

Four Portraits of Jesus



In any communication, it is important to discern what kind of message is being sent. If the sender is transmitting Morse code, but the receiver can only understand semaphore there will be problems! Both must use the same language. The first question about any text, therefore, must always concentrate on what kind of text we are reading – the question of *genre*. One does not listen to a fairy story in the same way as to a news broadcast. Correct interpretation depends on a correct identification of the kind of communication or genre. We differentiate between the visual and the verbal, between the spoken word and the written word, between fiction and non-fiction, poetry or prose, tragedy or comedy, legend or history, and so on. We do not expect that everything in Australia is the same as in soaps like *Neighbours* or *Home and Away*!

Thus, genre is a key convention guiding both the composition and the interpretation of writings. Genre forms a kind of 'contract' or agreement, often unspoken or unwritten, or even unconscious, between an author and a reader, by which the author sets out to write according to a whole set of expectations and conventions and we agree to read or to interpret the

work using the same conventions, giving us an initial idea of what we might expect to find. Thus, TV situational-comedies or soap operas are written with certain typical conventions; the viewer recognizes what kind of programme it is and interprets it accordingly. If, however, the viewer is expecting a documentary and interprets it according to those conventions instead, confusion and mistakes are likely to arise! To avoid such mistakes, we learn to identify genre through a wide range of 'generic features'. These may be known in advance, a review in the paper, or some publisher's 'blurb' on the dust jacket, or advertisement; but generic features are also embedded in a work's formal and structural composition and content. We learn these features through practice, having read similar types of book or watched similar programmes in the past, and so we pick up the clues, the generic features, as we receive the communication or read the book - and correct our interpretation according as we go.

What are the gospels?

Therefore, before we can read the gospels we have to discover what kind of books they might be.

Traditionally, the gospels were viewed as biographies of Jesus. During the nineteenth century, biographies began to explain the character of a great person by considering his or her upbringing, formative years, schooling, psychological development and so on. The gospels began to look unlike such biographies. During the 1920's, scholars like Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann rejected any notion that the gospels were biographies: the gospels appear to have no interest in Jesus's human personality, appearance or character, nor do they tell us anything about the rest of his life, other than his brief public ministry and an extended concentration on his death. Instead, the gospels were seen as popular folk literature, collections of stories handed down orally over time. Far from being biographies of Jesus, the gospels were described as 'unique' forms of literature, *sui generis*, and this approach dominated gospel studies for much of the twentieth century. However, the rise of redaction criticism and the development of new literary approaches have viewed the writers of the gospels as both theologians and conscious literary artists. This has reopened the question of the genre of the gospels and their place within the context of first century literature. Many genres have been proposed, but increasingly the gospels have been again seen as biography.

The gospels and ancient biography

If we compare different works from different authors, it will illustrate the nature of the genre. Thus I have compared the gospels with a wide range of ancient 'lives' of famous people, deliberately chosen to include the origins of biography in 4th century BC orations of praise through to 3rd century AD forerunners of the novel. Greek and Roman biography formed a diverse and flexible genre, yet still with a recognizable family resemblance in both form and content.

From the formal or structural perspective, they are written in continuous prose narrative, between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length - the amount on a typical scroll of about 30-35 feet in length. Such medium length, single scroll prose works include ancient romance or early novel, historical monographs and biographies. Unlike modern biographies, Graeco-Roman lives do not cover the whole life in strict chronological sequence, complete with detailed psychological analysis of the subject's character. Often, they have only a bare chronological outline, beginning with the birth or arrival on the public scene and ending with the death; the intervening space includes selected stories, anecdotes, speeches and sayings, all displaying something of the subject. Against this background, the gospels' concentration on Jesus' public ministry from his baptism to death does not seem very different.

The content of Graeco-Roman biographies also has similarities with the gospels. They begin with a brief mention of the hero's ancestry, family or city, followed by his birth and an occasional anecdote about his upbringing; usually we move rapidly on to his public

debut later in life. Accounts of generals, politicians or statesmen are much more chronologically ordered when recounting their great deeds and virtues, while lives of philosophers, writers or thinkers tend to be more anecdotal, arranged around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings. While the author may claim to provide information about his subject, often his underlying aims may include apologetic (to defend the subject's memory against others' attacks), polemic (to attack his rivals) or didactic (to teach his followers about him). Similarly, the gospels concentrate on Jesus' teaching and great deeds to explain the faith of the early Christians. As for the climax, the evangelists devote between 15% and 20% of the gospels to the last week of Jesus' life, his death and the resurrection; similar amounts are given over to their subject's death in many classical biographies, since in this crisis the hero reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching or does his greatest deed. Therefore marked similarities of form and content can be demonstrated between the gospels and ancient biographies.

