

TRUTH, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND THE GOSPELS' GENRE:
CLASSICAL AND PATRISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

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Theological Motives and the Partially Non-factual Ancient Genre Thesis

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that oceans of ink have been spilled on the question of the four canonical Gospels' genre. Scholars seem convinced that if they can only nail down an official genre identification for the Gospels, enlightenment will follow on a variety of issues.¹ In recent years, the identification of the Gospels as Greco-Roman biography has become increasingly popular, but, predictably, scholars have taken this conclusion in different directions. Some seem to regard it as indicating that the Gospels are robustly factual,² while others take the identification to mean that the authors had a surprising amount of allowable flexibility in altering literal fact.³

1. For a detailed survey of the literature, see Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2004), pp. 3-100.

2. Douglas J. Moo, 'Once Again, "Matthew and Midrash": A Rejoinder to Robert H. Gundry', *JETS* 26 (1983), pp. 57-70 (68); Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 4-9.

3. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, pp. 77, 184, 259-60; Craig S. Keener and Edward T. Wright (eds.), *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biographies?* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2016); Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), pp. 34, 593; Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There*

In the hands of the latter, the Greco-Roman biography thesis is a type of what I will dub a partially non-factual ancient genre thesis ('ancient genre thesis' or 'ancient genre theory' for short). I am giving this term a stipulated meaning, explained below, not referring thereby to other theories about the genre of books of the New Testament. Robert Gundry has used 'midrash' as a partially non-factual ancient genre theory,⁴ and Craig A. Evans refers to *chreia* as a micro-genre with much the same effect.⁵ A partially non-factual ancient genre thesis says that a given work (the Gospels, in this case) is in a genre such that the author knowingly includes some material that, though reported with apparent realism and without any indication that it is not factual, is not literally true. However, so goes the theory, this does not mean that the author was attempting to hoax or deceive his audience, since the audience expected works in that genre to contain some non-factual material, even if they could not discern which apparent facts were untrue. Hence, the audience generally moderated its expectations of the amount of fact that it could get out of the work. An example of a partially non-factual genre in our own time would be a movie based on true events, in which the director and screenwriters are allowed to take artistic liberties.

I have argued at length elsewhere that the partially non-factual ancient genre thesis for the Gospels is false.⁶ The Gospels are not in such a genre but rather are historical reportage (whether we call that 'memoir' or by some other specific name), which is to say that they were intended to be taken as historical in a fairly straightforward sense. When there is no other indication in the text (such as the use of a parable or a specific figure of speech), I have argued that the authors both believed that they were relating

Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 634-37. I will not be dealing with the midrash theory in detail in this article. For a rebuttal, with which I largely concur, see Douglas J. Moo, 'Matthew and Midrash: An Evaluation of Robert H. Gundry's Approach', *JETS* 26 (1983), pp. 31-39; Moo, 'Once Again'.

5. Craig A. Evans, 'Opening Statement', in Bart D. Ehrman, Craig A. Evans and Robert B. Stewart (eds.), *Can We Trust the Bible on the Historical Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), pp. 49-53.

6. Lydia McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels from Literary Devices* (Tampa, FL: DeWard Publishing, 2019), pp. 67-226.

facts and intended their audiences to take them to be doing so. This article will in part repeat those arguments and will further support that view.

To be clear, to say that the Gospels are in a literally factual genre (such as memoir or history) is not to say that they are infallible, inerrant or inspired. Many secular, non-inspired works of history are intended to be fully factual in this sense. Nonetheless, it may be asked what theological motive, if any, is driving the argument here. To be sure, there is much at stake (on both the *conservative* and *liberal* sides) in such a debate. Christianity is based on the doctrine of the incarnation, which allegedly took place in the realm of literal history. As Leon Morris has said, ‘God has ... preferred to reveal himself in the historical, and it is there that we must find him.’⁷ If an event recorded with apparent realism in the Gospels did not literally take place, does it have genuine theological significance? For example, if Jesus’ legs *were* broken on the cross, then no prophecy was fulfilled (Jn 19.36). A theological conservative therefore has a motive to reject the partially non-factual ancient genre thesis.

On the other hand, it is not hard to think of academic motives that could move scholars to assert that the evangelists sometimes altered the facts. By moving away from literal historicity, the advocates of the partially non-factual ancient genre thesis are able to accept the alleged results of critical Gospels scholarship. In this way, they avoid appearing naïve and uncritical, which may seem desirable.

Simultaneously, by speaking of a higher truth that is more truly true than mere facts,⁸ and by alluding to the allegedly accepted standards of ancient times, they can affirm that the Gospels are in some sense *true*. An ancient genre theory may even go hand in hand with a redefinition of ‘inerrancy’ that allows the theorist to apply that term to himself, which is important in evangelical circles (I will have a bit more to say about inerrancy later).⁹

7. Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1969), p. 90.

8. Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 169-70; Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 115.

9. See evangelical scholar Michael R. Licona’s statement that he is an inerrantist according to the definition in the Lausanne Covenant, which he calls ‘sufficiently vague as to allow a high view of Scripture while avoiding the need to over-define “inerrancy”.’ See online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210415003848/>the

The ancient genre thesis also claims to avoid attributing deception to the authors, just as we do not say that the screenwriter of a partially fictionalized movie is deceiving his audience. These considerations may help to explain why the full ancient genre thesis has been especially popular among evangelicals, while mainstream scholars are less concerned to argue for the audience side of the equation. That is to say, a non-evangelical New Testament scholar will be quite ready to say that an evangelist altered the facts but is less likely to insist that the Gospels' original audience would not have been misled.

Such speculations about scholarly motive are, ultimately, not very helpful. They certainly do not tell us who has the better of the arguments. At most, the recognition that much is at stake on both sides can motivate those interested in the issues to investigate fully rather than hastily adopting one position or the other.

The widespread presence of theological motives in Gospels scholarship could prompt us to turn to non-theological disciplines to adjudicate the matter. Some classicists have argued that Greco-Roman historians and biographers sometimes narrated things with apparent realism even though they knew that they were false. A classicist making such an argument about (say) Plutarch does not have a *theological* motive for doing so. Thus it might seem that such claims should tip the scale in favor of the ancient genre thesis for the Gospels as well.

But this conclusion, too, would be hasty. Theological biases are not the only biases there are, and scholars in any discipline can be mistaken. Moreover, it is not hard to think of sources of bias in the non-religious humanities. For example, it might seem more interesting to say that Plutarch is subtly *up to something* in moving an event for thematic reasons than to say that Plutarch failed to check his sources carefully or that he misunderstood them.¹⁰ Or it might seem to insult an ancient author's intelligence to say that he was credulous. But of course such prosaic explanations might be true.

I will survey and respond to a set of classical arguments that ancient historical authors were permitted to alter facts invisibly in their narratives. I will then turn to the self-presentation and reception of the Gospels and ar-

bestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/michael-licona-interview/.

10. Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History: Eighteen Studies* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002), p. 257.

gue that they were intended and taken to be historical in nature. If this is the way that the evidence points, this conclusion should be adopted, not because it serves a *conservative* agenda, but because it is an accurate understanding of the Gospels as documents.

Classical Arguments for License in Ancient History

It should be noted at the outset that classicists are not always concerned to insist that the audiences of ancient history and biography knew that they should not expect full historicity. Indeed, classicists at times refer to such factual license as ‘lying.’¹¹ But classicists do sometimes argue that ancient historians and biographers themselves considered it acceptable to alter the facts.

The arguments that license was allowed in ancient history and/or biography fall roughly into categories that I will call ‘theoretical’ and ‘inductive’. Theoretical arguments involve statements from ancient authors that are taken to confer license to bend or invent facts. Inductive arguments proceed by noting specific discrepancies or improbabilities and concluding that they represent the exercise of historical license. I will argue that, except in the case of set-piece speeches, which some authors (but not others) did feel free to invent, the arguments for a generic license to alter facts in serious works of Greco-Roman history or biography are weak.

I am well aware that the Greek and Roman authors I am discussing range over hundreds of years. I am certainly not arguing for a monolithic *ancient view* shared by *ancient men* from Thucydides to Theon. In fact, I am arguing that there was a diversity of views and practices concerning historical care not only because of time and space but also because of individual motives and interests. I am attempting to rebut sweeping generalizations such as that of Richard Burridge (both a classicist and a New Testament scholar) that ‘the negative connotation of “fabrication” is modern.’¹² In this context, Burridge explicitly uses this claim, illustrated by the fact that Tacitus invented speeches, to counteract the *prima facie* meaning of the fourth evangelist’s insistence that he is telling the truth. To respond to a generalization like Burridge’s requires a fairly broad chronological sweep, especially in

11. Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 93.

12. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus*, pp. 169-70.

view of the fact that a historian like Thucydides was an influence on the Greco-Roman curriculum long after his own time. My argument is that even when we take into consideration authors ranging over hundreds of years, we do not find the kind of 'ancient' looseness that a comment like Burridge's implies.

Theoretical Arguments for Ancient License

One set of arguments, especially popular among New Testament scholars, holds that ancient textbooks, such as Theon's *Progymnasmata*, conferred upon ancient historians an explicit license to invent at least some of their apparently factual material. The *Progymnasmata* of Theon contain recommended exercises in grammar, writing and rhetoric for schoolboys, probably around ages twelve to thirteen.¹³ They involve writing on set topics, rewriting passages from authors studied in the curriculum (including historians), memorizing and paraphrasing speeches, writing speeches in character, retelling fables and many more such assignments. A detailed examination of the exercises in the *Progymnasmata* and the arguments made from them lies beyond the scope of this paper, but I have published such an examination elsewhere.¹⁴ Briefly, the fundamental problem with the use that scholars such as Burton Mack, Vernon Robbins and Michael Licona wish to make of these exercises lies in a failure to see that they are not addressing the issue of historiography at all. This scholarly use of the textbooks represents (ironically) a failure to understand their genre.

Classicist Craig Gibson makes an attempt to discover what the *Progymnasmata* have to teach about historiography. He muses at the outset:

Imagine a world in which prospective historians were required by their teachers first to write historical fiction ... to invent stories in the science-fiction genre of 'alternate history' ... and to perform impersonations of historical characters for school plays and public festivals. What would be the effect of such a course of training on historians?¹⁵

13. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, 'Paul's Bible, his Education, and his Access to the Scriptures', *JGRChJ* 5 (2008), pp. 9-41 (16).

14. McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 138-75, 489-94.

15. Craig A. Gibson, 'Learning Greek History in the Ancient Classroom: The Evidence of the Treatises on Progymnasmata', *CP* 99 (2004), pp. 103-29 (103).

What indeed? There is in fact no reason to think that such a writing and rhetoric curriculum would result in loose historiographical standards. Modern language arts curricula include much creative writing, but in no way is this understood to confer a license for a student who is a historian in later life to get creative with the facts. A student who went in for drama at his university and played historical characters would not ipso facto be less likely to be scrupulously factual as an historian.

Despite this introductory paragraph, Gibson is ultimately forced to admit that the indications on this issue are at most highly indirect. He does not allege any clear statements in the exercises that support historical license. On the contrary, he points out that exercises that emphasize credibility and the ability to confirm and refute might give students some tools for criticizing their historical sources and that the frequent references to historical characters and events give us some idea of which historical facts were taken as common knowledge.¹⁶

Burton Mack and Vernon Robbins, in contrast, take it for granted, virtually without argument, that these exercises conferred factual license. The nearest they come to an argument on the point is to emphasize the term 'elaboration' as if this referred to factual elaboration. They then apply the term in that way to the Gospels without further ado. But on the contrary, the very example that Mack uses as a paradigm (elaboration in Hermogenes) is what we would call an essay on a set topic and does not instruct students that they may elaborate factually when writing historically.¹⁷

The exercise books simply do not address the question of historical license. One can read the entirety of the *Progymnasmata*, searching in vain for a discussion of how factually rigorous or loose one should be in writing history or biography. Attempts to force particular passages to address that question are *eisegetical*. Michael Licona has referred to Theon's brief statements about the usefulness of his exercises as if they address this issue,¹⁸ but that is not the case. For example, Theon says, 'training in exercises is

16. Gibson, 'Learning Greek History', p. 122.

17. Burton L. Mack, 'Elaboration of the Chreia in the Hellenistic School', in Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins (eds.), *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1989), pp. 31-67 (51-52, 57-58); Vernon K. Robbins, 'Foxes, Birds, Burials and Furrows', in Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins (eds.), *Patterns of Persuasion*, pp. 69-84 (81-83).

18. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 10.

absolutely useful not only to those who are going to practice rhetoric but also if one wishes to undertake the function of poets or historians or any other writers.¹⁹ He also says, 'historical writing is nothing other than a combination of narrations.'²⁰ Of course, history was one of several professions whose practitioners would profit from an education in good Greek writing, organization, rhetoric and argumentation, and this education could at times take the form of creative writing exercises (though ancient exercises seem dull as compared with modern assignments). But such general remarks leave unaddressed the question of how much factual accuracy historians or biographers were expected to provide. This is not to say that Theon has high standards of historical rigor. It is to say that the issue of desirable historical rigor or flexibility is not on his agenda.

The attempt to use these exercises to argue that ancient authors (including the evangelists) were licensed to alter facts has resulted in serious error in interpreting the exercises themselves. A particularly egregious example is the statement by Licona,²¹ followed by Craig Keener,²² that there was an ancient compositional device of numerical inflection that licensed authors to add people to historical events who were not present, thus 'inflecting' the number not only of the verbs but of the participants. This remarkable claim is supported by reference to a mechanical exercise in Theon in which Greek schoolboys are told to take a proverbial saying and inflect it into different numbers, including the Greek dual and plural.

