CAN ONE SPEAK OF A GOSPEL GENRE?

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ABSTRACT

We should not speak of a gospel genre both because the word ‘gospel’ was never the name of a literary or sub-literary genre and because the internal literary differences among the canonical gospels preclude their belonging to a common genre. These differences also show that none of the canonical gospels is a biography, and that rather than seek a generic identification of Mark and John it is more fruitful to determine the plot types that inform them. As others have seen, Luke-Acts belongs to the genre of historiography and Matthew to a genre that may be called ‘manual of discipline’ or ‘community rule’.

In his most recent and lamentably final reflections on the matter of ‘gospel’ as a generic category, Willem Vorster asked the question: ‘Can one speak of a gospel genre?’ While he recognised that ‘Gospel According to N’ titles are not original to our texts, and that they appear in texts that are manifestly different in content and ‘text type’, indicating that ‘gospel’ was not a genre name, he concluded by answering his question affirmatively. He argued that ‘the narrative character’ of the canonical Gospels rendered them members of ‘the same genre’. They are ‘narratives about the life, deeds, and words of Jesus’, and this allows us ‘to speak of a sub-genre of narrative as gospel genre’. More


3 ‘Gospel genre’, p1078.
precisely, analogies among the canonical Gospels and ancient biographies (vitae, bioi), despite the differences among the former and the diversity among the latter, render the canonical Gospels as biographies. In this essay in memory of Willem Vorster, a truly good friend and most respected colleague, I wish respectfully to disagree with his affirmative answer to his own question, to raise some questions about the value of identifying the canonical Gospels as biographies, and to reflect further on his notion of 'text-types' and its relationship to the notion of genre. And last, I wish that Willem Vorster were around to respond to my engagement with his thoughts on a topic that was of such deep concern to both of us. In the past, our candid and even heated exchanges were the source of our mutual respect, and not least of all of our friendship.

1 CAN ONE SPEAK OF A GOSPEL GENRE?

As Vorster acknowledged, the word 'gospel' was never the name of a literary genre or even of a sub-literary genre when the texts later given 'Gospel According to N' titles were composed. At best, the word 'Gospel' in these titles was an ecclesiastical classificatory category created in the second half of the second century CE, and at a time when other texts of very different literary character received the same formulaic titles. While it is unclear whether or not the creators of the titles for the canonical Gospels saw the titles as referring to a literary genre, the literary and material differences among the many texts bearing such titles indicates that there was no widespread agreement that 'gospel' referred to a literary (or sub-literary) cultural medium of communication or art. What is more, because some of the non-canonical 'Gospels'

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4 'Gospel genre', p1079.
clearly belong to other identifiable genres, their manifest generic character deprives the word ‘gospel’ in their titles of any literarily generic implications whatsoever. The same, I believe, is true of the titles given to our canonical Gospels. Accepting for the moment Vorster’s assignment of these Gospels to the genre of biography, they are biographies, and therefore to retain the word ‘gospel’ as a generic indicator is worse than irrelevant; it is misleading because it implies that ‘gospel’ is a sub-genre of biography by virtue of the Gospels’ being biographies of Jesus. Surely we would not assign a generic sub-type name, for example, to biographies of Alexander or Pythagoras. Rather, we would speak about biographies of Alexander and Pythagoras. They are not generic sub-types by virtue of their being about these people. And so, I think, we should cease talking about the four canonical Gospels as belonging to the same genre or sub-type of genre, namely ‘gospel’, simply because their common denominator is that they are stories about Jesus. We cannot and should not speak about ‘gospel’ as a genre name—because it was not.

If we exclude the word ‘gospel’ from our discourse about genre, except to use it as a reference to the current titles of texts, we are confronted in the canonical Gospels with the same literary problem posed by the non-canonical Gospels: we must ask of each of them, to what genre does it belong? As the ongoing history of research attests, the answer(s) to this question depend to a great degree on what it is in a given text that provides clues to the corpus of texts to which the text in question generically belongs. That is to say, and here I will use a long-standing distinction in both biblical and literary studies, we must begin with an intrinsic literary analysis (Literarkritik) of the text in question and then attempt to match the results of our analysis with other texts that have a significant number of features in common with the text we started with. Needless to say, in making this move to other texts we will also have to do intrinsic analyses of them and work back and forth between each of them until we feel that we have a secure genre identification. Be this as it may, with the move to other texts we move from literary criticism to literary history (Literaturgeschichte), which has both a synchronically comparative aspect that is concerned with textual and generic relations and a diachronically historical aspect, which is oriented to the evolution of material within a text or to the

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Row, 1988, pp938-950.


8 Ample discussion of this issue may be found in Burridge, What are the Gospels?
history of a genre, plot type, style, or motif. But it may be asked that if this process is as (surely misleadingly) simple as it sounds, why do critics differ so much in their genre identifications? Any even cursory perusal of the scholarly literature on the subject makes it abundantly clear that the differences among genre identifications of individual texts are largely based on the items that are considered to be genre indicators. It is to this point that I would like now to direct our attention, because in my judgment both the differences among the Gospels and problems internal to each of them have not received adequate consideration in the determination of genre indicators. Indeed, intrinsic peculiarities have been disregarded in the process of trying to fit the Gospels into known genres. Specifically, these differences, problems, and peculiarities raise significant questions about both the validity and the value of identifying any or all of the canonical Gospels as biographies.

