# 1. GENRE AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

THE GENRE OF A WORK is its literary "type" or category; the genre's frequent, hence anticipated, characteristics guide how informed readers will approach it. By conforming in some measure to generic patterns already present in the culture, a writer produces certain expectations in the readers of the work.[1] Although genres as categories are necessarily fluid, identifying the genre can reveal important purposes the author or authors had in seeking to communicate to an intended audience. The idea that genre affects interpretation would have made sense to the first readers of the Gospels,[2] since Greek writers also distinguished various categories for literary forms.[3] Of the diverse models for genre criticism in antiquity, Aristotle's prevailed longest.[4] Although they articulated distinctions, however, in practice ancient writers regularly mixed genres.[5]

Although many current theories of interpretation reject the priority of the author's intention, most recognize it as at least one level of meaning, especially for readers with historical interest.[6] Many critics regard the author's intention as unrecoverable; but all historical endeavor is necessarily conditioned by probability, and we may make probable inferences about the *implied* author from the text's literary strategies in their historical context. As Burridge notes, "the purpose of the author is essential to any concept of genre as a set of expectations or contract between the author and the reader or audience."[7] Writers such as those who produced the Gospels sought "to communicate with intended readers," a purpose that helped determine the text as we have it, whatever our subsequent purposes in utilizing the text.[8] The kind of "meaning" one pursues will depend to a great extent on one's goal in interpretation, but the historical goal of recovering how the implied readers of a document in its earliest historical context would have approached the document is inseparable from attempts to reconstruct the work's genre and the strategies of the implied author in that historical context.[9]

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[1] Cf. Shuler, *Genre,* 25–28; Hirsch, *Interpretation,* 68–126.

[2] Although the Gospels were probably "heard" more often than "read," at least aristocratic audiences could be described by ancient writers as their "readers" (e.g., Polybius 9.2.6).

[3] E.g., Theon *Progymn.* 2.5–33; even different genres of speeches require different kinds of styles (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Demosth.* 45–46); see also the ancient division of Pindar's various kinds of hymns and songs (Race, "Introduction," 1). Of course, such categories were never strictly observed even in Greco-Roman texts, and Israelite-Jewish tradition rarely reflected on the theoretical categories (Aune, *Environment,* 23). Mixed genres were common in the early imperial period (idem, "Problem," 10–11, 48).

[4] Burridge, *Gospels,* 27–29.

[5] Ibid., 33–34, 56–61.

[6] Certainly ancient writers debated about intention, both regarding deeds and legislative purpose (see Hermogenes *Issues* 61.16–18; 66.12–13; 72.14–73.3).

[7] Burridge, *Gospels,* 125. See Ashton, *Understanding,* 113.

[8] See Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts,* 173, also noting the extrinsic reality of this author and audience regardless of our ability to reconstruct them.

## Proposals concerning Gospel Genre

Readers from the mid-second century through most of the nineteenth century viewed the Gospels as biographies of some sort. This view prevailed until Votaw in 1915,[10] when the Gospels' differences from modern biography led most scholars to seek a new classification for them.[11] Thus Burton Mack claims that in the early twentieth century scholars realized "that the gospels were not biographies and that they sustained a very problematic relation to history."[12]

The twentieth century generated a variety of proposals,[13] some of which have proved less helpful than others. If identifying a document's generic category guides the way the reader interprets it, the earlier standard classification of the NT gospels as "unique"[14] is not very helpful. Most works, including other Greco-Roman documents, are "unique" in some sense.[15] Even though the four canonical gospels are closer to one another than they are to any other documents of antiquity,[16] each is also distinct from the others,[17] and all fit into a broader category of narrative.[18] While it is true that the Gospels tell a unique story, and borrow biblical narrative techniques from their Jewish tradition, Jewish Christian readers would have been most familiar with coherent literary works concerning primary characters in terms of Hellenistic "lives," or ancient biographies.[19]

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[9] See, e.g., Allison, *Moses,* 3. If various authorial or redactional levels complicate the question of "authorial intention" in John (Smith, *John* [1999], 13), we mean the level of our completed Gospel in our earliest textual tradition, which we believe remained well within the range of earlier Johannine theology.

[10] Stanton, *Gospels,* 15–17.

[11] Talbert, *Gospel,* 2–3, observing that Strauss, Bultmann (see Bultmann, *Tradition,* 372), and their followers rejected the biographical category because they confused the two.

[12] Mack, *Myth,* 16 n. 6; cf. Marxsen, *Mark,* 16.