If the chreia is that Isocrates the orator said that those with natural ability are the children of the gods, we inflect it as one person speaking of one other by saying, 'Isocrates the orator said that the student with natural ability was a child of gods'; and as two of two, that 'The twin orators Isocrates said the twin students with natural ability are children of gods'; and as plural of plural, that 'The orators Isocrates said the students with natural ability are children of gods'. From these

19. George A. Kennedy (ed.), *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (WGRW, 10; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 1-72 (13).

20. Kennedy (ed.), *Progymnasmata*, p. 4.

21. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, pp. 11, 71.

22. Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), pp. 317-18.

examples it is evident how we shall inflect the other forms; for (the original statements) are changed into the five grammatical cases.²³

Of course, this exercise does not license students who grow up to be historians to assert that there were twin (or more) orators named Isocrates. This is a purely grammatical exercise which has nothing whatsoever to do with historical license.

Similarly, Licona argues for historical license from a passage in Theon in which he suggests that the student practice various moods of verbs (such as question, command, etc.) to rewrite a historical passage from Thucydides in multiple ways.²⁴ Theon makes the artificial nature of the exercise clear when he says that the student may even be encouraged to *negate* the passage, changing the statements that things happened into statements that they did not happen.²⁵ The exercise of negation, included casually among the others, is decisive evidence that the exercise is not giving historiographical advice. It is merely using a passage from Thucydides as raw material for grammatical manipulation and writing practice.

Ancient comments about speech invention provide somewhat more fertile ground for speculations about loose ancient historical standards. Lucian, who is insistent on the importance of literal historical truth (see quotations below), does make allowance for the invention of set-piece speeches, so long as they are credible for the character and situation.²⁶ Diodorus of Sicily complains about invented speeches in history that are *too* showy and asks that those be kept for purely rhetorical situations,²⁷ but the complaint itself illustrates that speech invention was fairly common in historical works.

But even this point has a limited application. Thucydides makes an explicit distinction between speeches and ‘the actions of the war,’ making it clear that he did not allow license in reporting the latter (see quotation below).²⁸ Not only is Thucydides scrupulous about flagging the fact that he has sometimes partially invented speeches (trying to base them on what he

23. Kennedy (ed.), *Progymnasmata*, pp. 19-20.

24. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, pp. 12-13.

25. Kennedy (ed.), *Progymnasmata*, pp. 35-38.

26. Lucian, *How to Write History* 58.

27. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 20.1.2-3.

28. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.

thinks would have been said), he is also explicit that he did not do that with incidents.

While Tacitus no doubt invented set-piece speeches (e.g. for the chieftain Calgacus),²⁹ modern historians expect his chronology of events to be literally accurate and were therefore surprised when an inscription appeared to contradict his implicit chronology of the trial of Piso. Classicist Ronald Mellor, who at first concluded that Tacitus had moved the date of Piso's trial (via implication), later apparently decided that Tacitus was right after all.³⁰ So it would be hasty to extrapolate from allowance for inventing speeches to general historical looseness, even in historians who did make up speeches.

More than that, Polybius is emphatic that historians should not invent speeches:

A historian should not try to astonish his readers by sensationalism, nor, like the tragic poets, seek after men's probable utterances ... but simply record what really happened and was said, however commonplace. For the object of history is the very opposite of that of tragedy. The tragic writer seeks by the most plausible language to thrill and charm the audience temporarily; the historian by real facts and real speeches seeks to instruct and convince serious students for all time.³¹

The peculiar function of history is to discover, in the first place, the words actually spoken, whatever they were, and next to ascertain the reason why what was done or spoken led to failure or success ... For it is the mental transference of similar circumstances to our own times that gives us the means of forming presentiments of what is about to happen, and enables us at certain times to take precautions and at others by reproducing former conditions to face with more confidence the difficulties that menace us. But a writer who passes over in silence the speeches made and the causes of events and in their place intro-

29. Tacitus, *Agricola* 30-32.

30. Contrast Mellor, *Roman Historians*, p. 93 with Ronald Mellor, *Tacitus' Annals* (Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 35-36. See McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 495-502 for a detailed discussion of this passage in Tacitus and Mellor's apparent change of mind.

31. Polybius, *Histories* 2.56.10-12. See online: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius> (trans. Frank. W. Walbank).

duces false rhetorical exercises and discursive speeches, destroys the peculiar virtue of history. And of this Timaeus especially is guilty, and we all know that his work is full of blemishes of the kind.³²

Nor should we be quick to assume that this prohibition was idiosyncratic, since Polybius seems to assume, in criticizing Timaeus, that his readers will agree that the invention of speeches is poor historical practice. As Colin Hemer argues, the most useful distinction lies between those historians who had sources for their reported speeches and those who invented without sources; the former may well have represented *best practices*.³³

Since it is far too facile to say that inventing speeches was something that everybody did and expected, we cannot assume that the evangelists did so, even if they were aware that some Greco-Roman historians did (some Gospel authors may not have been influenced by secular Greco-Roman literature at all).³⁴ And indeed the discourses of (say) Jesus in the Gospels do not resemble polished, rhetorical set pieces.³⁵ I have argued elsewhere³⁶ that even Luke, the most Greek-educated of the Gospel authors, appears to have

32. Polybius, *Histories* 4.25b.1, See online: https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/12*.html.

33. Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT, 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), pp. 75-78.

34. The question of Gospel authorship is too often treated as irrelevant to this topic. Of the traditionally ascribed authors of the Gospels, only Luke would have been likely to have been educated in Greek rhetoric. Stanley E. Porter points out that the author of Matthew would not have been educated in Greek rhetoric: “‘When It Was Clear That We Could Not Persuade him, We Gave Up and Said, ‘The Lord’s Will Be Done’” (Acts 21:14): Good Reasons to Stop Making Unproven Claims for Rhetorical Criticism’, *BBR* 26 (2016), pp. 533-45 (536). While the topic of traditional authorship lies outside the scope of this paper, its importance needs to be noted.

35. Emphasized by Porter, “‘When It Was Clear’”, pp. 535-36. Acknowledged by Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 115–16. See also Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), I, p. 69, who states, “[N]one of his speeches [in John] follow standard rhetorical structures or display firsthand knowledge of rhetoric.’

36. McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 131-36. Also argued by Hemer, *Book of Acts*, pp. 75-78, 420-27. My argument goes somewhat further than Hemer’s in that I would grant even less ‘Lukanizing’ of what speakers said.

presented the speeches in Acts on the basis of reliable sources, rather than inventing.

