4-26-2012

Graeco-Roman Bioi and the Gospels

Matthew L. Hillman
Western Michigan University

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

The Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College

THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS

Matthew Hillman, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2010, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 26, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

Graeco-Roman Bioi and the Gospels

Timothy McGrew

Dr. Timothy McGrew, Philosophy

Marion W Gray

Dr. Marion Gray, History

1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5244
PHONE: (269) 387-3230 FAX: (269) 387-3903
www.wmich.edu/honors

Suetonius, Mark, Plutarch and Luke:
The Identification of their Genre.

By: Matthew L. Hillman

A senior thesis, presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in History, Western Michigan University

_____	_____
Dr. Timothy McGrew	Dr. Paul Maier

Plutarch and Suetonius are two well-known biographers, the first Greek and the second Roman, who wrote many biographies or *lives* of well known historical figures. Another group of writers, less commonly thought of as biographers, are the gospel writers of the New Testament. The purpose of this paper is to explore ancient biography as genre and its connection to the gospels. It is also a case study that will compare Suetonius's and Plutarch's biographies of Julius Caesar to Mark's and Luke's lives of Jesus. If all four works align in certain distinctive elements, it will be strong support for the argument to assign Mark's and Luke's gospels to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography.

One reason for choosing Suetonius's and Plutarch's biographies of Caesar and Mark's and Luke's gospels is their close chronological proximity to one another. All four of these writers lived in the first-century CE, a fact that some scholars have used to argue that all four writers can be considered biographers who wrote in the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. Luke's gospel was chosen as opposed to Matthew's gospel because Luke was a gentile, who wrote as a historian, giving a detailed chronological account of Jesus, where as Matthew was a first-century Jew, writing for a Jewish audience. Thus Matthew's book contains more Old Testament themes, which would not be found in a secular Graeco-Roman biography. Luke's gospel is the work of a gentile and is, prima facie, the closest Christian work to the works of Suetonius or Dio. It is therefore more suited for the purpose of comparison.

Mark was chosen because he is considered to be the earliest of the gospel writers, and he was likely used as a source for the other gospel writers. The genre of John's gospel was not analyzed because John is not considered one of the synoptic gospels. John's gospel, by contrast with the synoptics, contains much more theology, and his work is generally dated later than the

four sources considered here. While some arguments may be made to place John's gospel as well as Matthew's in the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, that is beyond the scope this paper.

Finally, Suetonius's, Plutarch's, Mark's, and Luke's biographies contain supernatural claims and may be considered in the same sub-categories of political biography, philosophical biography, and holy man biography.

Genre

The term "genre" refers to the categorization historians and literary critics use to classify material. Genres consist of works that align in content and style with one another. Genre is significant because it enables scholars to group texts together and understand the larger context in which the texts were produced. Understanding the genre of a work also allows readers to know if the work is to be understood as historical, as in biography, or as metaphorical, as in poetry.

In *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography,* Richard Burridge writes about the characteristics and features that determine genre. Burridge was the first person to publish a thorough, systematic analysis of the genre of Graeco-Roman biography and to compare the results of that analysis with the Gospels. Burridge's work is the only major recent work to have done this. All subsequent studies of the subject acknowledge heavy indebtedness to Burridge's work. Burridge's work has reduced the matter of genre to a set of criteria—flexible but identifiable—that can be applied in a straightforward fashion to any work proposed. This means that his work is particularly useful as a point of departure for a study of Mark and Luke.

According to Burridge, the opening features that convey genre include the title, opening words, prologue, and preface. Burridge states, "From the allocation of verbal subjects, it may be argued that if someone or something dominates the results, then the subject of the whole is

clear."[1] In other words, if there is a high number of grammatical subjects in a text that are the same, then it may be established that the work centers around that subject.

External features, including the mode of representation, size and length, structure or sequence, scale, literary units, use of sources, and the methods of characterization, may be used in identifying genre. Mode of representation refers to the form in which the work is written, such as prose or verse, and if it is constructed by means of dialogue, drama, anecdotes, disconnected units, or continuous narrative. The mode of representation can also include the method of presentation, that is, if the text were to be read aloud in a social context or silently to one's self. The method of characterization refers to how the author develops his character. In ancient literature, "character is revealed by the person's words and deeds."[2]

Internal features include the setting, topics, motifs, style, tone, mood, quality of characterization, social setting, occasion, authorial intention, and purpose. The style of a work can be divided into three categories—high, middle, and low—meaning a highly educated, sophisticated style; a moderately educated style; or a popular style.

The Genre of Graeco-Roman Biography

The genre of Graeco-Roman biography has several distinctive characteristics, such as an opening that presents the birth of the subject, the person's ancestry, and anecdotes of the person's youth. The structure and focus of Graeco-Roman biography is usually chronologically based on main events of the subject's career, but the genre is flexible. The majority of Graeco-Roman biography is written in continuous prose narrative. However, some ancient biographers also used poetry, songs, and sermons in their works. Literary units and devices may also be employed. One of the essential characteristics of Graeco-Roman biography is the author's active

[1] Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 110.
[2] Burridge, *What are the Gospels,* 117.

display of character through the subject's words and deeds. Finally, Graeco-Roman biography generally emphasizes the final days of the subject.