[13] For a fuller survey, see Burridge, *Gospels,* 3–25.

[14] W. Schneemelcher in Hennecke, *Apocrypha,* 1:80; Riesenfeld, *Tradition,* 2; Guelich, "Genre." The designation "Gospels" appears to date from the mid-second century (Aune, *Environment,* 18, cites Justin *Dial.* 10.2; 100.1; Irenaeus *Haer.* 3.1.1; Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 1.21), though some derive it from Mark's (Kelber, *Story,* 15) or Matthew's usage (Stanton, *New People,* 14–16) and it probably has antecedents in the LXX use of the term (Stuhlmacher, "Theme," 19–25; Betz, "Gospel").

[15] Cf. Robbins, *Teacher,* 4–5.

[16] So rightly Borchert, *John,* 29–30 (though noting differences between John and the Synoptics, p. 37).

[17] Marxsen, *Mark,* 150, thus objects to applying Mark's term "Gospel" to Matthew and Luke, arguing that Matthew is a collection of "gospels" and sermons (pp. 150 n. 106; 205–6), and Luke a "life of Jesus" (150 n. 106). He is uncomfortable with the language of a Gospel "genre" (25).

[18] Aune, *Environment,* 83, cites Quintilian 2.42; Cicero *Inv.* 1.27; Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 1.263–264 for the three major categories (history, fiction, and myth or legend), though noting that they overlapped in practice (Strabo *Geog.* 1.2.17, 35); for distinctions between mythography and history proper, see Fornara, *Nature of History,* 4–12.

[19] Luz, *Matthew,* 1:44–45.

## 1. Folk Literature or Memoirs?

No more helpful or accurate is the suggestion that the Gospels represent *Kleinliteratur,* that is, popular or "folk literature" of the lower classes in contrast to the stylish, sophisticated literature of the upper classes.[20] While the Gospels' oral sources were naturally transmitted in such a folk milieu, such forced categories prove unhelpful for genre criticism of the Gospels; they ignore the continuum between "folk literature" and the more stylish rhetoric and texts that strongly influenced them,[21] as well as differences among the Gospels themselves (Luke represents a much more rhetorically sophisticated author than Mark).[22] Specific genre categories like "biographies" actually appear throughout the continuum (e.g., contrast the popular *Life of Aesop* with the more literary *Agricola*).

The Gospels' sources may well include collections of "memoirs"[23] (perhaps "Q" may be understood in such terms),[24] the sort that could constitute "folk" biographies. Some second-century Christian writers[25] viewed the Gospels—alongside other apostolic works—as "memoirs," probably recalling Xenophon's *Memorabilia,* a "life" of Socrates. Their use of this term provides attestation that, from an early period, some saw the Gospels as a form of biography.[26] A common general pattern does exist, but the canonical gospels may represent a different *kind* of biography from most collections of memoirs; they are complete literary narratives and not simply "folk" biographies, as most such collections would be.[27]

In their present form the Gospels are relatively polished and intricate works, as literary critics have skillfully demonstrated. Such literary preparation is to be expected for writers in a Greco-Roman context. Ancient speechwriters, for instance, were expected to premeditate their works carefully, arranging the material in advance and fixing it in their memories, so that they needed add only finishing touches once they set out to write their speeches.[28] Similarly, writers of Greek and Latin narratives typically began with a rough draft before producing their final work;[29] Jewish writers in Greek could do the same.[30] The

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[20] This view was proposed by K. L. Schmidt, who provided analogies among later folk literatures of various cultures. He is followed by Kümmel, *Introduction,* 37; cf. Hunter, *Message,* 30; Deissmann, *Light,* 466.

[21] Downing, "Literature"; Aune, *Environment,* 12, 63; Burridge, *Gospels,* 11, 153. Rhetorical principles influenced narrative techniques; see, e.g., Dowden, "Apuleius."

[22] Koester, *Introduction,* 1:108; Kodell, *Luke,* 23; cf. Perry, *Sources,* 7. This is not to mention Luke's architectonic patterns (for which see Goulder, *Acts;* Talbert, *Patterns;* idem, *Luke;* Tannehill, *Luke*).

[23] E.g., Socratics *Ep.* 18, Xenophon to Socrates' friends. Diogenes Laertius includes compilations of traditions, but from a variety of sources.

[24] Cf. Papias frg. 6 (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39), on the hypothesis that Papias's "Matthew" is our "Q" (cf. Filson, *History,* 83; rejected by Jeremias, *Theology,* 38). Downing, "Like Q," compares Q with a Cynic "Life" (cf. Mack, *Lost Gospel,* 46); contrast Tuckett, "Q."