2 ARE THE CANONICAL GOSPELS BIOGRAPHIES?

To backtrack for a moment, while I concede that the canonical Gospels are to a certain extent 'narratives about the life, deeds, and words of Jesus', and that this commonality differentiates them from non-canonical Gospels, these facts do not of themselves warrant the conclusion that 'gospel' is a sub-genre of narrative. As I have indicated, Vorster himself accepted that they belong to the genre of biography, which is a sub-genre of narrative. But do they belong to this sub-genre? While a number of critics agree that the Gospels are biographies, others disagree. I find the arguments of the latter persuasive, and I have a few of my own to add to them.

Matthew and Luke are the most questionable. On the face of it, they look like Mark and have more in common with Mark and John than with any of the non-canonical Gospels. But appearances are deceptive, for their similarities to Mark are based on the fact that they used Mark as a source for their own works. To my mind, this is one of the most unappreciated and underestimated issues in the genre debate, for methodologically speaking it is not the similarities that should be focal but the differences between Matthew and Luke and their Markan source. Indeed, it was redaction critics, whose concern was with such differences, who first observed that the literary peculiarities of Matthew's Gospel make it look—and function—like a manual of discipline analogous to the Qumran Community Rule (1QS), and the Christian Didache.

9 On literary criticism and literary history, see my Literary criticism for New Testament critics, ch 2, and 'Literary criticism in Biblical Studies'.

Conversely, I would add, where Matthew differs most from such texts as these is precisely where he has used Mark! Matthew’s ‘book’ is in fact the book of the commandments issued by Jesus, to whom ‘all authority in heaven and earth’ had been given, and who sent his disciples to teach these commandments to all the nations (Mt 28:18-20). Matthew’s book contains the commandments issued in advance of the eschatological judgment by the one who will be the judge. Further, instead of merely telling a story about ‘the life, deeds, and words of Jesus’, Matthew’s narrative, both in what he takes over and changes from Mark and in what he adds to it, serves to legitimate Jesus by having his life, deeds, and words fulfill the laws and prophesies of Hebrew scriptures. The significance of the events he narrates about Jesus lies not in their emplotment in a story about Jesus’ life but in the fact that they are fulfillments of scripture. And last, Jesus’ teachings or commandments are self-consciously counterposed to the teachings of the rabbis on the same topics (cf Mt 5-7 and 23), whereas, for example, in Luke (and Acts) discourses are often more the occasion for advancing the plot of Luke’s story. Matthew’s book is not a biography.

In the case of Luke, the most decisive factor in denying that it is either a ‘gospel’ or a biography is the fact that what we call the ‘Gospel according to Luke’ is book one of a two volume continuous narrative whose plot shows how a new people of God emerged out of the old people who rejected what their God was doing in a succession of ‘prophets’ (including Jesus and his apostles) ranging from Moses to Paul. Thus, to say that volume one is a biography of Jesus is totally inadequate as a literary description because it fails to take into account the literary integrity of Luke-Acts. There has been a long history of discussion about this two-volume work belonging to the genre of historiography, and both the history and support for this identification have recently been dealt with by David Aune, who finds the two-volume issue a

Fortress, 1968.

11 The most distinctive feature in Matthew’s characterisation of Jesus is his future role as the eschatological judge. See 7:21-23, 10:32-33, 13:30, 39b-43, 16:27-28, 24:50-51, 25:10-12, 30-46. Reading these passages in a Gospel parallels is all the more revealing of Matthew’s investment in the role of Jesus as judge.

12 Contrary to Burridge, What are the Gospels?, pp191-219, who sees all of the canonical Gospels as biographies, and to Aune, The New Testament in its literary environment, pp46-76. Neither of them do any intrinsic analysis of Matthew. Aune, however, speaks of a plot in Mark’s narrative, but not the one to be discussed later. More significantly, he damningly observes that ‘Greco-Roman biography rarely exhibits a plot’, op cit 49!

13 For a fuller argument, see ch 4 of my Literary criticism for New Testament critics.
major one but also makes the point that I made about Matthew, namely that
where Luke’s first volume differs from Mark the differences prove to be traits
of a known genre, that of ancient historiographical writings. Because Aune’s
case is an extensive one, I will simply defer to him, noting only that he
believes that Matthew, Mark, and John are biographical in genre. For
reasons given above, I disagree with him about Matthew, but I also must dis­
agree with him about Mark and John.

It has long been recognised that the similarities between Mark and John are
central to the determination of their generic identity, whether as ‘gospel’,
‘biography’, ‘aretalogy’, or whatever, precisely because neither of them used
the other as a source. In principle, if neither used the other or a common
source, generic influence is a probable explanation of the similarities between
them. Explanations of the similarities have been of two sorts, both of which
are adequately summarised and evaluated by Vorster and others. Briefly,
therefore, we have on the one hand the view that Mark and John are the end
products of the evolution of the early Christian kerygma: the pre-literary
kerygmatic gospel evolved into full narrative Gospels. Thus, too, because of
this evolution, ‘gospel’ is a uniquely Christian literary genre. By way of
criticism of this theory, much has been made of the fact that the uniqueness of
a genre would render a text shaped according to it unintelligible, because
genres are the conventional media by which meaning is apprehended. Genres
can evolve or be cross-bred (as in mixed genres), but for meaning to be com­
communicated generic keys must be present. Admittedly, the evolutionary theory
is partially correct because it is possible to trace the history of the material in
Mark and John from individual traditions through collections of them into
more or less artful compositions of them in our present texts. However,
beginning with redaction criticism’s identification of the authorial contribu­
tions to our texts, and continuing in the newer literary criticism and numerous