However, all of these characteristics are variable, including length. Some works were intended to be read in one sitting and are thus under 10,000 words. Other works are of medium length, averaging 10,000 to 25,000 words. Larger works, requiring several scrolls, would be more than 25,000 words. Another area of flexibility in the biographical genre is the opening that sometimes begins with a detailed ancestry or sometimes begins with an authorial preface and statement.

Burridge's Thesis and Argument

According to Burridge, once the opening, external, and internal features can be established in a secular biographical work, its features can be compared to a sacred work such as the gospels. If the works are similar in most areas and diverge only slightly, they can be said to have the same genre of biography or βίοι. Burridge's wider objective is to demonstrate the general historicity and validity of the gospels after establishing that the gospels and secular biographies contain common features.

Burridge's scholarship has brought the study of genre in the gospels full circle. In the mid-nineteenth century, scholars such as Ernest Renan thought that the gospels writers were biographers, not in the style of Suetonius but rather in the way that Plato was the biographer of Socrates.[3] Likewise, C. W. Votaw, an earlier twentieth century scholar, regarded the gospels as popular biography in the sense of disconnected memorabilia similar to those of Socrates, Apollonius of Tyana, and Epictetus.[4]

---

[3] Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (London: Trübner & Co., 1864), 20.
[4] C.W. Votaw, *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Graeco-Roman World* (Fortress Press, Facet Books, 1970), 5-8.

However, with the rise of form criticism, a shift in scholarship occurred that argued that the gospels were unliterary writings, produced through popular tradition and storytelling but not by the conscious intention of the author. Karl Ludwig Schmidt put forth the argument that the gospels are oral folktales that were produced and spread in a cultic community. Rudolf Bultmann's scholarship supported this view that the gospels were not Graeco-Roman biography by arguing that there are no parallel works with which to compare the gospels in terms of genre. Bultmann argued that the gospels "'are a unique phenomenon in the history of literature'" and are thus *sui generis.*[5] However, the recent trend in scholarship has moved back to the gospels being βίοι.

The Case for the Gospels as βίοι

According to Burridge, the gospels can be considered βίοι because they align in several categories with secular ancient Graeco-Roman biographies. In the opening of Matthew, one reads of Jesus' ancestry just as in Nepos' and Plutarch's biographies. Burridge states,

> Mark, however, like Xenophon, begins with just one sentence, while some of Plutarch's *Lives* start straight in (e.g. Timoleon 1). Luke's use of a preface can be paralleled in Lucian and Philo, who have a paragraph each, and in Isocrates, Tacitus, and Philostratus, who all have a more extended prologue. Thus the various beginnings of the synoptic gospels reflect the range of possibilities for βίοι with respect to an opening sentence or preface.[6]

Second, the analysis of verb subjects in Mark's gospel shows that Jesus is the subject of one quarter of the verbs. Matthew and Luke similarly have Jesus as the subject in over a sixth of the verbs. These percentages are typical in the genre of βίοι. Third, regarding the allocation of space, some critics have argued that the synoptic gospels cannot be considered βίοι because there is little to no detail concerning the first 30 years of Jesus' life, but there is an extended treatment of his death. However, Burridge writes,

---

[5] Burridge, *What are the Gospels,* 4-11.
[6] Ibid, 189.

> Matthew and Luke devote just over 15% of their text to the events of the Last Supper, Trial, Passion and Resurrection, while Mark has rather more, 19.1%. If these figures are compared with those given to their subject's last days and death by Plutarch (17.3%), Nepos (15%), Tacitus (10%) and Philostratus (26%), then the gospels' allocation of space does not look out of place or puzzling.[7]

The literary units and methods of characterization used in the gospels are similarly found in βίοι. The gospel writers incorporate literary units such as songs, anecdotal stories, teachings, prophetic sayings, and miracle stories into their narratives. Βίοι also incorporates stories, anecdotes, sayings, and speeches. Such devices, Burridge notes, are found in Lucian's work *Demonax,* Philostratus' *Apollonius,* and in Plutarch's *Alexander, Caesar, Demosthenes,* and *Cicero.* Burridge concludes, "The combination of stories, sayings, and speeches found in the synoptic gospels are very similar to the basic literary units used by βίοι."[8]

With regard to the methods of characterization, Burridge states, "The absence of direct character analysis in the gospels is one of the traditional arguments against the gospels being biographies. However, we have seen that this requirement is a modern predilection; the ancient method was to display character through deeds and words. This is precisely what we find in the evangelists' characterization of Jesus. Luke describes this twofold method clearly when he says that his gospel deals with 'all that Jesus began to do and teach.'"[9] Therefore, the use of literary devices and absence of direct character analysis may not be used as reasons to exclude the gospels from the genre of βίοι.