The subject of the gospels

Next, we come to the thorny question of what the gospels are about. Gospel scholars have proposed a wide variety of subjects such as the Kingdom of Heaven, faith, discipleship and so forth; they often seem curiously resistant to the idea that the gospels are about Jesus! However, detailed analysis of the verbal structure of the



gospels and ancient biographies demonstrates another generic connection. Every sentence in English and in ancient languages must have a subject - the person or object doing the action of the verb. Analysis of the subjects of the verbs can be extended from one sentence to a paragraph and then across a whole work. Most narratives, ancient or modern, have a wide variety of subjects, as different people and objects come to the fore at different times. It is a peculiar characteristic of biography that the attention stays focussed on one particular person. My analysis has demonstrated that it is quite common in ancient biography for around a quarter or a third of the verbs to be dominated by one person, the hero; furthermore, another characteristic is that another 15% to 30% of the verbs can occur in sayings, speeches or quotations from the person. So too in the gospels: Jesus is the subject of a quarter of the verbs in Mark's gospel, with a further fifth spoken by him in his teaching and parables. Matthew and Luke both make Jesus the subject of nearly a fifth of their verbs, while about 40% are spoken by him. About half of John's verbs either have Jesus as the subject or are on his lips. Thus we can see clearly that, just like other ancient biographies, Jesus' deeds and words are of vital importance for the four evangelists as they paint their different portraits of Jesus.

Narrative Christology and biographies of Jesus

Thus the gospels are a form of ancient biography and we must study them with the same biographical concentration upon their subject, to see the particular way each author portrays his understanding of Jesus. The gospels are like a piece of stained glass upon which the main picture has been assembled using all the different colours of literary skill - and it is the portrait of a person. Historical, literary and biographical methods combine to show us that the gospels are nothing less than Christology in narrative form - the story of Jesus. Thus Christology now becomes the hermeneutical key to interpret the gospels. Every verse and passage has to be read in the light of what each evangelist is trying to tell us about the person of Jesus.

To provide a Christological reading of each gospel narrative, I have tried using the old symbols of the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. By the middle of the second century AD, these symbols were being applied to the gospels as 'images of the disposition of the Son of God', the lion showing his royal power, the ox his sacrifice, the human his human coming and the eagle his Spirit (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.8-9). In that spirit, let us turn to the gospels as four Christological narratives.

The roar of Mark's lion



The opening of any ancient biography tried to say something about who the subject was and where he comes from. In Mark, however, Jesus just leaps on stage fully grown to be baptized (Mk. 1.9). Then, like a bounding lion, we have the rush of the opening chapter: the phrase 'and immediately' occurs ten times in chapter 1 and forty times overall. With 151 uses of the historic present breaking open time itself, Mark's style and narrative techniques convey vividness and pace around Jesus. The lion is a beast of conflict, and the first half of the gospel (1-8) charts Jesus' ministry in the face of rising opposition; conflict with his family, the authorities and the devil are all sandwiched together (3.19b-35). Every lion has his pride, but the disciples in Mark are scarcely Jesus' pride and joy! His depiction of their role, their failure and lack of understanding has often been conceived as an attack on certain early church leaders; however, if biography is the key to interpreting the gospels, then this motif must tell us something not about the disciples but about Jesus himself - that he is an enigmatic figure whom people find hard to understand and tough to follow.

The interlude of chapters 8-10 raises further questions of identity: what kind of creature is this? Jesus is the enigmatic wonder-worker who binds people to secrecy; the eschatological prophet who will die in Jerusalem; the Messiah who will suffer; both Son of God and Son of Man. Rather than seeing a conflict between such titles, or seeking to explain them as deriving from different historical traditions, our narrative approach forces us to hold them together

as the text does - in a complementary tension. This is borne out by the final section as the lion comes to his lair and finds it a robbers' den; Jerusalem and the Temple are as barren as the fig-tree and will suffer the same destruction (chaps 11-13). Finally, a lion's story should end with a kill - yet now it is the bounding lion who becomes passive, suffers and dies all alone in dark desolation: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk. 15.34). Even the ending is full of enigma, fear and awe (Mk. 16.1-8). The story ends as abruptly as it began; the lion jumped onto stage, roared and has bounded off again; the story of the followers is passed on to the reader - and whether we shall see Jesus in Galilee depends on our response.

Matthew's human face - the teacher of Israel

If Mark's Jesus is dark and riddling, Matthew brings a human face - the Teacher of Israel. The opening chapters ask 'Where is he who is born King of the Jews?' and show us his Jewish background, genealogy and Joseph's viewpoint - although there are Gentiles who worship him (2.2,11). When he begins his ministry, Jesus is another Moses, who teaches from mountains (5.1) and fulfils the law and the prophets. He gives his teaching for Israel in five great blocks like the Pentateuch, full of the themes of righteousness, morality and judgement, the Kingdom of Heaven and the community of his followers (5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25). Unfortunately, this brings him into conflict: while his mission is to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10.6), the development of opposition forces him to gather a new community of faith, the Church (18). All that is left for the leaders of Israel are the woes (23).

