

7-1-1994

The Gospel Genre: What Are We After?

Tom Thatcher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thatcher, Tom (1994) "The Gospel Genre: What Are We After?," *Restoration Quarterly*. Vol. 36 : No. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol36/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.

Restoration Quarterly

- 129 The Gospel Genre: What Are
We After?
TOM THATCHER
- 139 Isaac Errett: Unity and
Expediency
DOUGLAS FOSTER
- 154 "When We All Get to
Heaven": The Ecumenical
Influence of the American
Gospel Song
DARRELL LARSON
- 173 Ministry and Scholarship
JOEL STEPHEN WILLIAMS
- 182 "The Poor in Spirit"
G. SCOTT GLEAVES
- 187 Book Reviews



The Gospel Genre: What Are We After?

TOM THATCHER
Cincinnati Bible Seminary

The parameters of genre criticism were regularized by David Hellholm's 1982 essay "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John." Approaching via semeiotics, Hellholm argued that the constituent elements of any sememe/concept are semes/characteristics "belonging to the three groups: content, form and function and that none of these groups are variable." Expanding the paradigm to literary texts, Hellholm suggested that "content" is the "propositional aspect," "form" the "utterance aspect" (oral or written), "function" the illocutional/perlocutional aspect (what the rhetoric attempts to do to the reader).¹ Hellholm's definition implies that any group of writings which are similar in the three areas of form, content, and function are inherently similar in nature and, therefore, may be studied comparatively.

The pervasive influence of this model is demonstrated by L. W. Hurtado's contribution on the "Gospel Genre" to IVP's highly acclaimed *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, released in 1992.² Hurtado adheres openly to the sui-generis position which enjoyed popularity in the wake of form-criticism, arguing that "the Evangelists, though influenced by their literary environment, seem to have produced works whose origin and characteristics are to be understood most directly in terms of the early Christian groups for which the Gospels were written."

Hurtado specifically refutes the influential theories of David Aune and Charles Talbert, but neglects to describe the categorization system from which either approached the question. By Hurtado's own definition, "a literary genre is a category or type of literature, such as biography or novel." More specifically, texts within the same genre exhibit similarities in terms of "formal features (e.g., structure, style, motifs, devices), author's intention,

¹David Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," SBLSP 1982, Kent Harold Richards, ed. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 160.

²L. W. Hurtado, "Gospel (Genre)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992); all citations are from pp. 276-279.

compositional process, setting of intended use, and contents." Notably, Hurtado has taken a position which antedates Hellholm's credo but implicitly adopts it in dialogue with other recent theorists. What Hurtado calls "formal features" would fall under Hellholm's "form" category; "contents" would fall under the "content" category; and intention, composition process, and setting all relate to the rhetorical purposes of the text, the "function." Thus, while "reverting" to the position that "the impetus, basic contents and general narrative complexion of the Gospels reflect primarily the Jesus-centered proclamation of early Christianity," Hurtado can also structure his argument in terms of recent genre theory.

The purpose of the present essay is threefold. First, it will briefly review the conclusion of David Aune and Charles Talbert, whose discussions of "Gospel genre" have followed Hellholm's paradigm that the canonical Gospels are samples of Greco-Roman "biography." Second, the more general question will be examined: What is a genre? Here it will be suggested that Hellholm's model is sufficiently comprehensive, but the appropriation of that model by biblical scholars such as Aune and Talbert has neglected those characteristics which make the canonical Gospels most distinct from Greco-Roman literary types. Section three will highlight these generically unique aspects.

What Is a Gospel?

David Aune and Charles Talbert have recently revitalized the interpretation of the Gospels as Greco-Roman "biography," by comparing the Gospels to other ancient texts via Hellholm's paradigm.³ Isolating Matthew, Mark, and John, Aune argues that "Gospel" is a subtype of biography, sharing the form and function of Greco-Roman counterparts but possessing a peculiarly Jewish content.⁴ He describes "biography" as prose narrative

³Talbert's analysis obviously began before 1982, and his major work on the subject *What Is a Gospel?* (1977) argued that the Gospels were indeed "biographies" by refuting Bultmann's sui-generis theory within Bultmann's own criteria, "form, function, attitude" (Charles Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] 15). "Attitude" here involves Bultmann's contention that the early Christians held a world-negating ideology which would prevent the use of a "secular" genre like "biography" (see 4-6, 16). Within that same volume, however, Talbert also uses the formula "contents, form, and function" (16). Although Talbert does not explicitly adopt the Hellholm model (cf. Aune), his theory is presented in a way conducive to examination within that system.