Criticisms of Burridge's Thesis

Joseph H. Lynch has contested Burridge's conclusions. He writes,

> The four canonical gospels are not biographies of Jesus. They are probably best described as theology presented in a narrative form. They try to answer a complicated set of questions, such as 'Who was/is Jesus' and 'What is his

[7] Ibid, 192-193.
[8] Ibid, 198.
[9] Ibid, 199.

> significance for Israel and for humanity?' Theologians classify the answers to such questions as Christology, which is the investigation of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ. . . . They [the gospel writers] recounted Jesus' teachings and actions not just to tell a story but also to convert readers and hearers to faith in Jesus, to instruct and strengthen those who already believed, and to refute those, including Jews and other Christians, with whom they disagreed.[10]

Lynch argues that the gospel writers should not be seen as writers trying to write a biography of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, they should be understood as Jewish and gentile individuals trying to make sense of an extraordinary man who—to them—seemed to fulfill prophecies in their religious tradition.

Another possible line of argument against Burridge's thesis is that Burridge is attempting to assign a Graeco-Roman genre to the gospels when some gospels were works written in a very different near-eastern, Jewish culture. There may well be many similarities between the four authors being examined in terms of Burridge's opening, external, and internal features. Though there are similarities in the content of the works, there are, however, wider dissimilarities in authorial intention, culture, and religion, which may outweigh the evidence to consider these works as belonging to the same genre.

Furthermore, one may argue there is no evidence to suggest that the gospel writers had any conception of the Graeco-Roman genre or even the genre of biography for that matter. The gospel authors, with the exception of Luke who was gentile, were living in a near-eastern Jewish culture that was extremely different from the Western and pagan cultures of Greece and Rome. They could not be writing in the Graeco-Roman biographical genre if they had never read Graeco-Roman biography to begin with. Rather, it is more likely that they would have been writing in a different genre more closely aligned with their culture.

Analysis of Suetonius's Biography of Caesar

---

[10] Joseph H. Lynch, *Early Christianity: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-6.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was born around 70 CE and was educated partly in Rome. Like his father, he served as military tribune. Catharine Edwards states, "Pliny [the younger] seems to have acted as his patron on a number of occasions. . . . It is known, from a fragmentary inscription found at Hippo, that Suetonius held a succession of posts at court, including a period in charge of the imperial libraries in Rome, as a minister *a bibliothecis*, another as minister *a studiis*, probably in charge of the emperor's own archives."[11]

In his biography of Caesar entitled *The Deified Julius Caesar*, Suetonius opens the work very abruptly, starting with Caesar at the age of 16 when his father died. The opening then goes on to describe Caesar's divorce of Cossutia and his marriage to Cornelia. The abruptness suggests that there may be a missing introduction, which would have given details regarding Caesar's birth and upbringing.[12] Concerning the mode, Suetonius wrote in continuous narrative form with very little dialogue or monologue. The first time there is dialogue or monologue in quotation comes in chapter thirty: "Caesar looked out over his slaughtered and scattered enemies, and he uttered the following words: 'It was they who wanted this; for I, Gaius Caesar, would have been found guilty, despite all my achievements, if I had not turned to my army for aid.'"[13] Like Luke's gospel, Suetonius's biography included songs. Suetonius states, "in his triumph over Gaul, his men chanted, among the other songs soldiers usually come out with as they march behind the chariot, the following most notorious lines:

> Caesar had his way with Gaul;
> Nicomedes had his way with Caesar:
> Behold now Caesar, conqueror of Gaul, in triumph,
> Not so, Nicomedes, conqueror of Caesar.[14]

---

[11] Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars,* trans. Catharine Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii.
[12] Ibid., ix.
[13] Suetonius, "Caesar," 16.
[14] Ibid., 24.

With regard to external features, such as length, structure, scale, sources, setting, and motifs, Suetonius's work is similar to the gospels and the overall Graeco-Roman genre. An English translation of Suetonius's work is approximately 18,000 words, common for medium sized biographies of later Graeco-Roman biography.[15] The structure of the work is chronologically based on Caesar's various political positions. This is evident from Suetonius's use of phrases such as "on the first day of his Praetorship," "following his Praetorship," "his very first act once consul," "when his consulship had come to an end," and "his actions during the nine years for which he held the command were essentially as follows."[16] This style of transitions between scenes, based on the timeline of Caesar's career, demonstrates that this is political biography. Furthermore, Suetonius traces Caesar's political career chronologically from military tribune, to quaestor in Spain, to Pontifex Maximus. However, there are descriptive passages interspersed in the chronology to describe Caesar's accomplished deeds, physical features, and his virtues.