The third theoretical argument for historical license in the Greco-Roman world consists of what I will call cynical comments. An example would be Seneca's statement that historians (*chroniclers*) tell lies to hold their readers' interest:

It requires no great effort to strip Ephorus of his authority; he is a mere chronicler. Some of his class seek to recommend their narrative by incredible stories, and by their marvels try to interest the reader, who would probably soon find some other occupation if he were called on to wade through their tedious narrative of ordinary events. Some, again, are too credulous, some too careless, some are deluded, some delighted, by falsehood. The former do not shun it, the latter go in quest of it. The whole clan of them have this in common; they fancy their work cannot merit approval, and become popular unless they freely interlard it with lies. Ephorus is not a person of any scrupulous honor; he is often duped, often he tries to dupe.³⁷

Seneca, of course, by no means approves of this practice; he deplores it. It is exactly the sort of thing that Lucian emphatically tells historians that they must not do.³⁸ Moreover, Seneca assumes that readers *will* be deceived by such practices. Seneca's complaint is therefore worse than useless as an argument for the ancient genre thesis, since that theory posits that factual changes were part and parcel of a well-defined genre, misled no one, and were expected as part of the compact between author and audience. Comments like Seneca's resemble similar complaints in our own day about sensational journalism. A cynical recognition that narrators do exaggerate or fabricate need not indicate a non-deceptive genre; it may well be a complaint about the abuse of a genre that will mislead its audience, who can be expected to take it at face value.

A statement by Cicero, cited by T.P. Wiseman, might seem a better candidate. Cicero places himself and his friend Atticus into the dialogue *Brutus*, and Cicero as a character opines that Coriolanus was like Themistocles not

37. Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales* 7.16. See *Physical Science in the Time of Nero: Being a Translation of the Quaestiones Naturales of Seneca* (trans. John Clarke; London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 289.

38. Lucian, *How to Write History* 9, 39, 47, 51, 63.

only in his life but in the manner of his death—i.e. that he committed suicide. Atticus teases him about the falsehood of this view and the tendency of orators to alter facts to fit a narrative:

‘It’s granted that orators may tell lies in historical matters in order to make a point more neatly. Just as you made up a story about Coriolanus, so Clitarchus and Stratocles produced their fictions about Themistocles ... [They] say that he sacrificed a bull, caught the blood in a bowl, and dropped dead. That, of course, was the sort of death they could give a rhetorical and tragic gloss; the other ordinary kind left no scope for decoration. So since it suits you ... you can take the bowl from me too, and I’ll give you the victim as well!’³⁹

Wiseman notes that Clitarchus was regarded as an historian, but it seems that for purposes of Cicero’s point he is treating him as an orator instead, making a distinction between the practice of serious history and that of rhetoric. Cicero admits in the same light-hearted vein that such alterations are not in line with good historical practice:

‘I am much obliged to you’, said I, ‘for your courtesy: but, for the future, I shall be more cautious in meddling with History when you are present; whom I may justly commend as a most exact and scrupulous reporter of Roman History.’⁴⁰

As J.L. Moles says, ‘Thucydides does differ from Clitarchus ... because in Thucydides there is also a serious concern with truth, an awareness of the different sorts of truth, an acute appreciation of the difficulties in attaining them, yet a constant effort to do so.’⁴¹ Cicero himself states elsewhere that the goal of history should be truth:

Indeed, all rules respecting it [history] are obvious to common view; for who is ignorant that it is the first law in writing history, that the

39. Cicero, *Brutus* 42-43. See D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (eds.), *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 222.

40. Cicero, *Brutus* 44. See online: <http://www.attalus.org/old/brutus1.html>.

41. J.L. Moles, ‘Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides’, in Christopher Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), pp. 88-121 (118).

historian must not dare to tell any falsehood, and the next, that he must be bold enough to tell the whole truth?⁴²

The idea that ancient history and biography exemplify a loose view of truth and that, in Burrige's words, 'The negative connotation of "fabrication" is modern'⁴³ does not do justice to the evidence of ancient historiography itself. Moles considers the issue of truth in ancient history to be complex, and he does believe that even top-notch ancient historians falsified at times. But he points out shrewdly that there are many passages that explicitly focus on 'key historical questions concerning truth, falsehood, the reliability of eye-witness testimony, and the importance of learning from eye-witnesses' as well as 'paucity or excess of evidence, conflict of sources, carelessness, chronological inaccuracy, dramatic exaggeration, and so on.'⁴⁴

Thucydides' famous passage about careful investigation is a case in point:

But as to the actions of the war, I have not been content to report them on the authority of any chance informant, or from my own conception of them; but either from personal knowledge where I was present, or after the most careful investigation possible in every case where I gained my information from others. Very laborious were these inquiries; since those who were present in the several actions did not all give the same account of the same affair, but as they were swayed by favour to one side or the other, or as their memory served them. Possibly this avoidance of any fabulous embellishment may make my work less entertaining; but I shall be well content if those shall pronounce my history useful, who desire to gain a view of events as they really did happen, and as they are very likely, in accordance with human nature, to repeat themselves at some future time ... And it is designed rather as a possession for ever than as a mere prize composition to be listened to for the moment.⁴⁵

42. Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators* (trans. J.S. Watson; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), pp. 156-57.

43. Burrige, *Four Gospels, One Jesus*, pp. 169-70.

44. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth', pp. 116, 118.

45. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.21-22. See *Thucydides* (trans. W. Lucas Collins; London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1878), pp. 4-5.

Similarly, Lucian says:

As to the facts themselves, he should not assemble them at random, but only after much laborious and painstaking investigation. He should for preference be an eyewitness, but, if not, listen to those who tell the more impartial story, those whom one would suppose least likely to subtract from the facts or add to them out of favour or malice.⁴⁶

Above all, let him [the historian] bring a mind like a mirror, clear, gleaming-bright, accurately centred, displaying the shape of things just as he receives them, free from distortion, false colouring, and misrepresentation. His concern is different from that of the orators—what historians have to relate is fact and will speak for itself, for it has already happened.⁴⁷

Many similar passages could be quoted. Thus, arguments from explicit statements about ancient historical standards turn out to be insufficient for and even detrimental to the ancient genre thesis. And it is in such explicit statements that the best hope lies for clear evidence. To take the modern example of movies based on true events, we would have no difficulty establishing the existence of that genre from explicit statements and even establishing that a particular movie belongs to that genre. We have articles and websites devoted to explaining the relationship between such movies and literal history. The combination of realistic, historical and fictional aspects in the modern biopic genre is out in the open.⁴⁸ This is perhaps why claims from these ancient genre theorists to have found license for historical alteration in the *Progymnasmata* and other handbooks are initially attractive; it seems that there *should be* such statements if such a genre really existed. But in fact, the theoretical argument fails.

46. Lucian, *How to Write History* 47. See *Lucian* (trans. K. Kilburn; Loeb Classical Library; 8 vols.; London: William Heinemann, 1949), VI, p. 61.

47. Lucian, *How to Write History* 51. See *Lucian*, VI, pp. 63-65. See McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 87-111 for a larger set of ancient comments about historical truth.

48. See online: <https://www.historyvshollywood.com>. The website compares movies based on true events with literal facts.

