MOROGORO BIBLE COLLEGE

2 WHAT is a ‘GOSPEL’?

# Which Gospels?

## apocryphal Gospels

### Includes Gospel of Thomas (collection of sayings of Jesus), Gospel of Peter (rehash of Matt, Mark and Luke), etc.

### Simon Gathercole: when we compare them with the gospel message summarised in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, the four canonical Gospels have all four key elements, but the other Gospels do not have all four

#### Jesus as Messiah/Christ

#### Jesus’ vicarious death

#### Jesus’ resurrection on the third day

#### fulfillment of the Scriptures

## canonical Gospels

### restraint about Jesus’ supernatural powers, etc.

### recognised by early church as Scripture in process through 2nd and 3rd centuries AD: key issue was association with apostle

#### Matthew and John thought to be by apostles

#### Luke a travel companion of Paul

#### Mark the scribe of Peter

### first called ‘Gospels’ by Justin Martyr in mid-2nd century: titles *kata Markon* (according to Mark), etc. added later

# The nature of the Gospels

## why ask this question?

## ancient readers used to different genres: history, rhetoric, poetry, drama, etc.

## ‘gospel’ = message

### Greek *euangelion* in secular use for good news of victory in battle brought by messenger, e.g. Priene inscription

### used in Greek OT for announcement that Yahweh was acting to save his people, e.g. Isaiah 40:8; 52:7

### *euangelion* in Paul is consistently a *spoken* thing (60 times): never written, e.g. Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1

## two approaches to question of genre of the Gospels

### (1) The Gospels are like other ancient writings, so seek parallels for comparison: likely to have some truth, since would have to appeal on basis of something people had a chance of seeing as a familiar literary form

#### Key proposal: ‘lives’ (*bioi*)

##### Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 1.1 (1st century AD):

I am not a writer of histories but of biographies*.* My readers therefore must excuse me if I do not record all events or describe in detail, but only briefly touch upon, the noblest and the most famous. For the most conspicuous do not always or of necessity show a man’s virtues or failings, but it often happens that some light occasion, a word or a jest, gives a clearer insight into character, than battles with their slaughter of tens of thousands and the greatest array of armies and sieges of cities. As painters produce a likeness by the representation of the countenance and the expression of the face, in which the character is revealed, without troubling themselves about the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to look rather into the signs of a man’s character, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of great events and battles.

###### histories describe events: *bioi* focus on person (seen in verb subjects)

###### ethos very important to *bioi*

##### Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography,* SNTSMS 70, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992 (3rd edition: 2018)

###### compares key features of *bioi* and establishes general list of features of Graeco-Roman biographies

* opening features
* title
* opening formulae
* subject
* tends to be subject of large proportion of main verbs
* given lion’s share of space—pie chart of Mark
* external features
* style, structure, etc.
* internal features
* setting
* topics/content
* values and attitudes espoused and promoted
* author’s intention and purpose

### (2) the Gospels are *unlike* other ancient writings

• kerygmatic hypothesis

• C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936): Acts 10:34-43 outlines message preached by apostles, in common with other speeches in Acts and summaries in Paul of his gospel message. Thus summary of kerygma (which Dodd contrasted with didache, teaching for those already Christians)

• John the Baptist, OT fulfilled (‘this is that…’) vv 37, 43

• Jesus’ ministry described vv 38-39a

• passion narrative v 39b

• resurrection vv 40-41

• command to make disciples v 42

• Key step in Dodd’s argument: these sections correspond to structure of Mark

• John the Baptist, fulfilment of OT (Isaiah quoted) 1:1-15

• Jesus’ ministry 1:16-8:30

###### • passion narrative 8:31-15:47

• resurrection 16:6 (? plus lost ending)

• command to tell others 16:7

##### Gospels therefore as testimony about Jesus. Not biographical, because not remembering Jesus as past figure.

### truth in both views?

‘Here, then, in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, each with its own peculiar emphasis, may be found the deposit of early Christian explanation: here are the voices of Christians explaining what led to their existence — how they themselves came to be: telling the story to themselves, that they may tell it to others, or even telling it directly to those others.’ (C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd edn, Black’s NT Commentaries, London, A. & C. Black, 1981, 133)

### key take-away: *the Gospels are books about Jesus*

#### so make that the key question you ask in each Gospel: what is this teaching about Jesus—who he is and what he has come to accomplish?

#### Secondly, ask: what is this teaching about what it means to follow Jesus? But remember this is secondary—the first focus must be on Jesus himself.

# Why were the Gospels written?

## evangelistic reason John 20:31

## didactic reason Luke 1:3-4; note Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)

## geographical reason

## historical reason Luke 1:2

# How were the Gospels written?

Luke 1:1-4

## deposit of eyewitness testimony v 2

## work of the ‘many’ v 1

## Luke’s own contribution v 3