[25] Justin *1 Apol.* 66.3; 67.3; *Dial.* 103.8; 106.3 (see Stanton, *New People,* 62–63; Abramowski, "Memoirs," *pace* Koester).

[26] See Robbins, *Teacher,* 62–67; Stanton, *New People,* 62–63.

[27] This is not to deny the Synoptics' substantial dependence on tradition, but tradition is not so dominant (as Jones, *Parables,* 36, seems to suggest) as to prohibit pursuit of literary coherence.

[28] Quintilian 10.6.1–2. One should also be ready to add improvisations during the speech (10.6.5).

[29] Cf., e.g., the opening Virgilic lines of the *Aeneid* removed by the final editors (LCL 1:240–241, esp. n. 1).

[30] Aune, *Environment,* 128. Thus Josephus thoroughly revised an earlier draft of the *War* into better Greek (*Ag. Ap.* 1.49–50); some think the earlier version was an Aramaic draft, probably

Gospels are thus undoubtedly polished products of much effort, carefully arranged to communicate their points most adequately.[31]

The writers of the Synoptics, like writers of most ancient historical works, probably began with a basic draft of the material in chronological order, to which a topical outline, speeches, and other rhetorical adjustments would be added later.[32] It was not, however, usually appropriate to "publish" the work in an unfinished form; one would complete the book, check copyists' manuscripts when possible, and then give the first copy to the dedicatee when appropriate (Cicero *Att.* 13.21a, 23, 48).[33] Aristotle recommended sketching the plot in outline, then expanding by inserting episodes, and illustrates this with the *Odyssey.*[34] Like other Greek writers, Luke follows one source at a time, incorporating a large block of Q material into Mark;[35] both Luke and Matthew make Mark the backbone, and supplement Mark from other sources.[36] John's adjustments toward rhetorical sophistication may in some respects be less elaborate than even those of Mark. Depending on the circumstances, some ancient observers could view incorporating preexisting lines as plagiarism, others (if the incorporation was obvious) as flattering the source (Seneca *Suasoriae* 3.7). The Gospels (especially if they were circulating anonymously, though this remains uncertain), however, functioned as common property of the apostolic church.

Whatever their sources, writers would likely normally pay careful attention to how they arranged their material, especially given the importance of arrangement even in oral discourse.[37] Some ancient writers recommended connecting episodes to provide continuity,[38] a practice followed by Mark (cf. 1:14–39). Others like Polybius, however, allowed disjunctions in their narratives, although recognizing that some disagreed with their practice.[39] This may explain the breaks in John's narrative, which is structured more chronologically (following Jerusalem festivals) than the Synoptics.[40] The basic plot of this Gospel includes increasing conflict, and its overarching structure moves from signs that reveal Jesus' identity (chs. 2–12) to instructions for his followers (chs. 13–17), the Passion Narra-

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circulated among Parthian Jews (cf. Hata, "Version"), though the thoroughly Greek character of Josephus's current work might count against this. One could also adapt earlier works; Josephus seems to have employed the *War* as his main source for the comparable portion of the *Antiquities* (Krieger, "Hauptquelle"); 3 and 4 Maccabees adapted material in 2 Maccabees (Gardner, "Mqbym").

[31] Thus allowing such literary techniques as foreshadowing (Quintilian 10.1.21). Editing provided the writer a chance to craft the material; thus, e.g., Epictetus's *Discourses* undoubtedly bear less of Arrian's stamp than the *Enchiridion,* where Arrian organizes and summarizes Epictetus's teachings.

[32] Burridge, *Gospels,* 203; Aune, *Environment,* 82, citing Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.47–50; Lucian *Hist.* 16, 48; *Demonax.*

[33] Although the old source theories concerning proto-Mark and proto-Luke are unfashionable, it is likely that proto-gospels existed temporarily (though unlikely that they were published); cf. Streeter, *Gospels,* 199–222; Taylor, *Formation,* 6, and appendix A; Wenham, "Parable."

[34] Talbert, *John,* 64, citing Aristotle *Poet.* 17.6–11.

[35] Aune, *Environment,* 139.

[36] Ibid., 65; cf. Downing, "Conventions"; idem, "Actuality"; Burridge, *Gospels,* 204–5.

[37] See esp. Wuellner, "Arrangement." Some forms of speeches did allow random sequence, however (Menander Rhetor 2.4.391.19–28; 392.9–14; 393.23–24).

