

BOOK REVIEW

Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2004). xiv + 366 pp. Pbk. US\$34.00.

Burridge's book, *What Are the Gospels?*, has enjoyed a second edition because of the large scholarly impact of his first edition. Revised and updated, Burridge has added a large chapter outlining the implications of his first book and the scholarly response to it.

In his first chapter, Burridge gives a general history of the genre classification of the Gospels. Beginning with Ernest Renan he traces the development of Gospel studies through Bultmann to redaction and form critical supporters. This is a good introduction for the non-specialized reader who might not be familiar with the scholarly history of this subject. Chapter 2 grapples with the questions: what is genre? and how does that affect our reading of the Gospels? Burridge produces a well thought out argument for the importance and difficulty of defining genre. He outlines the history of genre scholarship and defines how he perceives genre and how it will be used in the remainder of his work. Burridge's discussion of genre is a real strength in his book; however, there are a number of times when he does not define his French and German terminology. After this discussion, Burridge applies his study of genre to Greek and Roman biographies. He compares the different uses and classifications of biography and history and attempts to create an arena in which he can compare the Gospels. By outlining the development and divergences of these genres, Burridge effectively distinguishes biography from other similar genres. This process is continued in Chapter 4 where the recent development of Gospel-biography theory is considered. This chapter updates the reader to the current state of Gospel/biography

comparison by explaining the three most recent movements, their respective authors and their strengths and weaknesses.

In Chapter 5, Burridge outlines and defines specific characteristics of biography, which he later compares with Greek and Roman biographies and the Gospels. Burridge believes that there are four categories in which the genre of biography has specific characteristics: (1) Opening features: title and prologue/preface; (2) Subject: analysis of verb subject and allocation of space; (3) External features: Mode, *metre*, size, structure, scale, literary units, use of sources and methods of characterization; and (4) Internal features: setting, topics/motifs, style, tone, quality of characterization, social setting and authorial intent. These features provide the structure for the next four chapters, which Burridge uses to evaluate the biographical nature of the Gospels.

Both Chapters 6 and 7 open with an excellent brief introduction to ten different ancient writers, five predating and five postdating the Gospels, and one of their biographical works. Following this, Burridge applies the above features to create a range of biographical characteristics with which to compare to the Gospels. Although Burridge develops a number of biographical characteristics in these chapters, there are a couple issues in his application of his outlined features. First, Burridge places a large emphasis on the percentage of verbs in a work in which the protagonist is the focus. However, he only applies this statistical method to five out of his ten examples. Secondly, there is a disproportional focus on Plutarch, Xenophon and Tacitus. It is understandable that these sources would be focused upon because of their prominence; however, they should not be so at the neglect of the other sources. This neglect diminishes the strength of his argument by not allowing viable sources to contribute to the defining characteristics of the biography genre.

Chapters eight and nine focus on the synoptics and John respectively. Burridge adequately applies the features to the Gospels and generally places the Gospels' characteristics well within the developed range of biographical characteristics in chapters six and seven. However, when comparing the social setting of the Gospels, Burridge defines them as produced for a lower social strata than his other examples, yet, he still states that even though the Gospels are outside of his boundaries '*there appears to be nothing about this generic feature preventing them from being βιοι*' (207, his italics).

Burridge expounds his conclusions and implications in Chapter 10. He affirms that the Gospels are biographical in nature and must be placed

within their Hellenistic literary culture in order to be understood. He claims that both the reader and the author would have known the *βίος* genre and would have interpreted the Gospels according to that expectation. BurrIDGE concludes this chapter by stating that viewing the Gospels as biography has hermeneutical implications and helps focus the reader on the centrality of Jesus within the Gospels.

In his final chapter, BurrIDGE presents the reactions and developments of his first book to the field of Gospel studies. He outlines a few of the issues which a number of scholars have raised and gives a brief response to their concerns. In addition to this, BurrIDGE also delineates a number of further areas of research, some of which he has pursued himself.

Additional features of the book include two appendices. The first is a series of pie charts which are the statistical findings of his verb subject analysis. The second appendix is a response paper to questions regarding the Gospels' relationship to Jewish/ Rabbinical literature. In addition to this there is an excellent bibliography; however, there is no glossary for specific literary terms which he uses throughout his book.

Although BurrIDGE expressed that the genre of biography in the ancient world was flexible, the impression developed by his examples was that it was almost too flexible. An example would be the internal feature of atmosphere. The range which is developed is from serious, seen in Tacitus' *Agricola*, to comical, as presented by Satyrus. This range is too broad to be of any use, and almost every work in the ancient times would have fit into this range. Regardless of this and the other critiques noted above, *What Are the Gospels?* has a number of important insights into the relationship of the Gospels to the literary works of the ancient world. BurrIDGE presents a well thought out and logical argument and his work should be considered when evaluating the genre of the Gospels.

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