In chapter forty-one, Suetonius's political βίος shifts from a chronology of politics and military campaigns to a listing of deeds accomplished such as reforming the calendar, the increased membership of the senate, holding of a census, and ambitions such as the building of the Temple to Mars. In chapter forty-five, Suetonius describes Caesar as having a "lofty stature and fair complexion, with well-formed limbs, rather a full face, and keen, dark eyes. His health was good, although towards the end of his life he used to faint suddenly and even had nightmares."[17] Regarding his dress, Suetonius writes, "He would wear a broad-striped tunic with fringed sleeves down to his wrists, and always belted on the outside—though he wore his belt

[15] Burridge, *What are the Gospels,* 164-165.
[16] Ibid., 8-12.
[17] Ibid., 22.

rather loosely."[18] Suetonius highlights Caesar's virtues rather directly, which is common of Graeco-Roman biography. Suetonius writes that Caesar was determined, meaning he was driven to specific goals. Suetonius also discusses Caesar's affection for his troops by calling them comrades.[19] In chapter seventy-four, Suetonius attributes the virtue of mercy to Caesar through specific stories such as Caesar's ordering that the pirates be strangled before being crucified, so that they would suffer less; ordering that his slave-secretary, who attempted to assassinate him, be put to death without further punishment; and when he denied knowing anything of Publius Clodius' affair with his wife in order to free his family of suspicion and crime.[20]

The scale of the work is narrow in the sense that it deals only with Caesar's life and political career. However, Suetonius mentions the great Roman Republic and its people, including soldiers and other politicians who were influenced by Caesar. Suetonius relies on written sources to compose his biography. Suetonius was born in 71 CE, approximately one hundred years after Caesar's death, too long after the events for any eyewitnesses to have reported to Suetonius. In contrast, both Mark and Luke would have had access to first generation eyewitnesses. The written sources Suetonius uses probably included letters from Cicero, [as stated in chapter nine], and edicts of Bibulus, as stated in chapter forty-nine. Finally, Suetonius is precise in providing details of place, such as those relating to Caesar's military career in Asia, his withdrawal to Rhodes, and various places such as Gaul and Spain where he either fought or held political positions.

Suetonius has always had the reputation as a comical, popular writer. The tone of his work is sometimes descriptive and serious, but it is also light-hearted and humorous in some places, suggesting that this was a work inclined to entertain as well as inform. The style and tone

[18] Ibid., 23.
[19] Ibid., *30-31*.
[20] Ibid., 33-34.

also give a story-like quality to the biography with Caesar as the protagonist, which is evident from scenes such as the one in chapter seven that relates Caesar's reflection at the statue of Alexander the Great and his belief that he was to be great. Similarly, adding to the story-like quality of the biography, there are clear antagonists such as the aristocratic faction's opposition in chapter eleven and, of course, the politicians who eventually murder Caesar.

Suetonius also describes supernatural events. He introduces one by beginning with Caesar's words: "'Even now we can still turn back. But once we have crossed that little bridge, everything must be decided by arms.' As he paused, the following portent occurred. A being of splendid size and beauty suddenly appeared, sitting close by, and playing music on a reed. . . . 'Let us go where the gods have shown us the way and the injustice of our enemies calls us. The die is cast.'"[21]

More supernatural events come towards the end of the work. Regarding Caesar's death, Suetonius reports that there was a conspiracy against him involving Gaius Crassius, Marcus, and Decimus Brutus. Suetonius further writes,

> Caesar's murder was, however, foretold by clear portents. . . . A few days before, the news came that some herds of horses which Caesar had dedicated to the River Rubicon when he crossed it, letting them wander free without a keeper, were obstinately refusing food and weeping copiously. When Caesar was making a sacrifice, the seer Spurinna warned him to look out for danger, which would come no later than the Ides of March. The day before the same Ides, when a king's bird was flying toward Pompey's Senate Chamber, with a laurel sprig in its mouth, other birds of various kinds from a nearby grove attacked it and tore it to pieces in the same Chamber. And that very night, which ushered in the fatal day, Caesar himself had a dream, in which he was sometimes flying above the clouds and sometimes joining his right hand with that of Jupiter, while his wife Calpurnia had a vision in which the pediment of the house fell in and her husband was run through in her arms. Then suddenly the doors of the bedchamber flew open of their own accord.[22]

[21] Ibid., 16-17.
[22] Ibid., 38.

The closing words of the author further reflect a supernatural element to Suetonius's biography:

> He died in the fifty-sixth year of his life and was included in the ranks of the gods, not only by formal decree but also by the conviction of the common people. Indeed, at the first games, which were given after his deification by his heir Augustus, a comet shone, appearing around the eleventh hour for seven days in succession and it was believed to be the soul of Caesar who had been received into heaven. For this reason, a star is placed on top of the head of his statue. It was decided that the Senate Chamber, in which he was killed, should be closed off and that senate meetings were never to take place on the Ides of March, which should be renamed the Day of Parricide. Of the murderers, virtually none survived more than three years or met a natural end. All were condemned, each meeting a different fate, some by shipwreck, others in battle. A few even took their own lives with the same dagger they had used to make their impious attack on Caesar.[23]

One may claim that the gospels are mere mythic accounts with no trace of historicity, except for the probable existence of a man named Jesus, due to the miracle and supernatural claims discussed by the authors. However, as seen in these excerpts from Suetonius, there are supernatural and miracle claims in Roman biographies, and they are very much an element of ancient biography as genre. It seems unreasonable to conclude that the majority of Suetonius's biography should be taken as nonhistorical or nonfactual simply because it also contains miraculous, prophetic, and supernatural stories. Likewise, it seems unreasonable to conclude that the gospels can be similarly dismissed simply due to the presence of such elements.