15 See e.g., Norman Perrin, ‘The Literary Gattung ‘Gospel’—Some observations’, ET
82, 1970, pp4-7, and James M Robinson, ‘On the Gattung of Mark (and John)’, in
Jesus and man’s hope, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970, 1, pp99-
129. Most recently, D Moody Smith has reopened the question of John’s dependence
on the synoptic Gospels in light of studies of intertextuality, ‘John and the Synoptics
turgeschichte.’ See also Guelich, ‘The Gospel genre’, Koester, Ancient Christian
Gospels, pp24-31, and Burridge, What are the Gospels?, pp3-25.
17 The source of this notion is E D Hirsch, who is discussed below.
generic studies, it has become increasingly apparent that our texts cannot be comprehended solely on the basis of the history of the material in them. Authorial and generic contributions must be taken into account as we attempt to comprehend the texts as we have them, and what we have seen about Matthew and Luke should suffice to document that point. But the question that remains concerns precisely what generic influences have contributed to shaping the similarities between Mark and John.

The second theory, on the other hand, is one that seeks to find analogies among the Gospels and other texts. Vorster and others, most recently Aune and Richard A Burridge,18 find the analogue in ancient biography. As I have noted, Aune does not consider Luke-Acts to belong to the category of biography. Burridge, however, sees all four Gospels as belonging to it, but to do so he has to climb to a level of generalisation about ancient biographies that ultimately discredits the self-expressed claim that genre is of critical hermeneutical importance.

Aune and Burridge, both of whom are also trained in classical languages and literatures, maintain that the form critical rejection of biography as a generic influence on our Gospels (K L Schmidt; R Bultmann) erred by misunderstanding the nature of ancient biographies and by imputing to them modern notions of biography, in which psychological and personality development are focal. Equally importantly, Aune and Burridge insist, as did Vorster, that the genre of biography in late antiquity was highly diversified and flexible, vastly more so than the form critics realised. For Aune and Burridge, the type of characterisation that we find in the Gospels (Aune excluding Luke-Acts) is totally consistent with some biographies belonging to that diverse and flexible genre. And so they conclude that the Gospels are biographies, and that that is how their intended audiences would have construed them.19 Before we engage the question of the significance of identifying Mark and John as biographies, another aspect of Mark and John must be considered.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, when the genres of whole texts like Gospels and letters began to become an issue, especially in seminars of the Society of Biblical Literature that were designed to address the question of their generic character, a combination of form, redaction, and source criticism led on another front to conclusions that I still think have a fundamental bearing on the generic identity of Mark and John. The broadest conclusion was James M Robinson's determination that the similarities between Mark and John are

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18 See n5, above.
derived on the one hand from the aretalogical sources that they used, and on the other hand from their independent agreement that the true understanding of Jesus came only after his death, which undercut the divine man christology which Robinson and others saw as associated with the aretalogical genre of the sources. In an unpublished seminar paper on the reopening of the question of the genre(s) of Gospel literature, I took Robinson’s insights to their logical conclusion and suggested that Mark and John were parodies of aretalogies. By implication, moreover, Mark and John were also repudiating the divine man christology associated with the genre aretaiology. However, subsequent to the various studies represented by Robinson, debate arose over both the alleged divine man christology and the contention that ‘aretalogy’ was a recognised genre in late antiquity. As a result of the debate, neither the christology nor the genre play much if any of a role in the current discussion. What concerns me in this turn of events, however, is that in removing these ideas Robinson’s baby has been thrown out with the bathwater, for the idea that both Mark and John are parodies of other, similar stories, and perhaps their genre, has not in fact been addressed. The polemical thrust of each of these Gospels is a factor that cannot be ignored, either in intrinsic study or in the quest for the genre of these texts. My own intrinsic studies of Mark and John leave no doubt in my mind about this thrust or, in principle, about the hypothesis that Mark and John are parodies both of the stories they reject and of the genre of those stories (on these points, see further below). Thus, if Aune and Burridge are

21 ‘So-Called Gnostic type Gospels and the problem of “Gospel” as genre’. This was the keynote paper for the SBL task force on Gospel and genre, chaired by Helmut Koester. Burridge, What are the Gospels?, p18, attributes the notion of parody to Robinson and cites the three references in n20, above. I have been unable to find this notion in any of the three essays by Robinson and can only conclude that Burridge cites my conclusion to my discussion of Robinson’s work on p66 of my paper, a paper that is included in Burridge’s bibliography.
correct in seeing that the texts previously referred to as aretalogies were in fact biographies, Mark and John would have to be read as parodies of biographies of Jesus, not as biographies.\textsuperscript{23} If Aune and Burridge prove to be wrong, on the other hand, Mark and John will still be polemical parodies, for this conclusion is a result of intrinsic analysis.

Let us now turn to the question of the significance of identifying Mark and John as biographies. There are two issues at stake in this question. One concerns the relationship between the insights of intrinsic literary criticism and those of comparative or literary historical study. The other concerns the hermeneutical significance of genre identification, a significance associated with the work of E D Hirsch, a literary critic. I will begin with the second issue.

In 1970, when I first wrote on the question of the genre(s) of texts called 'Gospels', I was overwhelmed by Hirsch's insights into genre because I thought that he could help us to move beyond the form critics' sociological correlation between typical forms (\textit{Gattungen}) and typical social situations (\textit{Sitze im Leben}).\textsuperscript{24} My concern at the time was to identify the genres of whole texts, rather than those of their preliterary parts, and to determine the typical social situations in which those genres functioned. In other words, I wanted to apply form criticism's insights into preliterary traditions to whole texts. In this context, Hirsch was interesting because he saw that the genre of the whole informed the composition of the parts into a textual whole. But he also shifted (for me, at least) the sociological aspect of the problem of genre from social institutions like worship, law, or preaching to language as a social institution, which eventually led me into the sociology of knowledge. It was Hirsch who helped me to see that genres are elements in the cultural code by which people communicate. To be sure, genres are still bound up with narrower social situations. Hirsch just placed that fact in a wider context, one which he saw as being of hermeneutically fundamental significance. And it was this significance that lent a certain necessity to the study of genres. A few quotations from Hirsch may help to make my point and at the same time get to the point of the significance of identifying any Gospel at all as a biography.

