

## (1) What Is a Gospel?

The word Gospel (eu0aggelion) means “good news” and had been used of propaganda in the Roman imperial cult. In the NT a more precise Hebrew sense (*bissar* – eu0aggeli/zesqai) is invoked which implies “to announce news of salvation” (Is. 40:9; 52:7; 61:1; Ps 96:2, cf. Kummel 1974, 35-6). John gives a great summary of what a Gospel is meant to do towards the end of his own Gospel:

“these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31, NRSV)

The Gospels are meant, from this :

- To give information about Jesus
- To encourage belief and faith
- To give life, or bring transformation.

Our Gospels primarily perform these functions by providing information about Jesus: what he did, said, his death and resurrection. They are not purely accounts of details, neither are they exhaustive. Rather, each gospel is an account of Jesus’ life which includes comment and interpretation on what he means to the writer. This is reflected in their proper titles “The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to (kata)...whoever”.

But let us pause, and realise that we cannot just pick up a gospel and start to read it without thinking about how to read it- for we read different types of literature in different ways. Consider a newspaper – we read news stories in a different way from editorials, and editorials in a different way from advertisements. We need to know what kind of writing the Gospels are so that we can be faithful to the purposes outlined by John. And that means we need to know how a work like the gospel might have been written and read by the evangelists and their congregations. That, in turn, means looking at different kinds of writing in the ancient world.

There are various literary types to which the Gospels can be compared. Though some argue that the Gospels really form a new distinct literary genre on the basis of content (Kummel 1974, 37) this cannot be sustained: content and technique are not the basis for deciding a literary genre (Carter 2006, 8). Nor, from a literary point of view, is there such a thing as a truly unique document (*Ibid*).

It is worth looking at the analogies shared with other ancient writings, particularly BIOS, Aretalogy and Ancient novels/romances.

### **BIOS**

Bioj is the name given to Graeco-Roman writings which describe the lives of the famous. They focus on the history and development of a person, not their internal processes (a major difference from

modern biography- Carter 2006, 9) It also overlaps with other kinds of literature (encomia (praise), philosophy, politics, novel etc.. Carter, on John's Gospel, summarises Richard Burridge's work, and suggests that the Gospel approximates to a Bios:

- Title and opening prologue
- Focus on actions of central character with significant proportion given to end of life.
- Prose narrative comparable in terms of size, structure, scale, literary units, sources and characterization.
- Seven internal features also resonate: setting, topics, style, atmosphere, quality of characterization, social setting and author's purpose.

However, it is not, like other Bioi, exclusive. It shares features of other literary styles. These have sometimes been put forward as the dominant literary parallel, but the arguments are, ultimately, unconvincing.

Bultmann was critical of such a view, arguing that there was little interest in the personality of Jesus, but a focus on the Cross as an existential event. This prompted the reply from C.S. Lewis:

" I begin to fear that by *personality* Dr Bultmann means what I should call impersonality: what you'd get in a DNB article or an obituary, or a Victorian *Life and Letters of Yeshua bar-Yosef* in three volumes with photographs" (quote in Mascall 1984, 73)

## **Aretalogy**

An account, often in the first person, of the virtues, deeds and accomplishments of a deity, or heroic figure. There is an aretalogy of Isis (Jonsson). They often deal with miracles. However, they have substantial difficulties:

- There are very few examples to which the gospels may be compared.
- Birth stories are important in aretalogy, but only of significance in Luke.
- Shared miracles, yes, healing and bringing back to life, but not an exact parallel. Aretalogy has no equivalent of feeding miracle.
- Death of hero is significantly more important in gospels, and invested with specific meanings which are not shared
- Chronology is less important in the Gospel version

- Teaching is more important in the gospels than biographical material.
- Heroes may be saviours, but not by their death.