[38] Aune, *Environment,* 90, cites Lucian *Hist.* 55; Quintilian 7.1.1.

[39] Aune, *Environment,* 90, cites Polybius 38.5.1–8.

[40] Cf. Bruns, *Art,* 24–25; Tenney, *John,* 40–41. Murray, "Feasts," prefers John's chronology to that of the Synoptics; Sanders, *Figure,* 68, thinks it hard to decide; but Borchert, "Passover," 316 may be correct that John intends most of the Passover material theologically.

tive (chs. 18–19), and resurrection appearances (chs. 20–21). Instead of strictly linear plot development, however, John's plot often advances through the agency of repetition.[41]

Once a writer had completed such a public work, he (in most cases the writer was "he") would "publish" it, that is, make it available to its intended readership.[42] Typically this process would begin through public readings. The well-to-do would have readings as entertainment following dinner at banquets, but the Gospels would be read in gatherings of believers in homes.[43] Readers of means who liked a work would then have copies made for themselves, preserving and further circulating the work.[44] Ancient as well as modern readers recognized the value of rereading a document or speech as often as necessary to catch the main themes and subtleties (Quintilian 10.1.20–21), but given the limited copies of the Gospel available and the general level of public literacy,[45] much of John's audience may have depended on public readings.

The Gospels seem to conform to the standards of length appropriate to the scrolls on which they were written, which supports the likelihood that their authors intended them to be published. By some estimates, Luke and Acts are roughly the same length; Matthew is within 1 percent of the length of either; John is within 1 percent of three-quarters this length and Mark is close to half.[46] As Metzger notes, a normal Greek literary roll rarely exceeds thirty-five feet, but "the two longest books in the NT—the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts—would each have filled an ordinary papyrus roll of 31 or 32 feet in length. Doubtless this is one of the reasons why Luke-Acts was issued in two volumes instead of one."[47] Scrolls were not always completely filled, sometimes having a blank space at the end,[48] but the Gospels seem to have used all their space as wisely as possible; Matthew may condense and Luke expand at the end. (Likewise, Josephus seems to have been forced to end suddenly his first scroll of what is now called *Against Apion,* having run out of space; *Ag. Ap.* 1.320.)[49]

The lengths of the canonical gospels suggest not only intention to publish but also the nature of their genre.[50] All four gospels fit the medium-range length (10,000–25,000 words) found in ancient biographies as distinct from many other kinds of works.[51] A "book" was approximately what one could listen to in a setting.

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[41] Cf. Dewey, "Oral-Aural Event," 148–50 (following Ong, *Orality,* 141–44), on Mark.

[42] E.g., Josephus *Ant.* 1.proem 2, §5.

[43] Burridge, *One Jesus,* 20; Alexander, "Production," 86, 90; Dewey, "Oral-Aural Event," 145–47; cf. e.g., Diogenes Laertius 1.122; Cornelius Nepos 25 (Atticus), 14.1; Cicero *Att.* 2.1; 12.44; Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.19; Seneca the Younger *Ep. Lucil.* 95.2; Statius *Silvae* 2.pref.; Iamblichus *V.P.* 21.98–99; other sources in Keener, *Matthew,* 297. Perhaps they would be read after the Lord's Supper, a sort of dinner (1 Cor 10:21; 11:20–34; Jude 12).

[44] E.g., Phaedrus 4.prol.17–19. The wealthy might also have their own readers (Cicero *Fam.* 7.1.3).

[45] On public literacy, see, e.g., Lewis, *Life,* 61–62, 81–82. It is usually estimated around 10 percent (Meeks, *Moral World,* 62; Botha, "Literacy"), but for a higher estimate (especially relevant for urban settings), see Curchin, "Literacy."

[46] Morton in Morton and MacGregor, *Structure,* 16.

[47] *Text,* 5–6; cf. Bruce, *Books,* 12; Palmer, "Monograph," 5.

[48] E.g., Diogenes Laertius 7.2.38, on Diogenes the Cynic.

[49] Cornelius Nepos 15 (Epamindondas), 4.6, claims that he had to stop his account of Epaminondas's integrity to provide enough space for his other biographies.

[50] For length in distinguishing genre see, e.g., Aristotle *Poet.* 24.4, 1459b.

[51] Burridge, *Gospels,* 118, 199. John falls in the center of this range, the approximate length of *Cato Minor* (ibid., 225–26).