'All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound'.\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{23} I will pursue this point further, below.


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Validity in interpretation}, p76.
‘...the idea of the whole...governs our understanding’.26

‘Understanding can occur only if the interpreter proceeds under the same system of expectations [as the speaker], and this shared generic conception, constitutive both of meaning and understanding is the intrinsic genre of the utterance’.27

‘The best way to define a genre...is to describe the common elements in a narrow group of texts which have direct historical relationships. Such descriptions can sometimes be very useful propadeutic tools, but they will become less useful to interpretation as their scope becomes broader and more abstract’.28

While the first three quotations underscore the necessity for identifying genres, the last one, in the clause I have italicised, provides a coda that in effect says, ‘but not always’. When the description of a genre becomes too broad and abstract, it loses its hermeneutical significance. Now, we have seen that Vorster had an extremely broad description of ‘gospel’ as a generic class, a subcategory of narrative (as such!) which tells about the life, deeds, and words of Jesus, thus rendering the Gospels as biographies. But he also called attention to the fact that the genre of biography in ‘the ancient Greco-Roman and Semitic worlds’ evidenced a ‘diversity in the different types of biography’,29 which is the very point that enabled Aune and Burridge to classify all or some of the canonical Gospels as biographies. Let us hear Burridge’s conclusions, for they dammingly echo Hirsch’s coda and undercut the hermeneutical significance of reading Gospels as biographies.

Burridge observes that a narrow genre identification is hard to prove but most useful hermeneutically, while a wider genre identification—like biography—is easier to prove but less useful hermeneutically.30 The very diversity and flexibility of the biographical genre produces ‘less direct results’. This is reflected in Burridge’s principle conclusion about the hermeneutical significance of identifying the canonical Gospels as biographies, namely that their biographical character points to their ‘emphasis on the centrality of the person of Jesus’.31 I submit that the very triviality of this conclusion empties the generic classification of the Gospels as biographies of any hermeneutical significance whatsoever. I concede that identifying Matthew as a manual of discipline does have hermeneutical significance, as does the identification of Q and Thomas as belonging to ‘words of the wise’ (J M Robinson). But to clas-

26 Validity in interpretation, p77.
27 Validity in interpretation, pp80-81.
28 Validity in interpretation, p110. (italics mine)
29 ‘Gospel genre’, p1079.
30 What are the Gospels?, p255.
31 What are the Gospels?, pp256-259.
sify Luke-Acts as historiography (which it probably is) and Mark and John as biographies places them in such diversified categories that the categories lack hermeneutical pertinence. These classifications tell us absolutely nothing about these texts that we cannot learn from reading them individually, without comparative reference to other texts. Comparison would only disclose the differences among the many texts. This point therefore leads us back to the first one mentioned earlier, concerning the relationships between the insights of intrinsic analysis and those of comparative or literary historical study.

The conclusion that the person of Jesus is central in the Gospels—because they are biographies—obscures by ignoring the very evidence that would challenge classifying them as biographies. For Mark and John are not simply telling stories about Jesus, any more than Matthew is. Let us consider further some more results of intrinsic studies of each of these Gospels. My comments will be brief and unargued because I have provided longer arguments about both of them elsewhere.

In several essays on Mark I have tried to show that the plot of Mark’s narrative is bound up on the one hand with his focus on the pervasive ignorance of Jesus’ disciples (up to 16:8, the end of the text), and on the other hand with problems in Mark’s time (Mk 13), in which messianic claimants and (their) prophets are seducing members of ‘the elect’ by representing what is for Mark the same errant view of messiah and kingdom that the disciples had held during Jesus’ lifetime. Mark’s total story, which includes a story he attributes to Jesus in Mark 13 (a Markan ‘Acts’, as someone has said), is designed to undercut the basis of the position maintained by the messiahs and prophets. That basis is a story which they told to legitimate their claims that messiah and kingdom (‘the end’) had come or had begun to come in connection with the destruction of the temple. Mark polemically recast that story by introducing and emphasising the notion that the disciples’ understanding had been erroneous, and that to appeal to it in his time was as wrong as it had been in Jesus’ time. And besides, prior to their beginning of the mission Jesus had warned some of the disciples about these ‘false’ messiahs and prophets (Mk 13), while after Jesus’ resurrection some of the disciples met with Jesus in Galilee, where they presumably came to a correct understanding, one that Mark represents in what I have called level two information in his narrative. Level two contains information that only the reader is given to know, and it is imposed upon level one, which consists of what actors other than Jesus know and understand. In this light, then, while I now disagree with Robinson’s focus

32 See the reference to Mark in n 22, and especially ‘“Literarkritik”, the new literary criticism, and the Gospel according to Mark’.
on aretalogy and a divine man christology, I nevertheless agree with him in principle, for Mark was not only rejecting another story, which is to be detected in level one, but he was also parading the genre of that story, whatever it might have been (I don’t know). Equally important, moreover, I cannot envision what our knowing about that genre could tell us about Mark that we cannot know simply from a rigorous intrinsic analysis of Mark. I am certain, however, that that genre was not biography because as such it would have had to have served to legitimate Jesus, whereas the story that Mark rejected served to legitimate the messiahs as prophets. By the same token, Mark’s polemical parody served to delegitimate them, but also to legitimate his own position before the tempted elect for whom he wrote. In sum, Mark’s narrative is about much more than Jesus, and not least of all about many more people than him, people who are ultimately more centrally in focus than he is; Jesus is the one whom others are claiming as the source of their authority, and Mark’s story serves as his counter claim to their’s—which makes for a rather strange biography; which is why it is not one.