Note the conclusion of Weller:

“In all these ways, the Gospel of Mark cannot precisely be characterized as an aretalogy, as it differs subtly but pervasively in tone and specific detail. It seems extremely plausible, however, that Mark was written with the aretalogical genre in mind, making use of the characteristics of aretalogy while not precisely being an aretalogy in and of itself. Mark is, in this fashion, very similar to Philo’s *Life of Moses*, which also has many aretalogical aspects but deliberately uses these features to persuade its readers about the validity of Moses and the Jewish religion as respectively a spiritual teacher in the line of Socrates and a legitimate philosophical and theological teaching. Mark functions in much the same fashion; it sets up Jesus in the aretalogical mode and context, making him palatable to Greek thought and drawing Greeks towards conversion.” (2005)

### **Ancient Novel/Romance**

Argued from two different perspectives. In the older view, the Gospel is judged to be a “spiritual romance” or a “poem not history”- and more like works such as Pilgrim’s Progress. This kind of overarching comment provoked the wrath of Lewis:

“I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text [sc. The Fourth Gospel] there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage- though it may no doubt contain errors-pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who does not see this has simply not learned to read.”(quoted in Mascall 1984, 74)

More recent work has used the approach of Northrop Frye’s uses of archetypes in storytelling, that the Gospel can be identified as an example of romance, as it is a successful quest in three stages: journey and minor adventures, struggle, and exaltation of hero (conflict death and recognition),. There are also glimpses of tragedy, satire and comedy (the last in the sense of overcoming obstacles to reach a successful resolution).

Like structuralism, this approach begs a number of questions about how texts are read. Here they are read using ahistorical theory.

Comparison to ancient tragedy, satire and comedy quickly reveals a major difference in form: the Gospels are primarily prose not poetry. And the subject matter is markedly different from the domestic romantic subject matter of New Comedy (Plautus, Terence), and the satire of Old Comedy (Aristophanes), the second of which pointed out problems but did not engage with how to resolve them.

The length of the gospels and their strong ethical content is also far removed from ancient romance and novel forms, which were also more picaresque, and primarily for entertainment. There the focus of events is on the trail of misadventures which befall the hero/ine with little or no influence in their personalities or inner processes. Nor do the Gospels feature details beloved of such literature: ancient times, fictional characters, exotic customs or mythical locations (Allison 2010, 442 fn.19)

*In conclusion, it is suggested that the gospels approximate most closely, but not exclusively, to the BIOS form, admitting that they take it in a new direction in the combination of ethical and soteriological issues: a BIOS written for the purpose of giving the good news of salvation, not just to give us examples to shun or imitate. The Gospels may also echo other ancient forms so that they engage with the reading culture of the recipients.*

Does this actually help us with what was important question for theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely, its basis in history? After all, calling something “history” need be no guarantee of reliability. We after all live in an age where “historians” can deny the Holocaust, and re-write the lives of the famous to change them from hero to villain or vice-versa.

Theologians have, surprise, been little help, but only added to the confusion. A scholar like Rudolf Bultmann for example, was able, using critical methods to suggest that much of the Gospels was legend, or fabrication by the early church. His reading left little, if anything, beyond the Cross. Conservative scholars, on the other hand, will argue that every saying and every action is based on an accurate reporting of history. This convention lies behind those bibles which print the words of Jesus in red. Somewhere in between lies territory with which most of us are perhaps more comfortable: that the gospels are a mixture of history and its interpretation: Mark’s Jesus is different from Matthew’s is different from Luke’s is different from John’s. Pieces of traditions, sayings and actions, originate with Jesus, but the finished product puts those pieces in a picture constructed by the evangelist, a bit like a biopic, or an historical novel.

Nonetheless we may still want some comfort that these are reliable writings. We get this from two directions:

- The first, and here I summarise a huge amount of literature quickly, is that our gospels originate with eye witness tradition. In the case of Mark and the Synoptics, the primary source is Peter. In the case of John, I would suggest that the primary source is the person mentioned in that book as the Beloved Disciple, who seems to have been a well-placed Jerusalemite- after all, he blags Peter into the hearing against Jesus, and that Gospel knows little of Galilee but a lot about Jerusalem, and that action implies he was also present at the Supper and in Gethsemane. I realise that this means the evangelist is unlikely to be John, the son of Zebedee ( and, anyhow, Papias records the sons of Zebedee being killed early on), but his relative anonymity does not diminish his closeness to Jesus. You can follow the arguments for eyewitness sources in Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus & The Eyewitnesses*.
- The second is that the evangelists could not write anything they liked. Again, I summarise at high speed, evidence suggests that the Gospel material were at first passed on orally, and then committed to writing. Writing may have started earlier, but our Gospels seem to have