⁴David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 46. Elsewhere Aune explains that the content of the Gospels "is couched in distinctively Jewish and Christian

which focuses "on the character, achievements and lasting significance of a memorable and exemplary individual from birth to death."⁵ The individual's achievements are highlighted to indicate character, which is viewed as a static "possession" of the person; ancient biographies did not show "development" but rather displayed individuals who typified group values. Thus, the Gospels present Jesus "in the appropriate stereotypes associated with the titles Messiah and Prophet."⁶ As the focus tended toward the "ideal," plausibility was emphasized over historicity, with "the inclusion of an indeterminate amount of fictional elements."⁷

Talbert has created a paradigm in which Luke-Acts may also be studied as "biography." His 1977 definition followed a basic "form/content/function" platform:

[A]ncient biography is prose narration [form] about a person's life, presenting supposedly historical facts which are selected to reveal the character or essence of the individual [content], often with the purpose of affecting the behavior of the reader [function].⁸

Further study, however, led Talbert to the conclusion that many apparent similarities in G-R biographies were "accidental," so that a "biography" could incorporate a variety of subforms (narrative, dialogue, sayings) and subfunctions (didactic, defense of subject, authoritative succession).⁹ He thus stated in 1988: "[I]t is possible to say that we are dealing with the biographical tradition in antiquity whenever we meet the concern to depict the essence of a significant person."¹⁰ These conclusions work in support of his seminal thesis that Luke-Acts finds a parallel in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Like Luke, Diogenes describes the founders of the various philosophical schools (often ascribing divine qualities) before listing "official" successors. In the process, the "true" doctrinal tradition of

categories," but "both *form* and *function* are typically hellenistic" ("The Gospels: Biography or Theology?" *BibRev* 6 [February 1990] 16).

⁵David Aune, "Greco-Roman Biography," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*, David Aune, ed. SBLSPS No. 21 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 107.

⁶Aune, "G-R Biography," 122, and *Environment*, 54.

⁷Aune, "G-R Biography," 110 and *Environment*, 29-31. Aune also sees here an explanation for the loose causal sequences which occur in the Gospels as a result of Jesus' "random" actions ("Biography or Theology?" 20).

⁸Talbert, *What Is*, 17.

⁹Charles Talbert, "Once Again: Gospel Genre," *Semeia* 43, edited by Mary Gerhart and James Williams (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 57-59.

¹⁰Talbert, "Once Again," 59.

the school is emphasized.¹¹ Talbert contends that the Gospels and Laertius' *Lives* seek to correct doctrinal imbalance by placing debatable issues into a controlling [hi]story.¹² Combining, then, the efforts of Aune and Talbert within a "form/content/function" mind-set, it is possible to interpret the canonical Gospels as Greco-Roman biographies.

Both Aune and Talbert separate "gospel/bios" from the similar genre "history." This distinction leads Aune, in violation of traditional "synoptic" studies, to isolate Luke and devote two chapters of his influential *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* to Luke-Acts alone. Talbert carefully distinguishes these two genres in each of the three major areas of comparison. As to content, history records significant events in the public sphere; whereas biography is concerned with "character or the essence of the individual." In form, history is strictly cause/effect narration; biography may be selective and anecdotal.¹³ Talbert's remarks on "function" imply a vagueness within the genres themselves. Historians might present material for political training (Polybius), or they might simply seek to entertain patrons; biographers might provide patterns for imitation (Plutarch) or offer information "with no special moral objective" (Suetonius).¹⁴

In evaluating the work of these prominent scholars, it is relevant here to consider the statements of several ancient authors. The first is Plutarch, whose *Parallel Lives* is roughly contemporary with the Gospels. In the opening remarks of "Demosthenes," Plutarch rather comically excuses any tensions in his account by arguing that the best *ιστορίαι* are written by those who, unlike himself, live in large cities where resources and hearsay are readily available. Several lines later he ends this digression by formally introducing the subjects ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ τῶν παραλλήλων βίων.¹⁵ In the introduction to "Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus," Plutarch states that the exercise of writing the βίων of these great men has inspired him to emulate their virtues. He then says, in the same line, that he receives as a tutor each

¹¹Charles Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, SBLMS No. 20 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974) 126-128.