When we come to the Teacher's suffering, Matthew includes practically all of Mark's Passion, yet has a more awesome atmosphere. His additions about Judas and Pilate make clear the responsibility of the old Israel for the Teacher's death (Matt. 27.3-10, 17-25). The cry of abandonment is answered by an earthquake and resurrections; no wonder here everyone realizes this was truly the Son of God (27.51-54). Finally, the Resurrection continues this supernatural atmosphere with further divine earthquakes and the division of Israel; while some take bribes and tell lies, the new community gathers again on a mountain to receive the Teacher's commission to go to the Gentiles (28.1-20). In this gospel there has been no enigma nor hiddenness of God - and no departure of Jesus; he will be with them for all time as the human face of God.

Luke's burden-bearing ox

While the ox might seem to us a stupid and slow animal, in the ancient world it was the universal, powerful bearer of burdens, bringer of wealth (Prov. 14.4) and beast of sacrifice (1 Kings 8.63). So Luke begins with a Greek periodic Preface to make clear Jesus' universal significance (Lk. 1.1-4) and then depicts the ox in the Temple and the Stall: the story is told from Mary's viewpoint and we are among women

and the lowly poor (1.5-2.52). Unlike Mark's rushing lion, the ox plods a long, slow journey: Luke's Jesus is carefully set in historical perspective in the middle of time itself and he makes a geographical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9.51). Jesus' human development is recorded (2.40, 42) yet his identity as Saviour and Lord is clear (2.11). If Elijah found Elisha ploughing behind twelve yoke of oxen (1 Kings 19.19), Luke's interest in those who follow behind the ox goes beyond the twelve, to include women (8.1-2), the seventy(-two) (10.1-16) and the enthusiastic crowds (12.1; 23.5). The disciples are seen in a better light, while the Pharisees regularly invite Jesus to dinner (7.36; 11.37; 14.1); opposition comes from the powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem who control the sacrifices and know what to do with an ox which does not keep its place.

Throughout Luke's narrative, Jesus is concerned for those burdened with heavy loads: the poor, the lost and unacceptable, outcasts, women and Gentiles. He derives strength to bear the burdens as the man of prayer (11.1-4) and of the Holy Spirit (4.18), full of joy and praise. When he becomes the sacrificial, saving Victim, he is still bearing the burdens, concerned for the women of Jerusalem (24.27-31) and praying for forgiveness for the soldiers and the penitent thief (23.34, 43). When the ox rides again in the final chapter, he still dines with friends (24.30, 35, 43); history and geography start to run the other way, from Israel's past to the world's future, now moving away from Jerusalem (24.44-47). As the gospel began, so it ends 'in Jerusalem with great joy, in the Temple blessing God' (24.51-52) - and we know there is a sequel to come in the book of Acts.

John's high-flying eagle



In the Old Testament, eagles nest up high where they can see all things (Job 39.27-29) and they function as images of God's tender care (Exod. 19.4) and his destructive judgement (Deut. 28.49); all are true of John's portrait of Jesus. John begins not with Jesus' baptism, nor his birth, but with the high-flying perspective: Jesus came from before all time, in the beginning, and he is God (Jn. 1.1-18). John's story is constructed in two parts with narrative time moving fast at first but slowing down for the end, like fast-forwarding a video to watch the climax in slow motion; story time is full of flash-backs and flash-forwards, while levels of meaning shift and (mis)understandings occur as the narrative twists and turns, wheels and hovers. Jesus is constantly centre stage and he is characterized, as in most ancient writing, by indirect means as the author interweaves 'signs' and discourse, revealing the effect of meditation and theological reflection upon the person of Jesus: he is the Son, equal with the Father (10.30), yet totally dependent on him (5.19).

The eagle's talons are bared for conflict as opposition from "the Jews" develops through the first half (2-12). Yet 'living under the shadow of his wings' is a place of refuge (Ps. 17.8); as the tension comes to a climax, Jesus gathers his brood to his breast, washes

them and explains what will happen (13-17). When the hour of glory arrives, it is the Passion: throughout Jesus is serenely in control, directing events (19.11), organizing his mother and disciple (19.26-27), fulfilling scripture (19.28) until finally 'it is accomplished' (19.30). When he is 'risen with healing in his wings' he comes to comfort Mary (20.14), challenge Thomas (20.26) and restore Peter (21.15-19). From the heights of the prologue to the depths of the earth and back again, we have wheeled full circle; the divine returns to the divine, the eagle to the bosom of the Father.

Plurality and unity

Thus we must read the four gospels separately, respecting their different portraits of Jesus, rather than crashing them all together into a single amalgam as happens so often. Of course, they tell the same basic story of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection - but each author does it in his own particular way within the conventions of the genre of ancient biography. These different portraits spoke to different groups within the ancient world - and their diversity speaks to our multi-cultural world also. Their plurality is an encouragement to portray Jesus afresh today, yet their unity gives us the basic story of the love of God at work in his life, death and resurrection.

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For Further Reading

Richard A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1992; paperback 1995).

Richard A. Burrige, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (SPCK, 1994).

"Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

(Luke 1.1-4)

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

(John 20.31)

"I want you to know what sort of man Demonax was." (Lucian, *Life of Demonax*, 67; mid-late second century AD).