been first committed to paper about the late 60s AD, which makes sense if you think that until then Christians might have expected Jesus to return, but, by then, and the death of the first witnesses, realised that there might need to be a more fixed memory of the tradition. Being Jewish, for the most part, their ways of passing on material would have echoed their culture, and that meant that, whilst there was some flexibility in interpretation, changes were governed by strict customs about what were and were not acceptable alterations, and thus remain likely to be reliable: they could not, put simply, change that much. Here Gerhardsson's writing is important. His main work is a double collection called *Memory & Manuscript*, but the more populist *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* is cheaper, and will give all the information you need at this stage.

- Finally, Dale Allison's recent book, *Constructing Jesus* offers, as the result of many years of study, a criticism of much Higher Criticism, with its stress on literary sources. Rather than this, Allison proposes a development of Scriptures which is essentially reliable and focusses on how memory works and how memories are passed on. This leads him to posit that fundamental ideas about Jesus are reliable, that the evangelists are interpreting a known tradition, not inventing one, and that canonical status is gained because those texts, whether reordering received tradition or adding fresh material, are "congruent with beliefs and images of Jesus already valued" (p.160)

To finish, let me summarise my position, Gospels are like, but not identical to Graeco-Roman biography, and are historically reliable given their eye-witness foundations and methods of transmission: they simply could not have been made up nor received by the communities of the early church if they deviated excessively from understandings already held about Jesus, it seems to me.

But we also have to be careful how we read, so let me finish this section with a little brief word on miracles. Miracles have provided modern folk with all sorts of trouble. We have often got bogged down in their mechanics. Yet what matters for the Gospel writers, and what should matter for us is not how they happened, but what they signify. A story like the Feeding of the 5000 is important because it signifies Jesus bringing people to share at the Messianic Banquet: the heavenly feast anticipated for God's people, not as a way of cutting overheads in the bakery. Miracles of healing and exorcism are important because of the power they reveal and what they say about who Jesus is, not because of their mechanics. But they are also highly important at a deeper level: these alien stories were often rejected by modern scholars because they were perceived as being at odds with a particular set of assumptions about the world and how it works. Perhaps they have an additional purpose: not to be judged by the values which we gain from our context, but to ask us to look afresh at what such presuppositions are, and whether or not it is these that stand in need of refinement. In short not to judge the gospels by the values of our culture, but to be countercultural and offer challenges to those values. If that sounds hostile, remember, it is what has happened in decades of Christian mission activity where the values of the Gospel have become vehicles for social, political, religious and moral change.

Previous generations of biblical scholarship often cut out or demythologised what they were not comfortable with. Current scholarship looks more to an engagement with those passages, not

relegating them to the sidelines, but seeing that they are, no matter how alien, significant for our understanding of Jesus

Two short postscripts on items found in the gospels:

### **Miracles**

The reality of miracles was not disputed by all in the ancient world. We live in a post\_Hume and Bultmann world.

However, the significance of miracles lies not only in their reality, but in their significance. We do well to read miracles with an eye on what they symbolise, especially in terms of the hopes and promises of Scripture. And we need to be wary of over-investing in them, John is chary of faith based on signs: his gospel reiterates the value of belief without seeing, and without a dependence on signs.

### **Parables.**

The classic works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century often explored parables through the Greek kind of parable known to us from Aristotle and Aesop. Stand-alone self-contained allegories with moral teaching.

Hebrew *mashal* was more complex\_ it covers anything from riddles to complex allegories. They also serve to interpret the text in which they stand.

We usually think of parables in the Synoptic gospels. This wider use let us see parables in Paul (as in 1 Cor 15) and John. The Good Shepherd teaching of John 10 is parabolic commentary. The chapters which follow in John show Jesus living out the ideal of the Good Shepherd in both the raising of Lazarus and the Passion.

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