Inductive Arguments for Ancient License

If explicit statements from ancient authors do not support the ancient genre thesis, how else could scholars support it? There is one more method—that of induction; but it is on even shakier ground. I dub this the method of discrepancy ‘hunting’. Discrepancy hunting involves discovering some claim, stated or implied in an ancient work that presents itself as historical, that appears to vary from or contradict a claim made elsewhere. The scholar using this method moves from the appearance of difference or discrepancy to the conclusion that an author has *deliberately* altered a fact.

There are roughly three kinds of discrepancy-hunting arguments and, within each argument, roughly three levels of interpretation of the alleged discrepancy. Not all scholars carry the argument through all the levels of interpretation. The three different kinds of argument arise from the following:

(1) Places where there is merely a variation in apparent reportage, where the information in different sources could be easily combined, but where the scholar fails to make this combination;

(2) Places where there is some appearance of discrepancy but where this can be readily resolved by a reasonable historical conjecture, including the use of achronological narration (see below);⁴⁹

(3) Places where the appearance of incorrect information is fairly intractable but where the claim that the author *knowingly* related false information remains conjecture.

The three levels of interpretation based on such cases are these:

(1) Concluding that there is false information in a document;

(2) Concluding that the author knowingly gave false information while appearing to narrate historically;

(3) Concluding that this action represented flexibility within an established genre that did not deceive the audience.

As mentioned before, New Testament scholars who think that there are irreconcilable discrepancies in the Gospels but who wish to avoid attributing deception to the evangelists are the most likely to take step (3). Most classicists seem less concerned with that step, and it is the hardest to support and sometimes clearly false. For example, when Josephus apparently tries to whitewash his past involvement with the rebellious Galileans against the

49. Achronological narration is defined and discussed in McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 18-21; Lydia McGrew, ‘Time and Narrative: Clarity and Chronology in Reading the Gospels’, *JGRChJ* 17 (2021), pp. 62-87.

Romans, that bit of revisionist history would have a point only if it succeeded in deflecting the ire of his Roman patrons.⁵⁰ Thus it does not support the ancient genre thesis; it is simply a piece of misleading personal propaganda.

But even the second step—that the author knew that he was narrating falsely—is difficult to support. Many of the matters in question involve small details, which could easily be forgotten or which the author might not have reviewed recently. This is all the more likely in a context where looking things up required the manipulation of awkward scrolls. Some alleged discrepancies involve matters of the author's opinion (such as what counts as *democracy*—see below). Human errors, carelessness, misunderstanding one's sources and/or prejudice are known, common sources of such discrepancies, without the more complex assumption that the author was *up to something*, so the mere existence of a discrepancy (apparent or real) is in the nature of the case a weak argument for deliberate alteration.

The examples used in inductive arguments for ancient historical license are legion, and detailed quotation and discussion of each one takes time. Similar uses of discrepancy hunting to conclude deliberate factual alteration occur in Gospels scholarship.⁵¹ Here I will discuss a few examples from non-biblical works.

Classicist Christopher Pelling concludes that Plutarch knowingly changes facts, basing this conclusion on mere variation in the way that Plutarch reports the same events. He alleges, for example, that in Plutarch's *Antonius*, 'Antony and Cassius are given the speech to Caesar's troops before the crossing of the Rubicon.' In contrast, in *Caesar*, 'Plutarch says that Caesar incited the troops himself.' Pelling calls this 'the *transfer* of an item from one character to another.'⁵² But this analysis creates a discrepancy ar-

50. John Jordon Henderson, 'A Comparison of Josephus' Life and Jewish War: An attempt at Establishing the Acceptable Outer Limits of Biographies' Historical Reliability', in Keener and Wright (eds.), *Biographies and Jesus*, pp. 261-76 (269, 273-74). See further discussion of this incident in McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 217-23.

51. More Gospels examples and more detailed discussion can be found in McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 367-479. Further discussion of the discrepancy hunting method and more classical examples can be found in McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 175-226, 495-515.

52. C.B.R. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation of His Source Material', *JHS* 100 (1980), pp. 127-40 (129). Emphasis in original.

tificially. In the *Antonius*, Antony and Cassius flee Rome in the clothing of slaves and come into Caesar's presence crying aloud about the wrongs they have suffered. Caesar, who according to Plutarch has been looking for such a pretext, then takes his army and invades Italy.⁵³ In *Caesar*, Antony is driven from the Senate and flees to Caesar in the clothing of a slave. Plutarch says that Caesar incited his soldiers by showing them men of high repute who had suffered such wrongs. But there is not even an apparent contradiction here. To call Antony's and Cassius' words, cried aloud immediately in the presence of Caesar, 'giving a speech' is a dubious interpretation of what Plutarch says in *Antony*, and their being paraded before the troops as portrayed in *Caesar* is easily compatible with the other account.

Similarly, Pelling (followed by Licona)⁵⁴ alleges that Plutarch deliberately transfers an insult against Caesar (calling him a highway robber or bandit) from one senator to another, since in *Caes.* 30.3 Lentulus calls him by this epithet during a senatorial debate, but in *Pomp.* 58.4 Marcellus does so around the same time. But this theory reckons without the real-world existence of political *talking points*. Caesar and the Senate were at loggerheads, and there is no reason to doubt that more than one senator referred to Caesar by the same insulting term in the course of various debates at that time. The creation of a discrepancy between two of Plutarch's *Lives* is forced, and the attribution of the discrepancy to a device of transferal more questionable still.

A slightly more plausible claim of discrepancy concerns the precise time when Curio was pelted with garlands when he told the people of Caesar's proposals for compromise. In *Caesar*, we read:

However, the demands which came from Caesar certainly had a striking resemblance of fairness. He demanded, namely, that if he himself laid down his arms, Pompey should do the same, and that both, thus become private men, should find what favour they could with their fellow citizens; arguing that if they took away his forces from him, but confirmed Pompey in the possession of his, they would be accusing one of seeking a tyranny and making the other a tyrant. When Curio laid these proposals before the people in behalf of Caesar, he was

53. Plutarch, *Ant.* 5.4–6.3.

54. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation', p. 129; Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, pp. 63–64.

loudly applauded, and some actually cast garlands of flowers upon him as if he were a victorious athlete.⁵⁵

Plutarch narrates this in *Caesar* prior to the introduction (in the Senate) of a motion that Caesar be considered a public enemy if he does not lay down his arms by a certain day and prior to the Senate's vote on the compromise proposal. In *Pompeius*, Curio rushes out in the midst of the debate and announces prematurely that the proposed compromise has been adopted, whereupon the people pelt him with garlands. Licona alleges that Plutarch has deliberately changed both the timing and the content of Curio's announcement, making it in one case the presentation of the compromise to the people (prior to its being presented to the Senate) but in the other case the (as it turns out, inaccurate) announcement that the proposal has been accepted, during the Senate debate.