As for John, and as Wrede saw long ago, John and Mark share the view that no one in Jesus’ time correctly understood who Jesus was or the significance of his words and deeds until after Jesus’ resurrection. Like Mark, although by different means, John is rejecting an understanding of Jesus that, according to John, obtained in Jesus’ lifetime and in fact led to his death, namely that he was not the expected prophet like Moses (Dt 18:15-22) and, indeed, that he was to be condemned on the basis of Mosaic law (Dt 13:1-5; Ex 31:12-17). Unlike Mark, however, the disciples are not the focus of John’s concern, but the ‘Jews’ who persecuted Jesus and his disciples in Jesus’ time, and also John’s people in his time. John’s book is designed to re-inforce the belief and the identity of persecuted believers who were being expelled from synagogues and in some cases, perhaps, executed. In this context, John affirms that Jesus was the prophet like Moses, but infinitely superior to him, and that Moses himself was both a witness against and the judge of those who persecuted Jesus and his people. Thus John, too, is caught up in a social, political, and religious conflict over legitimacy, this time the legitimacy not only of Jesus but also of his people. There is nothing generically biographical about this, except that those who rejected Jesus rejected his autobiography as it appears in his speeches. In fact, the rejecters used their knowledge of Jesus’ biography to repudiate his autobiography (see further, below, in the next sec-

These few comments on Mark and John show why I am convinced of two things: first, that intrinsic analysis provides insights into them that have been ignored by those who would call our Gospels biographies; and second, that those insights raise serious questions about calling them such. But a third point is also to be made, namely that there is no intrinsic reason to believe that finding a generic analogue for these Gospels would tell us anything significantly new, or hermeneutically significant, about them. I conclude, therefore, that in the case of Mark and John, and also of Luke-Acts, generic identification proves to be hermeneutically irrelevant.34

3 WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ‘GENRE’ AND ‘TEXT TYPE’?

In his last reflections on ‘gospel’ as a generic category, Vorster apparently differentiates between the expressions, ‘genre’ and ‘text type’, while also using them as synonyms. On the one hand, they seem to be differentiated when he says that ‘no genre could consist of such different text types’, or when he asks, is there ‘any text type of antiquity which has the same genre characteristics as the [canonical] gospels’?35 On the other hand, however, Vorster seems to treat these expressions as synonyms when he speaks about ‘text type features’, ‘genre characteristics’, ‘generic text type’, ‘generic type of text’, ‘generic types’, ‘text type ’gospel’, and ‘gospel genre’.36 It would appear from these locutions that ‘text type features’ correspond to ‘generic characteristics’, and that they thereby constitute a ‘generic text type’, a ‘genre’. And so he speaks about a ‘generic text type’ which is ‘a story—about the life, works, and teachings of a person’.37

I do not know either from Vorster’s writings or from my own reading exactly where his use of ‘genre’ and ‘text type’ comes from, but I do believe that distinctions others have made between these expressions may lead us beyond the impasse I have described in the search for the genre(s) of Mark and John. If, as I have claimed, genre identifications hold little if any hope of illuminating these Gospels, it must be asked if this conclusion excludes the relevance of further comparative, literary historical study for Mark and John. My answer is a resounding ‘No’! The answer to the question of genre may be

34 In concluding comments I will address the similarities between Mark and John that the discussion of genre was intended to explain.
37 ‘Gospel genre’, p1079.
irrelevant for them, but comparative study offers insights into them that are of fundamental hermeneutical significance. This can best be appreciated by exploring first some distinctions between ‘genre’ and ‘type’, and then by looking at some ‘types’ that other critics have identified as relevant but, in my judgment, without fully appreciating what they identified.

‘Genre’ and ‘type’ have been distinguished by others in two different ways, both of which are pertinent for our present concerns. Already in 1974 I introduced one of these ways in an essay on genre in the first volume of Semeia.38 Although today I am considerably less ‘structuralist’ than I was then, I think that there is still much in that article that is as relevant today as it was then. The point of the article that is immediately pertinent is the distinction between these terms that was made by T Todorov, literary critic, and Dan Ben Amos, folklorist. Todorov argued that the word ‘genre’ should be used ‘to describe the structural entities which are arrived at inductively from texts, while type should be used to refer to deductive entities which are postulated within a theory of literary discourse.’39 Ben Amos made essentially the same point, although his immediate concern was with folklore genres. He found that in using the word ‘genre’, his colleagues in folklore studies confused two different things when using this word, sometimes referring to cultural media, genres proper or ‘ethnic genres’, and sometimes to universal types or analytical categories. Permit me to quote from my comments in the earlier paper:

Both Todorov and Ben Amos are at pains to disassociate the notion of genre from genre names and to define genres as structured modes of expression within cultural systems of expression (cf the discussion of Hirsch, above in §2). For each of them, genres are expressive modes which are differentiated relatively systematically by cultural conventions; in the forefront of such conventions, but by no means exhausting them, are structural [syntagmatic] traits which function as conventional signals by which one differentiates between expressive modes, whether as a sender or as a receiver, whether as a native speaker or as an analyst....Types, on the other hand, are the creations of analysts (not of native speakers), the means by which analysts account for similarities observed in the expressive repertoires of different and unrelated cultures. ‘Types’ and ‘genres’ thus refer to different objects of inquiry, universal categories on the one hand and culture-specific phenomena on the other.40