¹²Thus the ancient biographers display, like the evangelists, "an attitude of inclusion of that which is different and of its reinterpretation by means of its incorporation in a new whole with another determining principle" (*What Is*, 127; see also *Patterns*, 129-130, and "Once Again," 62-66).

¹³Talbert, *What Is*, 16-17; also "Once Again," 55-56.

¹⁴Talbert, *What Is*, 17. His comment on Suetonius should be evaluated in light of his later conclusion that biography may function to encourage or discourage emulation ("Once Again," 56).

¹⁵Plutarch, "Demosthenes and Cicero" 2-3, *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

subject of his ἱστορίας and reiterates that the study of history enables him to adopt the virtues of noble men from the past.¹⁶ Polybius had made a similar point in the introduction to his history of the expansion of Rome: "[T]he surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune is to recall the calamities of others." Apparently for this reason, Polybius feels that the study of history is valuable in preparation for political life.¹⁷ The Latin historian Livy makes the intended function of his work plain in the prologue to *Ab Urbe Condita*:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.¹⁸

These authors illustrate the close similarity between the "historical" and "biographical" genres in the period of the Gospels. In form, both genres may appear as a time-plotted narrative of historical events, which functions to provide the reader with models for personal reflection and emulation. Plutarch's testimony is notable, as he seems to use the terms βίος and ἱστορία interchangeably to describe the same literary activity.

Consistent with Aune and Talbert's analysis, however, it has often been observed that "biography" and "history" are generically distinct in respect to "content." The major citation is again from Plutarch, the opening to "Alexander and Caesar" in *Parallel Lives*. Acknowledging the great volume of data available on these men, Plutarch anticipates that many will object to the omission of certain memorable exploits. He justifies such omissions with the phrase οὐτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν ἀλλὰ βίους explaining that, unlike history, biography is not concerned with great public deeds so much as character, and the seemingly insignificant is often the truest measure of a person.¹⁹ A notable parallel from the Latin corpus appears in Cornelius Nepos' treatment of Pelopidas of Thebes in *Great Generals of Foreign Nations*. Nepos recognizes that his subject is not widely known, creating a biographical dilemma:

¹⁶Plutarch, "Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus," 1.

¹⁷Polybius, *Histories* I.1, trans. W. R. Paton, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 3.

¹⁸Titus Livius, *From the Founding of the City* I.1, trans. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939) 7.

¹⁹Plutarch, "Alexander and Caesar," 1. He also there states that biography can devote itself to τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεία.

I am in doubt how to give an account of his merits; for I fear that if I undertake to tell of his deeds, I shall seem to be writing a history rather than a biography; but if I merely touch upon the high points, I am afraid that to those unfamiliar with Grecian literature it will not be perfectly clear how great a man he was.²⁰

These passages, however, must be balanced with the activity which apparently motivated Lucian's *How to Write History*. This satire bemoans the development of the "narrative encomium" as a sort of historical subgenre which turned a loose historical framework into a platform from which to laud the public deeds of wealthy patrons. Apparently, the dime-store "historians" of Lucian's day were guilty of exploiting their genre to create false character profiles which exaggerated the virtues of relatively insignificant persons.²¹ In actual practice, the line between "great events" and "signs of the soul" was apparently often drawn by the author's purposes.

From the brief review of these data, several observations may be made concerning Aune and Talbert's thesis. First, the cursory survey above suggests that, in the ancient world, the technical distinction between biography and history was vague, perhaps based only on the particular author's opinion about what he/she was doing. Second, the imposition of the "form/content/function" triad onto the Gospels and other ancient texts has, at some points, strained the evidence. In "content," the Gospels simply do not resemble ancient "biographies" or "histories." Unlike the latter, they focus on a single person, and unlike the former they focus on that individual's major public exploits with very little concern for the nuances of personality. The "function" of the Gospels is also hard to explain within the Greco-Roman paradigm. Legitimate biographies presented examples of virtuous living with a view to exciting emulation. Even if Jesus does fit a "messianic stereotype," such is impossible to "emulate."²² It might be argued that the Gospels present "model" situations which show the correct response to Jesus—the correct response of disciples set in contrast to the disbelief of

²⁰Cornelius Nepos, *On the Great Generals of Foreign Nations* 16.1, trans. John C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947) 551.