Analysis of Mark's Biography of Jesus

The author of the gospel of Mark is traditionally thought to be John Mark, who is first identified in the New Testament in Acts 12:12, when his mother's home is the first destination for Peter, who has been miraculously released from prison, and the meeting site for Christians in Jerusalem. This early association with Peter is further reinforced by Mark being Barnabas's choice as an associate to accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first mission to Asia Minor.[24]

---

[23] Ibid., 41-42.
[24] Acts 13:5 (All New Testament translations are from New American Standard Version, unless otherwise noted).

Barnabas was a leading figure in the early church in Jerusalem and undoubtedly well acquainted with Peter.[25] Although Paul and Barnabas would have a falling out over the issue of Mark,[26] who left them early in their first missionary journey,[27] Mark is mentioned in one of the later epistles of Paul as having contributed to Paul's ministry.[28]

William Lane Craig states that there is an "unbroken tradition" that identifies John Mark with Mark, the author of the gospel of Mark.[29] That tradition is recorded by Eusebius in his *Church History*: "Peter's hearers, not satisfied with a single hearing or with the unwritten teaching, of the divine message, pleaded with Mark, whose gospel we have, to leave them a written summary of the teaching given to them verbally, since he was a follower of Peter."[30] Eusebius records that Mark was the leader of the church in Alexandria and that Papias, second-century bishop, relates that John, the gospel author, stated that "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord."[31] Eusebius also records a similar testimony by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origin.[32]

One small piece of evidence for Mark relating eyewitness testimony is found in the scene where Jesus was feeding five thousand people. Mark states, "And he commanded them all to sit down by groups on the green grass."[33] The specificity of "green grass" instead of just "grass" indicates that Mark was an eyewitness or was relating eyewitness testimony. One also reads of this scene in John's gospel, but John adds that the miracle took place near Passover. This detail

---

[25] Acts 4:36.
[26] Acts 15:37–40.
[27] Acts 13:13.
[28] 1 Timothy 4:11.
[29] William Lane Craig, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 21.
[30] Eusebius, *The Church History,* trans. Paul Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 73.
[31] Ibid., 84 and 129–30.
[32] Ibid., 183; 218; and 226.
[33] Mark 6:39.

fits well with Mark stating that the grass was green because the grass would be green at just that time of year.[34]

In Mark's gospel, we have both similar and dissimilar opening features to that of Suetonius's biography of Caesar. In the preface, Mark writes: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"[35] Mark introduces John the Baptist with this citation of Isaiah 40:3. The mode of Mark's book is continuous, block narrative. Mark is constantly shifting scenes, sometimes with the word "immediately." The length of an English translation of Mark is approximately 15,000 words, putting it in the mid-sized range typical of Graeco-Roman biography. The structure of Mark is broadly chronological, starting with Jesus' baptism, then proceeding to the calling of the first disciples, and the healings and teachings, and finally ending with his arrest and crucifixion. However, one may also argue that the sections are connected geographically, especially considering that many scenes begin with a geographical citation, for example: "They came to Capernaum,"[36] "He went from there to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan,"[37] and "As they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives."[38]

The scale of Mark, compared to Suetonius, is narrower. Mark is more concerned about telling his readers of Jesus' healings, miracles, and death than any of other persons, places, or events. Mark was probably the first gospel to be written, and the other synoptic gospel writers used it in composing their gospel narratives. Thus, if one dates the book of Mark as early as the

[34] John 6:4.
[35] Mark 1:1-3.
[36] Mark 9:33.
[37] Mark 10:1.
[38] Mark 11:1.

mid-first century, the author of Mark would have still been within reach of other eyewitness observers. This is very significant because, unlike Suetonius's biography of Caesar, Mark had close contact with direct observers, which to the first-century reader was deemed more historically accurate. Richard Bauckham, while speaking at the Kistemaker Academic Lecture Series, stated that a contemporary biography and good history come about when the author is able to make personal contact with people who had known the person. According to Bauckham, personal sources are always better than written sources, and a circumstance where the biographer falsely claims to have had a personal source, but in reality relied on a written source, shows the value and significance of personal sources to readers living during Antiquity.[39] This point is illustrated in Eusebius's *Church History* by Papias, the second century church bishop:

> If I met with any one who had been a follower of the elders anywhere, I made it a point to inquire what were the declarations of the elders; what was said by Andrew, Peter, or Philip; what by Thomas, James, John, Matthew, or any other of the disciples of our Lord; what was said by Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord. For I do not think that I derived so much benefit from books as from the living voice of those that are still surviving.[40]

The setting of Mark begins in Galilee and ends in Jerusalem. The time is more difficult to determine because Mark does not give any of his sections specific dates, nor does he say who was the reigning emperor at the time. However, modern readers can tell the time frame because of Mark's mention of kings, such as Herod. There are also instances where the reader can distinguish the month or day because of references to Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Sabbath. Modern archeology can also date Mark's mention of a denarius in Mark, chapter twelve, which reads, "Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement. They came and said to Him . . . 'Is it lawful to pay a poll tax to

[39] Richard Bauckham, "The Gospels as Historical Biography" (lecture, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, February 22, 2011).
[40] Eusebius, *The Church History,* 126.