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39 ‘On the notion of genre’, p146.
Clearly, the genre debate in biblical studies has not centered on the relationship between universals and particulars. Nevertheless, Ben Amos’ distinction between analytical categories and ethnic genres is pertinent because in the history of the debate ‘biography’ belongs to the latter category and ‘aretalogy’ to the former. And Todorov’s distinction between genre as an object of inductive analysis and type as the object of deductive thinking joins with Ben Amos’ distinctions to render genres as ethnic media subject to inductive study and types as analytical categories resulting from deductive reflection on texts and genres, and even on narrative as such.

There is, however, a second and more immediately relevant way in which genre and type have been distinguished. On the one hand, Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson’s classic The Types of the Folktale catalogues on a universal basis the plot types found in the genre ‘folktale’.41 Although the very universality of the types and of the genre take us beyond the scope of a narrower ethnic cultural milieu and its genres, the distinction made between genre(s) and plot types is pertinent because different plot types can occur in a single genre, just as a single plot type can occur in different genres. Genres have a certain cultural, even cross-cultural, stability, but so do plot types. But the important point for our purposes is that if we have problems determining the genre(s) of Mark and John, that does not preclude our asking about plot types that might inform their composition. In this regard, and in view of the possibly distracting universality of the Aarne-Thompson index of types in the folktale, mention must be made of V I Propp’s own classic Morphology of the Folktale,42 which in part took its point of departure in the earlier edition of Aarne’s index, but which, more importantly, was focused on the Russian fairy tale, an ethnic genre. Propp’s concern was to identify the generic features of the Russian fairy tale, but one of the results of his investigation was his discernment of two distinct plot types. That he only found two is not important; what is important is that his study of a genre produced not only generic traits,
but also plot types. Folklore studies therefore provides us with a basis for an inquiry into the plot types that may be of hermeneutical significance for our understanding of Mark and John. In what follows, I shall argue that Mark and John belong to two different plot types and that these types are of the utmost hermeneutical significance for their narratives.

In my comments on Mark in the previous section, I noted several literary features that brought into question the alleged biographical character of this narrative. Among these features, four are interesting: (1) the two levels of information given to the reader, which are related to (2) the failure of characters on level one to understand what the reader has been given to know on level two, which in turn (3) raises the question of when and with what consequences the characters on level one, especially the disciples, would come to understand or recognise what Jesus' words, deeds, and person were all about; and (4), the previous feature indicates that Mark's narrative is more about the disciples than about Jesus. These four features are in fact characteristic of a type of plot that is widely attested in both Israelite and Greco-Roman stories that were well known in the first century C E. Because this plot type is the subject of another project that I have been working on, one that is too complex for a full discussion here, let me just cite some classic examples: the stories of Athena's appearances to Telemachus in the form of Mentes and Mentor (both are males known to Telemachus) in books 1-4 of the Odyssey; the appearance of angels in human form to Gideon in Jdg 6:11-24 and to Manoah and his wife in 13:2-25; and the appearance of the angel Raphael to Tobit and Tobias in the form of Azarias (a man whose family is known to Tobit) in the book of Tobit.43 For the sake of discussion, let us call the plot type of these stories a

concealment/recognition type. And let us recognise, too, that while the four features from Mark are to be found in these stories, other features found in them also appear in Mark—which is what makes this plot type hermeneutically interesting. Let us see.

The principal characteristic of all stories belonging to this type is that a divine being appears in human form to human beings and for a time conceals her or his identity. Already with this most basic feature of the type more insights are provided into Mark, for if Mark belongs to the type, as I am convinced it does, then the Son of God is a divine being who appears in the form of Jesus of Nazareth who, like Mentes, Mentor, and Azarias was an already existing and known human being. Also, the divine beings' concealment of their identity in such stories provides us with a new, literary historical basis for understanding the so-called Messianic Secret in Mark, by rightly shifting the focus from this alleged 'secret' to the Son of God's concealment of his identity, which is precisely what Mark tells us about Jesus' silencing of the demons and what is entailed in his teaching of the secret of the kingdom of God in a form that is designed to prevent people, apart from the disciples, from understanding it—'it' presumably having to do with the relationship between the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the kingdom's coming. But the concealment motif also serves to highlight a distinctive feature of Mark that seemingly deviates from the type, namely the ignorance of the disciples who were supposed to understand but did not. The deviation is in the fact that they were supposed to understand, but their ignorance brings the characterisation of them back to the type, which leads us to two other matters. First, in each of the stories belonging to the type, the plot centers on the characters to whom the divine beings appear, not on the divine beings; the divine beings are characters in stories about other people. Thus the type is consistent with my intrinsically based argument that Mark's story focuses on Jesus' disciples, not on Jesus. And second, the plot of this type of story is oriented both to the characters' coming to understand/recognise that a divine being has appeared to them, and on their subsequent action. Thus, in Mark the disciples' ignorance through Mark 14 points us to the meeting in Galilee as the moment of recognition and as the moment when it became possible for them to undertake the mission and other responsibilities that are specified in Mark 13.

