurice Casey at the University of Nottingham. At the time he was working on this project, the prevailing view in New Testament studies was that the New Testament Gospels did not fit any contemporary literary genre. The author of the Gospel of Mark was thought to be the creator of a new literary genre. Challenges to this view were being raised, particularly the claims of Charles Talbert and others that the Gospels were a type of ancient Greco-Roman biography. In response to these claims, Burridge undertook in his thesis a study of Greco-Roman biographies and compared his findings to his analysis of the Gospels. Although at the outset of his study, as he admits, he believed that the Gospels did not belong to the genre of ancient biographies, the results of his research proved otherwise.

Burridge begins his study with a historical survey of scholarly assessment of the genre of the Gospels during the last century and a quarter. In the nineteenth century Ernst Renan and others presented the Gospels as ancient biographies. The rise of form criticism, with its stress on the oral nature of the Gospels' source material and its view of the minimal authorial role of the writers of the Gospels, led to a shift in scholarly consensus concerning the nature of the Gospels. Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann were seminal figures in the development of the view that the Gospels were unique in terms of

their literary genre. Redaction criticism, emphasizing the creative role of the Evangelists as real authors, contributed to a questioning of the *sui generis* view of the Gospels. Scholars such as Talbert and Philip Shuler argued that the Gospels do not belong to a unique genre but are best understood as a subgroup of Greco-Roman biographies. In assessing the work of Talbert, Shuler, and others, BurrIDGE lauds their contributions to the genre quest but faults them in two main areas: an inadequate treatment of literary theory of genre and lack of a thorough study of the development of Greco-Roman biography. Both of these deficiencies BurrIDGE seeks to address in the remainder of his study in order that the theory that the Gospels are a type of ancient biography might “be put on a sound scholarly footing or exposed as a false trail” (78).

In chapter 2, entitled “Genre Criticism and Literary Theory,” BurrIDGE gives a brief but helpful description of the history of the critical theory of genres and discusses the levels, features, and functions of genre. He notes that to declare that the Gospels are unique in terms of genre is flawed based on literary theory, because no genre can be totally unique. All have developed from previous genres. Furthermore, if a work could belong to a totally unique genre, it could not be properly understood because recognition of genre is part of the process of correctly understanding and interpreting communication. Chapter 3 examines the development of the genre of biography (or βίος, as BurrIDGE prefers to label it, in order to avoid identification with modern biographies) in the Greco-Roman world, showing that it was a flexible genre that developed and changed and that shared some similarities in form and content with neighboring genres such as historiography, rhetoric, encomium, moral philosophy, polemic, and the novel. Chapter 4 presents in more detail the work of Talbert and Shuler (along with Graham Stanton) to locate the Gospels within the genre of ancient biographies that was briefly discussed in chapter 1. After discussing the responses of various scholars throughout the 1980s to this move away from seeing the Gospels as being unique in regard to their genre, BurrIDGE concludes that, as helpful as the previous studies have been, greater attention to literary theory and classical biographies is still needed.

Whereas the first four chapters of *What Are the Gospels?* lay out the problem in genre studies of the Gospels, the remaining seven chapters offer BurrIDGE’s solution. He begins by describing the features of literary genres, classifying them into four groups: opening features, subject, external features, and internal features. The identification and examination of these features provide the methodology, then, for genre analysis. Using these groupings, BurrIDGE (in chs. 6 and 7) performs a generic analysis of ten Greco-Roman biographies, five of which predate the Gospels and five of which were written after the Gospels. Although variation exists, he concludes that these works contain sufficient common generic features to identify them as belonging to the genre of biography.

After establishing the features common to works that belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography, Burridge compares these features to those found in the Synoptic Gospels (c. 8) and in the Gospel of John (ch. 9). Allowing for the diversity and flexibility that exist in almost all genres, he demonstrates clearly that each of the New Testament Gospels should be classified as belonging to the genre of Greco-Roman biography. In chapter 10, which was the concluding chapter of the first edition of this work, Burridge restates his approach and his findings and suggests the implications of these findings for the study of the Gospels.

The second edition of his work includes one additional chapter, “Reactions and Developments,” in which Burridge presents the progress in Gospel genre studies since the publication of the first edition of his book. He presents both the positive and negative responses to his proposal, showing that the identification of the Gospel genre as a type of Greco-Roman biography has now become the consensus among New Testament scholars. In response to criticism that his suggested implications of this study were inadequate or too banal, he attempts to explain further why identifying the Gospels as biographies of Jesus is helpful and important. In addition, he answers scholars who noted his failure to compare the Gospels to ancient Jewish literature by noting the absence of ancient biographies of the rabbis. This latter criticism led Burridge to produce an article entitled “Gospel Genre, Christological Controversy and the Absence of Rabbinic Biography: Some Implications of the Biographical Hypothesis” for a collection of essays edited by David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett (*Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David Catchpole* [Leiden: Brill, 2000]). That article, much of which is summarized in his response in chapter 11, is included as an appendix in the second edition of the work.

As Burridge himself documents in chapter 11, the first edition of his book received much acclaim and played a significant role in furthering the shift of viewing the Gospels not as unique literary products but as forms of ancient Greco-Roman biographies. Although he has not won over all New Testament scholars, anyone who would argue that the Gospels are not ancient biographies must be able to counter the solid, convincing arguments spelled out by Burridge. His work is clearly written, well argued, and accessible, even for readers not conversant with the intricacies of literary theories.

Even though in the preface to the second edition Burridge claims to “have given chapters 1 to 10 a general overhaul, updating them where necessary” (x), the only changes in these chapters appear to be a few updated footnotes, and even those are rare. The bibliography has been expanded, containing approximately twice the number of entries as the first edition. As noted above, chapter 11 and one appendix are also new to the second edition. This book is certainly one that all New Testament scholars should read. The second

edition, however, does not present enough significant, additional material to justify its purchase if one already owns the first edition.