Caesar, or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?' But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, 'Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at.' They brought one. And He said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' And they said to Him, 'Caesar's.'"[41] Every denarius discovered from that time shows the image and inscription that Mark records, enabling modern readers to date events within Mark's work.

With regards to motifs, William Lane Craig states: "The wilderness motif in the prologue and throughout the gospel displays a significant grasp of OT revelation and its relevance for the church."[42] Throughout Mark there are other motifs such of Jesus' identity. Within the first chapter there is a sense of Jesus wanting to keep his identity hidden, but many disobey him and tell others of what he had done. The motif of identity is evident in chapter eight when Jesus asked Peter, "'Who do people say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.' Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.'"[43]

Mark's style of writing is not as refined as Suetonius's. Although it is not as stylistically sophisticated, it is descriptive. Mark is very aware of the contemporary landscape as he show's by references to specific places in his narrative. Mark states, "Again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis."[44] Some scholars have suggested this verse shows that Mark was unaware of the geography of Palestine because Sidon is north of both Tyre and Galilee, meaning Jesus would have traveled north to go south. Because of this, some suggest that Mark was an individual who had not lived in the area,

[41] Mark 12:13-16.
[42] Craig, *The Gospel of Mark*, 23.
[43] Mark 8: 27-29.
[44] Mark 7:31.

and so his work must be questioned.[45] However, more careful scholarship, using topographical maps, reveals that Jesus would not have gone to Galilee from Tyre because of a steep mountain, which would have made the journey very difficult if not impossible.[46] Jesus and the disciples went north to Sidon so they could come down a trade route, which runs along the Jordan River. Thus, the skeptical argument proves to be flawed, and it is more widely acknowledged that Mark was very precise in his account of geography and other important facts.

Specific descriptions of John's clothing and eating habits—"John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey,"[47]—are similar to Suetonius's specific descriptions of Caesar, but there is no mention of Jesus' dress or diet in Mark. There are some smooth transitions, which show sophistication, such as the shift of John the Baptist announcing the one to come and Jesus' first mention. In Mark's quotations of Jesus, one reads a cryptic, metaphoric language used by Jesus. Jesus explains in chapter four that he only speaks in parables to the crowds but explains everything to the disciples. The majority of Jesus' dialogues are teachings that use complex, metaphoric language. One instance of this is in chapter eight: "And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, 'Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.' They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread."[48]

There is a mysterious tone throughout the first half of the book. Jesus is introduced as a mysterious man who works miracles, which are not approved by teachers of the law. This is especially prominent at the end of chapter four describing conversation between the disciples:

---

[45] Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark* (London: Westminster Press, 1978), 153.
[46] Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, *Israel: A Country Study* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 130.
[47] Mark 1:6.
[48] Mark 8:14.

"They became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'"[49] Mark creates a suspenseful tone through foreshadowing events. After Jesus predicts his death again to the disciples, before entering Jerusalem where he is well received, he overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. This angers the chief priests and teachers of the law, so they plot a way to kill him but are afraid because of the crowd's amazement with his teachings.

Mark seems to have written his book for the purpose of spreading the message of who Jesus was and why others should aspire to such a virtuous life. The Platonic idea of virtue is a characteristic of Graeco-Roman biography. Similar to Suetonius's portrayal of Caesar, Mark shows the virtues of Jesus indirectly. Burridge states,

> Jesus' virtues emerge through stories which display his compassion for the crowd who were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34); or his concern for the outcast by his touching a leper, 'moved with pity' (Mark 1:41); or his quick mind to avoid the questioner's trap (Mark 12:17). Such indirect displays of the subject's virtues are common in bios.[50]

Analysis of Plutarch's Biography of Caesar

Plutarch (46 CE–120 CE) was a very influential writer born in Chaeronea, Greece. He studied in the academy at Athens under Ammonius, traveled widely, including two trips to Rome, and at some point received Roman citizenship. He was the priest for Apollo at Delphi for many years.[51] Stadter writes in the introduction to his translation of Plutarch's *Caesar* that "it is probable that a page or two is missing which would have treated Caesar's ancestry (the family traced itself back to Iulus, the son of Aeneas, the Trojan hero who founded Rome, and to Venus, Aeneas' mother) and his appearance and fundamental qualities."[52] The mode of representation is

---

[49] Mark 4:41.
[50] Burridge, *What are the Gospels,* 202.
[51] Plutarch, *Roman Lives,* trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), x.
[52] Ibid., 299.

continuous narrative prose, and it is likely that the work was distributed in oral and written form for a ruling, elite audience.[53] The work consists of approximately 24,500 words and is structured chronologically from Caesar's early life until death.