A further basic characteristic follows from the first one, for if the divine being conceals her/his identity the narrator is required to inform the reader about things of which the other characters in the story are unaware, principally that what they construed as a human being was in fact a divine being. But with
this necessity is born the two level distribution of information which I have
identified in Mark. As indicated earlier, level one information consists of
information the narrator gives to the reader, information that leads the reader
not only to judge the characters, but also to expect a moment of recognition or
understanding, which invariably occurs at the end of the story and in connec­
tion with the divine being’s departure—again, as in Mark and the anticipated
meeting in Galilee after Jesus’ resurrection. All stories belonging to the con­
cealment/recognition type contain this two level distribution of information.
There is, however, yet another consequence of the two levels that is also
pertinent to Mark.

In a study of Homeric stories belonging to this type, Bernard Fenik has
shown that because the reader knows what the characters do not know, their
actions (words, deeds) are often for the reader ambiguous, ironic, and even
humorous. Ironic humor is immediately apparent, for example, in the story
of Balaam’s ass in Nm 22:21-35, where the ass perceives an angel and the
prophet does not, and in Tobit, where characters say things about Azarias that
are appropriate to an angel, although they do not know, as the reader does,
that they are in fact dealing with an angel. As for Mark, Robert Fowler has
noted that the so-called Messianic Secret ‘may be accurately regarded as the
observation of irony in the Gospel…. [T]here is no Messianic Secret for the
reader of Mark’, because the reader knows what it kept secret from the actors
in the story. Because the reader knows what the characters do not know, the
reader is often able to reject the literal meaning of their words (including
Jesus’) and to interpret them ironically, as meaning something more or other
than the literal meaning. Thus, Jesus is an ironist when he says to the crowds,
‘Hear me, all of you, and understand’ (Mk 7:14), for the reader knows from
4:11-12 that Jesus taught the crowds in a form that was designed to allow the
crowds to hear, but also to prevent them from understanding what they heard.
Similar ironies abound, as for example in the flight of the disciples after
14:17-31, the high priest’s question about Jesus’ messiahship (14:61-62), and
the centurion’s so-called confession (15:39). The defection of the disciples is
ironic because Jesus both predicted it and pointed beyond it—to a meeting in
Galilee after his resurrection; the high priest’s interrogative identification of

44 Bernard Fenik, Studies in the Odyssey, Hermes Einzelschriften 30 Wiesbaden:
Steiner, 1974, pp5-60.
45 Robert Fowler, Loaves and fishes. The function of the feeding stories in the Gospel
of Mark, SBLDS 54, Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1981, p98. See now Jerry Camery-
Hogatt, Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and sub-text, SNTSMS 72, Cambridge
University Press, 1992. I have not yet read this study.
Jesus is ironically right, even though he saw Jesus' affirmative response as blasphemy; and the centurion's acclamation of Jesus as a 'son of God' is ironically correct because he could not have known from the event of Jesus' death what Mark and the reader know about Jesus' being 'the Son of God'. Enough. Sufficient evidence has been cited to warrant seeing Mark as belonging to the concealment/recognition type of story. But the evidence also warrants the conclusion that the type has a profound hermeneutical significance because it relates the type to intrinsic literary features in such a way as to produce insights into Mark that go far beyond what any previous generic identifications have been able to provide. What, then, can plot types offer us with respect to John?

The type of plot that we find in John differs fundamentally from the one we have found in Mark. Like Mark, a divine being/entity appears in human form to human beings who know the biography of the human being whom they see and hear. But whereas in Mark the divine being conceals his identity, in John he openly discloses it, thus producing a different type of plot, one that focuses on whether, and with what consequences, the human beings will accept or reject what is disclosed to them. To be sure, understanding is also a problem in John but, as Wrede saw, it is a problem that emerges on totally different grounds from Mark. For while in Mark the Son of God produces the problem of understanding by concealing his identity, in John it is produced by the incommensurability of human language to convey what is in fact disclosed. In order to communicate what he wishes to disclose, Jesus necessarily speaks in everyday language, which is designed for speaking about 'earthly things'. Understanding becomes problematical for the characters in John because Jesus uses this language to talk about 'heavenly things' . Like Mark, too, in John the narrator tells the reader things that characters other than Jesus do not know or understand, and as in Mark this privileged knowledge is the basis for readers perceiving ironically things that the characters say and do. And as in Mark, the failure of characters to understand Jesus leads the reader to expect that they, or some of them, the disciples, will come to understand, and the narrator explicitly says that they will, after Jesus' resurrection. Wrede saw the similarity between Mark and John on the matter of post-resurrection understanding as a reflection of an historical fact, namely that after Jesus' death his followers came to understand him—and themselves—quite differently from before it. I will return to this historical explanation in my concluding

46 The messianic secret, pp181-236.
47 Petersen, The Gospel of John and the sociology of light, especially chs 1 and 2.
comments. For now, it is necessary to see that this problem of understanding is a deviation from the type of plot that is represented in John, a deviation, however, that is comparable to Mark's Jesus' expectations that his disciples should have understood him. Both, so to speak, revert to type.

One of the distinctive features of John's narrative is that understanding is separated from the characters' immediate responses to Jesus both by being deferred until post-resurrection times and by being related to the discovery of scriptures that would make sense of things that Jesus said and did before his death (as also in Lk 24.) 49 Within the narrative itself, John's focus is on the actors' reception or rejection of what Jesus says. They either receive it or not; they either believe it or not. Those who receive or believe it have eternal life, then and there; those who reject it and disbelieve it have their judgment, then and there (e.g., 3:16-21, 31-36; 5:21; 6:25-51). Thus, if Mark's plot type was oriented to concealment and recognition, John's is oriented to disclosure and reception, with life and death being the consequences of whether one received or rejected what was disclosed.