While it is possible that Plutarch has contradicted himself in chronology (perhaps by sheer carelessness on a point of minor detail), it is not even clear that the two accounts do contradict each other. The statement in *Caesar* that 'when Curio laid these proposals before the people in behalf of Caesar, he was loudly applauded' is meant to emphasize the proposal's appearance of reasonableness. Curio could easily have described the proposal at the same time that he told the people that the Senate had accepted it. While this event is *narrated* prior to the narration of the debate in the Senate, it does not follow that Plutarch is asserting that it *took place* prior to that debate. As I have discussed elsewhere, we should allow for inexplicitness in time narration, which I have called achronological narration;⁵⁶ that may well be what we have here.

Plutarch does seem to present inaccurate information in his *Caesar* concerning when Caesar wept at the thought that he had not accomplished as much as Alexander the Great at the same age. In *Caes.* 11.5-6 Plutarch appears to connect this event with Caesar's proconsulship in Spain. Although Plutarch says explicitly only that it happened 'in Spain', the immediate context specifies the proconsulship, and it is most natural to take this to be the occasion in Spain to which Plutarch refers. In contrast, Suetonius and Dio Cassius explicitly connect the incident with an earlier period in Spain when

55. Plutarch, *Caes.* 30.1-2.

56. McGrew, *Mirror or Mask*, pp. 18-21; McGrew, 'Time and Narrative'.

Caesar was quaestor.⁵⁷ It is fair to note, as Licona does, that the earlier period suits the incident better, since Caesar's age then corresponded more closely to Alexander's.⁵⁸ But we may also fairly ask whether this represents deliberate factual alteration by Plutarch. We do not know what Plutarch's source was for the incident, how recently he had read that source, or how carefully he had noted the date. If he knew that the incident occurred while Caesar was in Spain, why could he not have simply misremembered the proconsulship rather than the quaestorship? To say, as Licona does, that Plutarch is emphasizing Caesar's ambitions at this point in his narrative is a weak argument for deliberate alteration; his focus on Caesar's ambitions may have been what brought the incident to mind when writing this portion of *Caesar*.

The *boring* hypothesis that Plutarch has erred is in the nature of the case the more probable, since it represents a common human experience, but it may be unattractive to scholars. If one assumes that historians or biographers must be changing the facts *somewhere or other* and that it is merely a matter of figuring out *where* they are doing so, one will take the mere appearance of difference or discrepancy to justify that conclusion in a particular instance. But once we recognize the feebleness of theoretical arguments for that prior assumption, discussed in the last section, the discrepancy hunting method by itself can no longer justify the conclusion.

Moles proposes as a case where a serious historian knowingly narrates falsely Herodotus' insistence that Mardonius introduced democracy to Ionian cities before the Greeks themselves had invented democracy. Herodotus says, 'I shall describe a great wonder to those of the Greeks who do not accept that Otanes declared his opinion to the seven that the Persians should have a democracy: Mardonius suppressed all the tyrants of the Ionians and established democracies in the cities.'⁵⁹ Moles argues that this is far too improbable either to be true or to have been sincerely believed by Herodotus.

But if Herodotus was inventing out of whole cloth, one wonders why he would go out of his way to admit that others were skeptical. That looks like conscientiousness, as far as it goes. Moles admits that his own view is influenced by a desire not to think less of Herodotus' intelligence. '[E]ven to argue ... that Herodotus believed the story—demeans him by making him a

57. Suetonius, *Jul.* 7; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 37.52.2.

58. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 163.

59. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth', pp. 118-19.

much less intelligent man than he was ...'⁶⁰ Moles suggests that Herodotus' reason for the falsehood and for the invention of a Persian constitutional debate was to allow himself the opportunity to explore themes such as the nature of good government. I note that Moles does not attempt to argue that Herodotus' audience would not have taken him to be narrating literally, so he does not go to the farthest level of ancient genre theory conjecture.

It may be that here we encounter a real point of disconnection between modern and ancient—namely, the historian's credulity. Classicists tend to connect a concern with objective truth in ancient times with critical history, in which an author attempts to sift truth from error in his sources. Wiseman makes this connection explicit in his discussion of Thucydides, Polybius and '*historia* as enquiry.'⁶¹ It is certainly true that a forensic interest in examining sources critically illustrates a supposedly *modern* approach to truth and history. The fact that several prominent ancient authors did such sifting shows that these concerns should not be dubbed *modern* after all. But it does not follow that credulity by itself indicates a *lack* of interest in literal truth. A credulous author is not ipso facto uninterested in literal truth, much less willing to make things up and narrate them as true. Wiseman virtually admits as much when he describes Dionysius of Halicarnassus as 'an honest man with a serious view of the value of history, but who had little or no conception of *historia* as enquiry' and who applies 'Polybian precepts to a wholly un-Polybian subject—the early Roman Republic, four to five hundred years before his own time.' According to Wiseman, Dionysius accepted 'in good faith' sources which could not possibly have been fully accurate and 'used them to provide examples to guide the judgement of statesmen, an aim for which only the truth would suffice.'⁶²

Moles does not want to attribute to Herodotus the degree of credulity that Wiseman attributes to Dionysius; hence, Moles takes Herodotus to be inventing the Persian invention of democracy and a debate over it. But Moles himself suggests that perhaps Mardonius took a 'selectively conciliatory attitude to democracy in Ionia.'⁶³ What constitutes *establishing* a democracy, or even what counts as a democracy, is a matter open to opinion. We can

60. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth', p. 119.

61. Wiseman, 'Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity', in Gill and Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, pp. 122-46 (143).

62. Wiseman, 'Lying Historians', p. 144.

63. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth', p. 119.

well imagine someone in our own day crediting a favorite US President with establishing democracy in a foreign nation, while the same President's critics would consider that conclusion to be partisan political spin. So we should be open to the possibility that Herodotus had sources for his claims about the Persians and democracy, though he may have used those sources credulously or interpreted them in a biased manner.

The purely inductive attempt to establish audience-accepted looseness in ancient history and biography was doomed to begin with. The thesis in question is too large and contains too many substantive parts to be supported purely on the basis of a series of instances where modern historians think that someone got it wrong. There are too many other, simpler, and more common causes of getting something wrong.

This is not to say that no ancient historian deliberately falsified. No doubt many did so. Propaganda is nothing new, just as error is nothing new. But at each stage along the way we should consider seriously the possibility that an author believed what he said. And at the last step we should recognize that, if the incident is narrated with historical plausibility and apparent realism, it is likely at least that the author intended his *audience* to accept what he said.

*The Gospels and the Partially Non-Factual Ancient Genre Thesis:
Evidence for Sincerity*

Where does all of this leave us with respect to the Gospels? I have argued that there was no general ancient license to change historical facts while appearing to narrate literally. Even in the limited area of speeches, some countenanced doing so while others did not. If some ancient authors, like some modern ones, took liberties with the truth, this does not mean that they were writing in a genre in which such liberties were accepted and expected, nor that their readers would have not been misled.

