The Gospels as Literary Works

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- Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament
- Words of Delight – expanded for the whole Bible
- See also his Dictionary of Biblical Imagery
Their Literary Form

What kind of writings are the Gospels?
What is the Overall Genre of the Gospels?

Some Suggestions:
- Biography?
- Propaganda?
- Dramatic History?
- Collections of Stories?
Genre "Biography"?

- Obviously Gospels are:
  - Presenting information about Jesus
  - Jesus actually lived in history
  - So biographical in some sense

- Not biography in modern scholarly sense:
  - Not by uninvolved, detached observer
  - Not giving all important dates & facts
  - Not primarily personal reminiscences and character studies
Genre "Biography"?

- More like biography in ancient, popular sense:
  - Author has practical concerns
  - Acquainting reader w/ historical person
  - Giving an account of his deeds, words
  - Resemble ancient biographies about:
    - Socrates, Epictetus, Apollonius
  - But Gospels concentrate on Jesus' death, and on reactions to him
Genre "Propaganda"?

- Also popularly called:
  - PR, sales pitch, hype
- The Gospels are trying to convince readers that Jesus is vitally important & to move them to respond to him.
- But propaganda
  - Seeks to propagate ideas or attitudes
  - A dirty word today, since it usually involves:
    - Playing fast & loose with the truth;
    - Working on fears, prejudices, exciting emotions.
Genre "Propaganda"?

- Gospel writers are inviting a reader response.
  - Not mainly interest or imagination
  - But rather faith or trust in Jesus

- Gospel writers are surprising:
  - They restrain their post-Easter faith in telling the story.
  - They let the events tell their own story.
Genre "Dramatic History"?

- The Gospels are telling a dramatic story of the person, actions, and impact of Jesus, a real figure in history.
- They do in some ways look more like plays than modern narratives.
- Roland Frye thinks the Gospels should be classed as dramatic histories, like those of:
  - Shakespeare
  - George Bernard Shaw
Characteristics of Dramatic History

- Essentially fair representation of events
- Directed to a broad, general audience
- Condensed to hold attention
- Use representative (sample) people, incidents, actions to give accurate picture while keeping length down
Collections of Stories?

- In contrast to modern biographies, the Gospels are most striking in being a collection of stories:
  - Incidents, speeches, sayings
- The Gospels are action-packed
  - Numerous brief stories allow more of this than connected narrative does.
Collections of Stories?

- They center on Jesus
  - Person and work
  - Explain and celebrate Jesus
  - Use narrative to show:
    - His actions
    - His words
    - Responses of others to him
Collections of Stories?

- They contain varied materials
  - Probably used independently before compilation
- Various categories of narratives
  - Sketched or detailed events, dialogues
- Words of Jesus:
  - Brief sayings
  - Extended discourse
  - Parables
Summary on Genre

Gospels are like:

- Ancient, popular biography
- Seeking to propagate faith
- Dramatic history
- Collections of stories
Their Techniques

How do the Gospels do this?
Gospel Techniques

- Restraint & objectivity
- Concise, compressed accounts
- Very concrete narration
- Selection of materials
- Variety
- Sampling
Restraint & Objectivity

- Gospels unusual here, even compared to ancient biographies
- Authors let Jesus speak & act
  - Do not try to persuade or to influence the reader by evaluative comments
  - Only technique used here is selection
Concise & Compressed

- Especially in the Synoptics, most incidents are:
  - Single scene
  - Two actors (group as unit)
  - Told w/ very economical use of words

- John works with fewer accounts, but longer and more detailed.
Concrete Narration

- To avoid danger in brief accounts of generality, blandness...
- ... Use specific incidents, with short, vivid description (like artist’s sketch)
- ... Use direct discourse
- ... Characterization by actor's words or actions rather than by description
Selection of Materials

- The author selects:
  - Which event he will recount
  - How he will tell it

- Author communicates his emphasis:
  - Not by evaluation
  - But by space provided
  - By expectations aroused
Variety

- The author groups material to provide variety:
  - Alternation of actions/words
  - Alternation of miracles/controversies
  - Alternation of followers/opponents
- Helps keep attention of audience
Sampling

- Rather than give a full report, the Gospel writers give us samples of Jesus' speech and actions.

- Various kinds of samples:
  - Types of miracles
  - Various kinds of people
  - Sorts of opposition
  - Speeches on various occasions
Jesus' Speeches

Typical features of his discourses
Jesus' Speeches

- Aphoristic
- Poetic
- Patterned
- Subversive
- Fusion of genres
- Structured
Aphoristic

- Brief (sound-bites)
- Memorable (structure, word-play)
- Proverb-like

- "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."
- "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the ditch."
Poetic

- Not rhyming or metric, but ...
- Often Hebrew parallelism
- Concrete images
- Metaphor and simile
- Paradox
- Hyperbole
- "It is easier for a camel to go thru the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven."
Patterned

- Repetition
- Balance

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you..."
Subversive

- Jesus attacks our everyday way of thinking
- He undermines our conventional values
- Consider the Beatitudes
Fusion of Genres

Sermon on Mount:
- Beatitude
- Character sketch
- Proverb
- Satire
- Lyric
- Parable

Sermon as whole:
- Utopian literature
- Inaugural address
- Wisdom literature
Structured

- Simple
- Highly artistic
- Single themes or three-fold examples
- "The artistry of the design is apparent. There is no reason why the sermon as it stands could not be exactly the form Jesus' longer sermons took." – WOL,120
The End

Try to be on the lookout for these features.