²¹See, for example, Lucian, *How to Write History* 7-9, trans. K. Kilburn, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

²²This problem is obvious to Aune as well, who at one point specifies that the Gospels' presentation of Jesus as Messiah functions to legitimate the Christian worldview of the readers ("G-R Biography," 122). This is not, however, the type of **direct** modeling found in other G-R "biographies." Much more serious, however, is the difficulty of proposing a coherent "messianic stereotype" which would be widely recognized by the first century audience of the Gospels.

enemies. The disciples, however, whom later readers would identify as founders and leaders of their communities, are consistently mystified by Jesus' nature and mission, so much so that one betrays him, one denies him, and one adamantly refuses to accept eyewitness evidence of his resurrection.

Despite these difficulties, Aune and Talbert have presented the strongest case thus far. At this point, it will be suggested that a revised consideration of the nature of "genre" could assist further study by broadening the issues of consideration.

What Is a Genre?

Aristotle's *Poetics* holds a preeminent position as the starting point in genre studies. Aristotle described narrative as "imitation" of humans and human action, developing three mimetic categories—medium of representation, objects represented, and manner of representation.²³ Aristotle divided "medium" into subforms such as poetry, dance, mime. In this century, Northrop Frye followed a similar approach, contending that "the basis of generic distinctions appears to be the radical of presentation." Frye identified four such "radicals"—oral ("epos"), literature ("fiction"), drama, and "lyric," the last a sort of "accidental" overhearing. Subcategories of these larger groups he called "forms," identifying tales, novels, oratorical prose, and narrative poetry as "forms."²⁴ Although the biblical texts overlap the oral and literary radicals, they may be placed within Frye's "fiction" category, because this is the only form in which they are now accessible for examination. Such a broad definition of "genre," however, is generally not convenient for use by biblical scholars, who deal exclusively with compositions within one medium. Thus it may be said that the biblical texts utilize the medium of literature, but belong to several distinct genres (not subgenres). At the same time, literary features which arise as limitations in the technology of writing should not be included among aspects of a literary genre.

Determining which elements must be parallel among compositions within a medium is the key issue in genre study. Unfortunately, a great deal of liberty has been exercised here, so that "genres" often vary from scenario to scenario, depending on the immediate needs of the researcher. Rene Welleck and Austin Warren suggest "form" as a good starting point in

²³Aristotle, *Poetics* I.2-4, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932).

²⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 246-250.

generic classification: "[G]enre should be conceived . . . as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience)."²⁵ The "outer form/inner form" paradigm is preferable to the "form/content/function" approach at two points.

First, "content" plays very little role in generic determination. This removes a considerable measure of subjectivity, because definitions of "content types" are inherently tied to culture. Aune's analysis of the Gospels notes that they are distinct from other "biographies" mainly in the area of content.²⁶ This is not to deny Hellholm's definition of "concept," but rather to assert that, in the case of literary types, "content" is primarily a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, category.

Second, Welleck and Warren's model allows "attitude, tone, purpose . . . subject and audience" to enter discussion of "genre." Several aspects of these, particularly "purpose" and "audience," fall under Hellholm's "function," as rhetoric is presumably tailored to create a certain response in a certain audience. "Attitude" and "tone," however, allow the entrance of Robert C. Post's 1981 article "A Theory of Genre: Romance, Realism, and Moral Reality." Post argues that texts can be classified on the basis of the author's moral perceptions, which affect the evaluation and presentation of specific characters and incidents. When several texts seem to exhibit a common moral perspective they may be grouped on the basis of the narrator's ideology.²⁷ Though incomplete in scope, Post's thesis is for biblical studies, as the Evangelists were heavily controlled by their moral and theological perceptions in selecting and narrating events. Aune anticipates such a consideration when he states that the Gospels are "unique" because they

were read by early Christians within the context of a belief that Jesus was the Messiah of Jewish expectation and further that he was the pre-existent Son of God. . . . No Greco-Roman biography depicts a life even remotely comparable to that of Jesus.²⁸

Hence, the Evangelists' ideological perception of their subject material finds few parallels in the G-R corpus. Even within Hellholm's paradigm, it must be acknowledged that author/audience perceptions of reality will

²⁵Rene Welleck and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 231. Welleck and Warren, like Frye, distinguish between "archetypes" (modes of expression) and "genres" (229).