Plutarch designed his life of Caesar to show Caesar in comparison with Alexander the Great. Stadter writes, "Plutarch knew from his rhetorical training that comparison was a powerful means of analysis and instruction. Comparison of the lives of two men would reveal the underlying qualities of each and highlight their similarities and differences."[54] Friedrich Leo, the German classical philologist has divided ancient biography into two types: "Alexandrian" and "Peripatetic." David E. Aune writes in his article, "The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography,"

> The second type, 'Peripatetic' biography, originated with the early Peripatetic school founded by Aristotle and took the form of *chronologically ordered* narrative particularly useful for depicting the lives of generals and statesmen. A major exponent of this biographical style was Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. A.D. 50-120), an extraordinarily prolific encyclopedic scholar. Twenty-three sets of his 'parallel lives' have survived, in which he compares a famous Greek with an equally famous Roman. Most of these lives emphasize the private virtues (rarely the vices) of famous public men.[55]

Plutarch begins, "Once Sulla was in power he tried to persuade Caesar, using a combination of inducements and threats, to divorce Cornelia, the daughter of the former autocrat, Cinna, and when this attempt failed, he confiscated her dowry and turned it over to the public treasury."[56] This abrupt beginning suggests that there are missing pages that the original work would have included. In the second chapter, Plutarch tells the story of Caesar being caught by pirates in which one learns that Caesar wrote poetry and prose. Additionally, Plutarch shows anecdotally Caesar's virtue of fearlessness through his direct threats and criticisms towards the pirates. Plutarch is more precise than Suetonius in giving additional details. For instance, while

---

[53] Ibid., xiv.
[54] Ibid., xiii.
[55] David E. Aune, "The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography," *Mosaic* 20, no. 4 (1989): 4.
[56] Plutarch, "Caesar," *302.*

Suetonius and Plutarch both write of Caesar's studying at Rhodes, it is Plutarch who tells more specifically that Caesar studied under "Apollonius the son of Molo, a famous teacher of rhetoric and, by all accounts, a good man too, whose lectures were attended by Cicero as well. It is said that Caesar had a remarkable gift for political oratory and worked very assiduously to develop this natural talent."[57] Furthermore, there are some differences between Suetonius's and Plutarch's accounts of chronology. Plutarch records that Caesar was held captive for 38 days by pirates, where as Suetonius states that Caesar was held for 40 days.[58]

Analysis of Luke's Biography of Jesus

Like Plutarch in his biography of Caesar, Luke was not an eyewitness to the events that occurred during Jesus' life. Luke writes,

> Inasmuch as 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 for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.[59]

Of the four works considered, Luke's preface is the most dissimilar to Suetonius and Plutarch because of its direct authorial intention. However, Luke also is the only work of the four being considered that is actually preserved in complete manuscripts that include the preface. In contrast to Mark but similar to what was probably in Plutarch's preface, Luke gives an account of Jesus' birth and a story of Jesus' boyhood at the temple. Moreover, Luke gives a complete genealogy of Jesus, tracing him back to Adam. This is very similar to what may have been Plutarch's preface of Caesar, namely one including a detailed genealogy tracing Caesar back to

[57] Ibid., 303.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Luke 1:1-4.

Aeneas, the hero from the Trojan War and beginnings of Rome.[60] Luke's prologue has many parallels in Graeco-Roman biography but not in the two works being examined here. The mode of Luke's book is prose with dialogue, drama, songs, teachings, sermons, and continuous narrative. In the beginning of Luke, there is dialogue between people and angels, a song of Mary, and a song of Zechariah. The length of an English translation of Luke is approximately 25,700 words, making it just a thousand words longer than Plutarch's biography of Caesar.

The work is mostly chronologically and geographically based. However, following his preface, Luke gives a detailed account of John the Baptist's birth, foretold by an angel, then the birth of Jesus, foretold by an angel. There is a symmetrical structure between the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. One begins with the preface, the birth of John the Baptist being foretold, the birth of Jesus being foretold, the meeting of their mothers, Mary's song, the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah's song, and then the birth of Jesus.

The organization of Luke's beginning and work overall is highly sophisticated. Luke's style of writing is extremely detailed, perhaps due to his medical background as a physician. He provides precise details of chronology and time, such as: "In the time of Herod . . .",[61] "In the sixth month, God sent the angel . . .",[62] and "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea . . .".[63] Luke is a careful historian who consistently explains the reasons events are occurring the way they are. One instance of this is the explanation of why Joseph went from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea just prior to Jesus' birth. He states in chapter two: "Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while

[60] Plutarch, "Caesar," 299.
[61] Luke 1:5.
[62] Luke 1:26.
[63] Luke 3:1.