But what kind of authors were the evangelists? Were they the sort who took historical liberties, regardless of whether their audience was confused? The argument thus far, though it undermines sweeping generalizations used by the ancient genre theorists, does not necessitate the conclusion that the evangelists did not deliberately modify the facts. All the less so does it support a stronger thesis such as inerrancy. It is no part of my project to argue for inerrancy. I would argue that both classicists and Gospels scholars

would be better served if they took the possibility of good-faith error more seriously when confronted with apparent discrepancy, rather than leaping over that possibility and going straight for the complex theory of deliberate alteration.

Many types of evidence are relevant to the question of whether the Gospel authors either deliberately changed facts or made good-faith errors. One could go point-by-point through passages where Gospels scholars have used the discrepancy hunting method. One could argue that in one place the apparent discrepancy can be eliminated by justified harmonization, in another place there is merely a difference and not an apparent discrepancy and in yet another place there may be a good-faith error on the part of one author or another. One could also discuss the external and internal evidence concerning the historical accuracy of the Gospels, where (I believe) positive evidence points to a high degree of literal reliability. But all of that is far too wide-ranging for a single paper.

Here I will suggest this: Since there is not good evidence for a generalization that ancient authors were historically loose and that ancient audiences accepted historical looseness, the Gospels and their audiences have to be evaluated in particular. What we find upon examination is a consonance between the way that the Gospels present themselves and the way that they were accepted, and this evidence points to their being written in an intentionally factual genre. If the Gospel authors never deliberately altered the facts, erroneous elements in them (if any) are non-deliberate. Again I stress that this argument *does not* entail that the Gospels are without error nor that they are inspired. Non-religious, fallible documents can be literally historical in intention and reception.

A prominent example of a Gospel's factual self-presentation is the explicit statement in Jn 19.32-35:

So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe (Jn 19.32-35 NASB).

It would be easy to fixate on the programmatic statement that the evangelist is saying these things so that his audience will believe on Jesus and to

miss a different point: The evangelist clearly wants his audience to believe the literal truth of what he is affirming—that Jesus' legs were not broken and that his side was pierced. If he is inventing these facts, he is doing so with an apparent sincerity that is intended to convince. In other words, if he is not sincere, he is hoaxing. But why should we think that, either? The circumstances related are not particularly implausible and are the sort of thing that a bystander could witness and remember.

Similarly, Jn 21.24, possibly written by someone other than the evangelist, testifies at a minimum to the reception of the document as truthful:

This is the disciple who bears witness of these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true (Jn 21.24 NASB).

There is no reason to put an asterisk next to the word 'true' in such statements. On the face of it, such comments tell us that the evangelist and his first readers were treating the facts reported as literally true. That appears to be a common understanding between them.

Similarly, Luke's famous preface assures his first reader of his care in investigating the facts he relates:

Since many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting to me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in an orderly sequence, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught (Lk. 1.1-4 NASB).

This appears far removed from an allowance for historical looseness. While it certainly does not guarantee that Luke got everything right, it indicates an intent to be *taken* to be giving literal historical facts which he has discovered by patient investigation. And on the face of it, this in turn indicates an intent to tell what is true. This *prima facie* case would need to be countered by something stronger than a claim that Luke included erroneous information somewhere in the Gospel or in Acts, which might have been non-deliberate.

Here we should note that the earliest Christians were drawn from various strata of society, without a bias toward the highly educated. Paul emphasizes this point when writing to the cosmopolitan city of Corinth: 'For consider your calling ... that there were not many wise according to the flesh,

not many mighty, not many noble ...' (1 Cor. 1.26 NASB). In that chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly emphasizes that secular eloquence is not characteristic of most early Christians (see vv. 17, 20-25 NASB). The issue of ancient literacy and whether or not, as Stanley Porter has put it, 'rhetoric was in the air,' is too large to go into in detail here. Suffice it to say that Porter has rightly pointed out that functional literacy differs from book-learning which in turn differs from education in rhetorical tropes.⁶⁴ I would also stress the importance of regional and religious variation in the probability of familiarity with Greco-Roman literature or rhetoric. Andrew Pitts has suggested that a Palestinian Jew could have learned to read and write Greek from a curriculum based on the Septuagint rather than Greek secular literature.⁶⁵ Further, Justin Martyr attests that the Gospels were read aloud in public worship,⁶⁶ so even basic literacy was not required to be a member of the first intended audience of the Gospels. If the Gospel authors did not wish to confuse their audiences, they would have been well-advised not to include, for example, made-up speeches on the assumption that their audiences would know that these were not real.

Several centuries later, Lactantius makes a related point when he tells the emperor Constantine that the Christians' sacred writings (presumably including both Old and New Testaments) are despised by the wise and learned of the secular world because they are unembellished and truthful rather than polished, eloquent and pleasing.⁶⁷ Even when it comes to recorded speeches, then, much less other events, the Gospels are unlikely to manifest the sophisticated wit of the Greco-Roman rhetor that seeks to please one sector of

64. Porter, "When It Was Clear", pp. 533-45; Stanley E. Porter, 'Ancient Literate Culture and Popular Rhetorical Knowledge: Implications for Studying Pauline Rhetoric', in Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer (eds.), *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric: Theory and Practice in the Hellenistic Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 96-115.

65. Andrew W. Pitts, 'Hellenistic Schools in Jerusalem and Paul's Rhetorical Education', in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Paul's World* (Pauline Studies, 4; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 19-50 (36). Greek language and broader Greek learning could come apart in the ancient Jewish world. See the statement in *Sotah* 49b that it was permissible for a father to teach his son the Greek language but not Greek wisdom.

66. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67.

67. Lactantius, *Inst.* 5.1.15-18.

his audience with a wink and a nod while moving others by his eloquent elaboration.

This same *naïve* approach to literal historical truthfulness in the Gospels is reflected in patristic statements, beginning early and continuing over the centuries. Justin Martyr, for example, refers to the Gospels as *memoirs* of the apostles and their companions.⁶⁸ Papias, a companion of Polycarp, says that he wanted to talk with those who had known Jesus personally so that he could find out what Jesus actually said:

Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else's commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.⁶⁹

Late in the second century, Julius Africanus indignantly rejects the suggestion of explaining the differences between the Matthean and Lukan genealogies by attributing invention to the evangelists:

Some indeed incorrectly allege that this discrepant enumeration and mixing of the names both of priestly men, as they think, and royal, was made properly, in order that Christ might be shown rightfully to be both Priest and King; ... Let us not ... descend to such religious trifling as to establish the kingship and priesthood of Christ by the interchanges of the names ... The evangelists, therefore, would thus have spoken falsely, affirming what was not truth, but a fictitious commendation ... Nor shall an assertion of this kind prevail in the Church of Christ against the exact truth, so as that a lie should be contrived for the praise and glory of Christ. For who does not know that most holy word of the apostle also, who, when he was preaching and

68. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 100-106.

69. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3-4. See Richard Bauckham, *The World around the New Testament: Collected Essays II* (WUNT, 386; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), p. 154.

proclaiming the resurrection of our Saviour, and confidently affirming the truth, said with great fear, If any say that Christ is not risen, and we assert and have believed this, and both hope for and preach that very thing, we are false witnesses of God, in alleging that He raised up Christ, whom He raised not up? And if he who glorifies God the Father is thus afraid lest he should seem a false witness in narrating a marvelous fact, how should not he be justly afraid, who tries to establish the truth by a false statement, preparing an untrue opinion? For if the generations are different, and trace down no genuine seed to Joseph, and if all has been stated only with the view of establishing the position of Him who was to be born—to confirm the truth, namely, that He who was to be would be king and priest, there being at the same time no proof given, but the dignity of the words being brought down to a feeble hymn,—it is evident that no praise accrues to God from that, since it is a falsehood, but rather judgment returns on him who asserts it, because he vaunts an unreality as though it were reality.⁷⁰

The common approach of the church fathers was harmonistic. Even the existence of Tatian's early harmony, the *Diatesseron*, attests to the assumption that the Gospels are literally truthful. Clement of Alexandria, wrestling with the alleged discrepancy between John and the Synoptics on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, does not use allegory to escape the issue (though he is interested in allegory and symbolism) but claims that the Gospels can be harmonized:

Suitably, therefore, to the fourteenth day, on which He also suffered, in the morning, the chief priests and the scribes, who brought Him to Pilate, did not enter the Prætorium, that they might not be defiled, but might freely eat the passover in the evening. With this precise determination of the days both the whole Scriptures agree, and the Gospels harmonize.⁷¹

70. Julius Africanus, *The Epistle to Aristides* I. See A. Cleveland Coxe (ed.), *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), p. 125.

71. See Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermes, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), p. 581.

In the fourth century, Epiphanius of Salamis gives straightforwardly historical reasons for dismissing objections to Gospel chronology from the group he dubs the Alogi:

Because Matthew did not report the events which Luke related, can St. Matthew be at odds with the truth? Or is St. Luke not telling the truth, because he has said nothing about the first things Matthew dealt with? Didn't God give each evangelist his own assignment, so that each of the four evangelists whose duty was to proclaim the Gospel could find what he was to do and proclaim some things in agreement and alike to show that they were the same source, but otherwise describe what another had omitted, as each received his proportionate share from the Spirit?⁷²

This is followed by many pages of historical harmonization of alleged discrepancies. One may certainly disagree with Epiphanius's conclusions, but his approach is unabashedly literal. There is no question of suggesting that the evangelists did not intend their works to be taken historically, even on matters of chronological detail, and Epiphanius is impatient with anyone who accuses John of what he calls 'lying.'⁷³

Augustine, trained to teach Greco-Roman rhetoric, is insistent that the Gospels be taken as literal and even that they should be harmonized whenever there is an apparent discrepancy in their chronology.⁷⁴ Despite his advanced training, he treats the Gospels as *naïvely* historical and shows no knowledge of their being in a genre in which factual alteration is expected.

The outlier in this otherwise unanimous patristic chorus is Origen. He is neither the earliest nor the latest of those I am surveying, but he is unusual. In his commentary on John, Origen goes further than adding an allegorical interpretation *on top of* the literal meaning of the text. Instead, he speaks of Gospel discrepancies in terms that sound (at first blush) somewhat like those of the partially non-factual ancient genre theorists. After surveying

72. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.3.1. See *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (trans. Frank Williams; Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, 36; Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 30.

73. Hence, as Epiphanius represents them, even the objectors take John to be presenting his work as historical. They apparently think he is being dishonest.

74. Augustine, *Cons.* 2.21.51-52.

some places where he believes that there are intractable discrepancies between John and the Synoptics, Origen opines:

I do not condemn them if they even sometimes dealt freely with things which to the eye of history happened differently, and changed them so as to subserve the mystical aims they had in view; so as to speak of a thing which happened in a certain place, as if it had happened in another, or of what took place at a certain time, as if it had taken place at another time, and to introduce into what was spoken in a certain way some changes of their own. They proposed to speak the truth where it was possible both materially and spiritually, and where this was not possible it was their intention to prefer the spiritual to the material. The spiritual truth was often preserved, as one might say, in the material falsehood.⁷⁵

But before we conclude that Origen supports a partially non-factual Gospels genre, we should note that Origen himself does not claim this. He does not say that the evangelists are using compositional devices in an established genre of partially fictionalized biography, history or midrash. On the contrary, his theory of theological interpretation, in which the *spiritual truth is preserved in the material falsehood*, appears to be a conclusion based on his own use of a discrepancy hunting method.

Origen is explicit that he is putting forward this idea to save the truth of the Gospels by redefining *truth* as spiritual rather than literal:

If the discrepancy between the Gospels is not solved, we must give up our trust in the Gospels as being true and written by a divine spirit, or as records worthy of credence, for both these characters are held to belong to these works. Those who accept the four Gospels, and who do not consider that their apparent discrepancy is to be solved anagogically (by mystical interpretation), will have to clear up the difficulty, raised above, about the forty days of the temptation, a period for which no room can be found in any way in John's narrative ... There are many other points on which the careful student of the Gospels will find that their narratives do not agree; and these we shall place before the reader, according to our power, as they occur. The student, staggered at the consideration of these things, will either renounce the attempt to find all the Gospels true, and not venturing to conclude that

75. Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 10.4.

all our information about our Lord is untrustworthy, will choose at random one of them to be his guide; or he will accept the four, and will consider that their truth is not to be sought for in the outward and material letter.⁷⁶

Even those who see Origen, in these passages, as a precursor of a post-modern approach should acknowledge that the idea of saving the truth of the Gospels by redefining 'truth' appears to be his own rather than an appeal to known genre conventions. In fact, Origen appears concerned about impressionable readers who might give up the Gospels altogether if they keep trying to reconcile them literally. This point indicates that Origen is the exception that proves the rule—the rule being the early historical reception of the Gospels, with attempted harmonization as a natural consequence.

Conclusion

On examination, it turns out that the large claims of the partially non-factual ancient genre thesis have little to commend them. Neither theoretical nor case-by-case considerations establish the existence of a genre of partially fictionalized but apparently serious ancient history or biography, accepted as such by ancient audiences, to which the Gospels might easily belong.

When we turn to the Gospels themselves, we find an apparent earnestness in conveying historical truth that finds its match in the historical way in which they were received. The ancient genre thesis for the Gospels is thus undermined at multiple points. It does not appear to be true that Greco-Roman historians or biographers had broad permission to alter facts. And even if there had been such license, and even if the evangelists had been aware of that, they do not seem to have been trying to write that kind of book. Nor do their early readers and hearers seem to have taken them to be doing so.

While these considerations by themselves may not settle the question of the historicity of the Gospels' genre, they point in the direction of historical authorial intention. Scholars should take seriously the idea that the evangelists never deliberately invented or changed facts, whether or not they sometimes made errors. We should take this possibility seriously not because of theological commitments but because of historical considerations that apply to any work.

76. Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 10.2.