

WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

I. Introduction

II. The Significance of Jesus

A. Jesus of Nazareth – the most significant figure in Western Civilization

B. Followers of Jesus

C. Non-believers

D. Well-known?

III. This course

A. Genre identification.

B. Unique contribution.

C. Contemporary scholarship.

III. How have people viewed the Gospels?

A. Mark Strauss¹

1. *They have a history of composition.*
2. *They are set within a specific historical context.*
3. *They are meant to convey accurate historical information.*

Strauss says, “We can classify the Gospels as *historical narrative motivated by theological concerns*. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events.”²

4. However

¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 27-29.

² Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits*(2007) 29.

B. Supernatural Histories

C. Natural Histories

Heinrich Paulus, *The Life of Jesus* (1927)

D. Myths

David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835)

E. History, Myth or What?

F. The importance of genre identification

IV. What is a Gospel? Ancient Biography

A. Ancient Greco-Roman biographies (*bioi*)

Plutarch [46-120 AD], *The Life of Alexander*, chapter 1. In writing for this book the [life] of Alexander the king ... I have before me such an abundance of materials that I shall make no other preface but to beg my readers not to complain of me if I do not relate all [his] celebrated exploits or even any one in full detail, but in most instances abridge the story. I am writing not histories but lives [*bioi*], and a man's most conspicuous achievements do not always reveal best his strength or his weakness. Often a trifling incident, a word or a jest, shows more of his character than the battles where he slays thousands, his grandest mustering of armies, and his sieges of cities. Therefore as portrait painters work to get their likenesses from the face and the look of the eyes, in which the character appears, and pay little attention to other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to dwell especially on the things that express the souls of these men, and through them portray their lives, leaving it to others to describe their mighty deeds and battles.

B. What kind of literature/genre is a Gospel?

1. Pre-19th cent—biographies
2. 19th and 20th cent—not biographies
3. 21st cent—Gospels as *bioi*

C. The Gospels as ancient religious biographies

1. Recent scholarship

Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

2. Gospels are unique

3. What is included ancient *bioi* (“Lives”)?

- A miraculous beginning and a miraculous ending to his life
- Evidence of the Jesus’ teaching and deeds were divine
- How Jesus’ character was reflected in his reactions to various challenges
- How consistent Jesus’ character was from the beginning of the Gospel to the end