Quirinius was governor of Syria."[64] In addition to songs and narrative, Luke includes accounts of Jesus' teachings, the most notable being the Sermon on the Mount, which is not found in Mark. The relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist is woven throughout the first third of Luke's gospel, further showing its higher complexity in terms of style compared to Mark.

Luke has reoccurring statements just as Mark does. For instance, Luke writes, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."[65] The phrase is used again later in the same chapter: "his mother treasured all these things in her heart."[66] The opening material concerning Jesus is fairly straightforward compared to Mark, whose opening is more abrupt. Both accounts stress the spreading of the news of Jesus without Jesus telling them not to. There are also some stories that are shared between Luke and Mark, such as the healing of the Paralytic and Jesus' being questioned about fasting, which read almost verbatim between the two accounts. There is similar content in Luke as there is in Mark, such as the Pharisees' and teachers' of law planning to kill Jesus.

Over all, Luke's gospel is more elaborate and detailed than Mark's. However, there are some elements in each of the gospels that help explain the other. For instance, when Jesus is taken before Pilate in Luke, the people begin to cry out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" A careful reader may wonder why the crowd would ask for Barabbas' release. The answer is in Mark, where Mark explains, "It was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did."[67]

---

[64] Luke 2:1-2.
[65] Luke 2:19.
[66] Luke 2:51.
[67] Mark 15:6.

Another critical point to be understood is that Luke intended for his gospel to be read in relationship with his other work, Acts. Luke and Acts should be read sequentially. Thus, it would seem that if there were a genre Luke intended for his gospel, it would probably be the same as his sequential book, Acts, which reads like a first-hand account and history of the first Christians. Acts may be read as the continuation of Jesus' working spiritually through Peter and Paul, who form the main subjects of the book.

The purpose of Luke's book is clearly stated in his preface, emphasizing the authenticity of the work. Luke uses the word "certainty," the Greek word *asphaleia*, which has the notion of firmness, safety, and security.[68] Theophilus was living at the early stages of the Christian movement when the Jewish communities, as well as from Roman pagan groups, were criticizing Christianity. Thus, one can understand Luke's prologue (authorial statement of purpose) as a work that would confirm the beliefs of the early Christian communities. Luke was interested in giving an authentic account of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, as well as Jesus' theological significance so to bring the Christian community, which Theophilus was a part of, certainty that their beliefs were reasonably based.

Conclusions

Richard Bauckham explains that different genres influence each other and that the rules of genres are not strict but flexible. Within biographical genres there is historical biography. Within historical biography there is political biography, biography of philosophers, and biography of holy men. Burridge argues that we do not have to assign the gospels to a specific category of biography in order to understand the gospels as biography. Bauckham thinks it is possible to see Jesus as a unique figure in field of biography but still see the gospels as biblical

[68] William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1100.

history. He suggests that we should see the gospels as not just philosophical biography but also political biography. Luke varies his style to the suitability of his subject matter. The gospel authors saw Jesus as a king. In the first two chapters, Luke is less interested in Herod than he is in Caesar. It was Augustus's orders that set the stage for Jesus' appearance. The angels announce to shepherds that messianic peace has come, an event that can be contrasted with the political and civil peace of *Pax Romana*. Thus, this brings the gospels closer to political biography.

In conclusion, the gospel narratives of Mark and Luke have many similar characteristics to Suetonius's and Plutarch's biography of Julius Caesar. Understanding genre as being flexible is critical to this thesis because there are differences among the four works considered, but it may be established that these four works bear a resemblance that outweighs their differences. Using the opening and the external and internal features as the means of identification, it is possible to align the gospels with the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. Some of the commonalities in both Suetonius and Plutarch and Mark and Luke include the ancestry in the opening of the work, the use of songs, the relative length, the extended treatment of death, the display of a character's virtues through deeds and words, and the occurrence of supernatural events. If this thesis is correct and the gospels can be considered Graeco-Roman biography, then they should be viewed with the same level of historicity as the works of Suetonius and Plutarch.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Eusebius, *The Church History.* Translated by Paul Maier. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007.

Plutarch. *Roman Lives.* Translated by Robin Waterfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Suetonius. *The Lives of the Caesars.* Translated by Catharine Edwards. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Secondary Sources

Aune, David E.. "The Gospels as Hellenistic Biography." *Mosaic 20,* no. 4, 1989: 1-10.

Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.

Bauckham, Richard. "The Gospels as Historical Biography." Lecture, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, February, 22, 2011.

Burridge, Richard A. *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography,* 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004.

Cox, Patricia. *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Craig, William L. *The Gospel of Mark.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.

Lynch, Joseph H. *Early Christianity: A Brief History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Israel: A Country Study, Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

Mounce, William D. *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Nineham, Dennis. *Saint Mark*. London: Westminster Press, 1978.

Renan, Ernst. *The Life of Jesus.* London: Trübner & Co., 1864.

Votaw, C.W., *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Graeco-Roman World.* Fortress Press, Facet Books, 1970.