²⁶See Aune, "G-R Biographies," 122.

²⁷Robert C. Post, "A Theory of Genre: Romance, Realism, and Moral Reality," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981) 369-370.

²⁸Aune, "G-R Biography," 122.

heavily impact both the content (selection) and function (interpretation) of a genre.²⁹

Without denigrating Hellholm's formula, it is possible to define a "genre" as *a certain group of writings sharing a certain set of conventions recognizable in a certain social matrix*. "Writings" acknowledges that the biblical texts, at least in their present form, are within the literary medium and can therefore be profitably studied by comparison with other ancient documents. "Conventions" covers all stylistic conventions evident within the document. "Social matrix" acknowledges two realities: first, that the intended function of a text is relevant to its (implied) audience; second, that the worldview and perceptions of the author and the audience will exercise significant influence on the final composition.

Gospel Peculiarities

The compositional history of the Gospels is unusual. The close connection between kerygma and "gospel," between "gospel" and the Gospels, is glossed over in studies which attempt to directly compare the canonical Gospels with Greco-Roman compositions. The Gospels were shaped by a perceived need to put an oral Jesus into print. This need may have found, in the Greco-Roman literary milieu, types which offered assistance in realizing this goal, but these types never shared the same motivation, nor did they share the same compositional process.

Second, the authors of the Gospels possessed an unusual worldview. Its distinctiveness begins in the Jewish heritage of the subjects, authors, and, in some cases, audiences of these texts. Jewish historiography is becoming a field of inquiry all its own, with a number of recent books and articles noting the differences between Jewish and Greco-Roman historical perspectives in the first century. N. T. Wright, for instance, notes that within the Jewish worldview "it mattered vitally that certain events should happen within public history, precisely because the great majority of Jews believed . . . that their god was the creator of the world who continued to act within his creation."³⁰ In another vein, Tessa Rajak observes that the prescriptive role of Torah within the Jewish community created a holy fascination with texts which

²⁹The terms "selection," referring to the process of choosing materials to include in a composition, and "interpretation," determining the nature and significance of those materials within the composition, are borrowed from N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 82-83.

³⁰Wright, *People*, 68.

described the past;³¹ in the Jewish mind, the "emulation" function in historical writing was not a matter of choice. Close connections, literary and philosophical, between the Gospels and the Jewish Scriptures have been noted.³² The Evangelists share the Jewish belief that God (singular) can and does interact catastrophically in human affairs; beyond this, they believe themselves to be citizens of an eschatological age ushered in by a person from recent history. When this person becomes the subject of a literary treatise, it should not be surprising if such literature finds no exact parallels in the Greco-Roman world.

This essay concludes where David Aune's discussion of the Gospel genre began. Four years after the release of *What Is a Gospel?* Aune offered a comprehensive (54 pages) and personal critique of Talbert's work which stated that

at this point in the history of New Testament research, it does not appear that a satisfying solution to the problem of the genre of the gospels can be proposed which could overturn the critical consensus that the gospels are unique.³³

It seems clear, however, that the Gospels can be profitably analyzed by comparison at those points in which they are similar to other extant pieces. In the future, such comparison should recognize that issues of composition, social context, and ideology will be more useful than a sterile "form/content/function" analysis. It should also be recognized that the closest parallels to the Gospel genre are most likely to be found within the same Jewish matrix which gave rise to the church itself.

³¹Tessa Rajak, "The Sense of History in Jewish Intertestamental Writing," in *Crises and Perspectives* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) 128-130.

³²See Frank Kermode, "Introduction to the New Testament," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 378-383, who argues that the Evangelists found in the Scriptures both authentication of, and literary parameters for, their work; also Gregory Sterling, "Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography," in SBLSP 1989, David Lull, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), who says of Luke, "the LXX also provided our author with his concept of history" (338); William Kurz, "Luke-Acts and Historiography in the Greek Bible," in SBLSP 1980, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980) 283-300.

³³David Aune, "The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C. H. Talbert's *What Is a Gospel?*," in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2, edited by R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981) 44.