The disclosure/reception type of plot derives from stories about Sophia, the personified Wisdom of God. It has long been known that John is deeply influenced by the figure of Sophia, and recently I attempted to explore this influence further in terms of its contribution to both the plot and the system of characterisation in John. 50 For our present purposes, let it suffice to say that the plot type evidenced in John is to be found principally in two Wisdom texts, Proverbs 1-8 and Baruch 3:29-4:4.

In Proverbs we find Sophia encountering individuals directly in her feminine form, which is contrasted with that of the harlot hawking her wares on the street corner. In Proverbs 1 she speaks to them in the first person singular, while in chapter 8 she speaks about her past history, her autobiography, as it were (cf Sir 24). In terms of the time of her presence on the street, however, she summons her audience to listen to her, but they refuse to listen (1:24); they hated the knowledge she gave, and they are killed by the very fact of their turning away. Those who listen, however, 'will dwell secure' (1:29-31). 'Solomon' tells his sons, too, that 'the LORD has given wisdom' (2:6) as 'a shield to those who walk in integrity', delivering them from those who 'walk in the ways of darkness' (2:7-15). Wisdom is 'a tree of life to those who lay hold of her' (3:18). And she herself concludes: 'For he who finds me finds life...but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death' (8:35-49).

50 The Gospel of John and the sociology of light, ch 5.
36). Life and death are thus the consequences of accepting or rejecting what Sophia discloses.

Baruch 3:9-4:4, and especially 3:28-4:4, is important because in John 3:13-21, 31-36 John has used its revision of Moses' speech in Deuteronomy 30:11-20.\textsuperscript{51} As I have argued elsewhere, Baruch and John share a common story, one that John found in Baruch and adapted to his own purposes: 'No one receives what they seek from God by ascending into heaven, but only as a result of God's giving it to his people, whom he loves. It appeared on earth and lived among his people, giving life to those who came to it, while those who did not do so died.'\textsuperscript{52}

There is much more to John's dependence on features of Sophia, and not least of all in connection with the Logos' 'biography' prior to its incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. In contrast to Mark, in John the character Jesus is focal, and this is consistent both with the plot of some Sophia stories and with the character of Sophia in all of them. But this does not render John's narrative biographical, because in both John and Sophia stories the time in which the Son of God and Sophia 'dwell' on earth is a very small part of a 'biography' (beginning at creation!) that transcends all biographies of human beings. My point here is not the usual one, that the biography of Jesus is swallowed up or contained within a 'myth' of a divine being, which is probably true, too, but that the larger 'biography' is presented in the form of first person singular autobiographical statements by 'Jesus' which undercut the narrowly biographical knowledge characters ('Jews') have of him.\textsuperscript{53} In John, this common knowledge about Jesus is displaced by autobiographical disclosures of the one who only for a time is Jesus; disclosures, moreover, that summon the characters to accept them and have life, and warn them that rejection brings death. In this light, therefore, the type of story to which John's narrative belongs confirms what our intrinsic observations have shown, and both the type and the intrinsic observations preclude any attempt to identify John's narrative as a mere biography of Jesus of Nazareth. At best, and then only in a most oblique way, John's narrative is an anti-biography, not just a parody of one.

4 CONCLUSION

There remains one final question, the question that the discussion of the genre(s) of Mark and John was designed to answer: how can we account for the similarities between Mark and John if neither of them used the other as a

\textsuperscript{51} The Gospel of John and the sociology of light, pp115-119.

\textsuperscript{52} The Gospel of John and the sociology of light, p117.

\textsuperscript{53} The Gospel of John and the sociology of light, pp54-57, 89-109.
source? We have seen that genre studies have not provided an answer that is accountable to the literary character of either narrative. And we have found that plot types both better illuminate the individual narratives and confirm and deepen the results of intrinsic analysis. But the significant differences between the plot types only raise once more the initial question. The similarities, it is argued, do not derive from source relationships, except insofar as Mark and John used a source or sources containing miracle stories. But even with this possible exception, there is no consensus on the extent of the sources. Nevertheless, sources and/or common traditions surely account for some of the similarities, but not at all for some of the basic agreements between Mark and John on the biography of Jesus, their obvious disagreements not withstanding. I can only suggest that Mark and John had available to them some relatively common knowledge about Jesus, indeed, common biographical knowledge of his name, place of origin, travels, the kinds of things he did, and his terminal fate in Jerusalem. Earlier, I referred to Wrede’s explanation of why both Mark and John represent people during Jesus’ lifetime as being ignorant of what Jesus was all about. In effect, Wrede attributed their agreement to the common knowledge that believers came to understand Jesus differently after his death. Both Mark and John—and Paul and Luke—represent this knowledge differently, as they do with most of the other common knowledge that they seem to share. But it does not seem too much to conclude that what they have in common besides specific texts or traditions is precisely common knowledge, information that was rather widely available to one degree or another before Mark and John were written, and in the process of writing became textually codified. It does not seem too much, either, to conclude that this knowledge would have had a biographical dimension to it. How else to arrange it? Having said this, however, I must also insist that there is a considerable difference between saying that the similarities between Mark and John are in part based on common biographical knowledge, and that their narratives are biographies. I think I have shown that they are not biographies. And I think that common knowledge is a reasonable answer to the question of why John and Mark evidence the similarities that are apparent between them. Finally, I also find it somewhat amusing, if not paradoxical, that my original interest in Hirsch’s ideas about genre led me to the sociology of common knowledge to explain the very similarities that I had hoped the notion of genre would explain. I lament that one who would have shared my amusement cannot do so.

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