> The average length of a book of Herodotus or Thucydides is about 20,000 words, which would take around two hours to read. After the Alexandrian library reforms, an average 30–35 feet scroll would contain 10,000 to 25,000 words—exactly the range into which both the Gospels and many ancient *bioi* fall.[52]

Also seeking popular analogies, Moses Hadas and Morton Smith compared the Gospels with aretalogies.[53] Aretalogies do have some features in common with some Gospel narratives, but they are normally brief narrations or lists of divine acts, hence do not provide the best analogies for the Gospels as whole works.[54] These narratives may support the hypothesis of early circulated miracle-collections (such as John's proposed signs source), and indicate the degree to which narratives could be employed in the service of religious propaganda. They do not, however, explain our current gospels and their length; aretalogy was not even a clearly defined genre.[55]

## *2. Novels and Drama*

Not all literary works concerning specific characters were biographies. Yet all four canonical gospels are a far cry from the fanciful metamorphosis stories, divine rapes, and so forth in a compilation like Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The Gospels plainly have more historical intention and fewer literary pretensions than such works. The primary literary alternative to viewing the Gospels as biography, however, is not entertaining mythological anthologies but to view them as intentional fiction,[56] a suggestion that has little to commend it. First-century readers recognized the genre of novel (the Hellenistic "romance"),[57] including novels about historical characters,[58] but ancient writers normally distinguished between fictitious and historical narratives.[59] As some literary critics have noted, even when historical works have incorrect facts they do not become fiction, and a novel that depends on historical information does not become history.[60] Talbert argues that not all biographies were basically reliable like Suetonius and Plutarch; but his examples of unreliable biographies, Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* and Lucian's *Passing of Peregrinus,* do not make his case.[61] The former is more like a historical novel, and the latter resembles satire. This is not to deny some degree of overlap among categories in historical content, but to affirm that what distinguishes the two genres is the nature of their truth claims.[62]

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[52] Burridge, "People," 141.

[53] Cf. Hadas and Smith, *Heroes.*

[54] Shuler, *Genre,* 15–20; cf. Talbert, *Gospel,* 12–13. A proposal of aretalogical biographies (Wills, *Quest*) would be more reasonable.

[55] Burridge, *Gospels,* 18–19. Talbert, *Gospel,* 43, cites biographies of immortals (mainly from the second and third centuries), but, as he admits, the religious or mythical dimension does not affect genre (cf. Shuler, *Genre,* 21); his evidence for specific cultic biographies (*Gospel,* 91–113) is mainly inferential (Aune, "Problem," 37–42).

[56] E.g., *Apocrit.* 2.12–15 (possibly by Porphyry); Mack, *Myth,* 11, 322–23.

[57] Although writers like Apuleius and Achilles Tatius are a century or more after our period, the nineteenth-century view of Greek novels as late (fifth or sixth centuries) is no longer tenable (Aune, *Environment,* 150). Thus elements in Chariton *Chaereas and Callirhoe,* (Pseudo-) Plutarch *Love Stories* (*Mor.* 771E–775E, five brief stories; the heroine of 774E–775B is named Callirhoë, but apart from the suitors the story bears little resemblance to Chariton's work), Petronius *Satyricon, Joseph and Aseneth,* Judith, and other works suggest that the general genre was already established in the NT period.

[58] Cf., e.g., Lindenberger, "Ahiqar." Yet even historical novels from the Hellenistic era often exhibited some measure of historical accuracy (cf. Anderson, "3 Maccabees"; Miller, "Introduction," viii), though it varied considerably (e.g., Tobit exhibits anachronisms, but none as serious as Jdt 4:3). Even a pure novel like Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* may include some autobiographical hints (e.g., 11.30).

[59] E.g., Lucian *Hist.* 12, who distinguishes proper biography from falsification and flattery; Plutarch in *Poetry* 2 (*Mor.* 16F) points to fabricated materials in poetry (quite different from his description of his sources in the *Lives*). See Mosley, "Reporting," 26; Kany, "Bericht"; Witherington, *Acts,* 25–26; cf. Aune, *Environment,* 79 (who both notes the distinction and recognizes some overlap).

Whereas the apocryphal gospels and apocryphal acts betray novelistic characteristics,[63] the four canonical gospels much more closely resemble ancient biography.[64] With a few notable exceptions (like Pseudo-Callisthenes), ancient novelists did not seek to write *historical* novels.[65] Further, novels typically reflected the milieu of their readership more than that of their characters,[66] a situation quite different from histories and biographies, which were readily adapted for readers but focused on historical content. Finally, novels were written primarily to entertain rather to inform.[67] Some, like Apuleius's *Metamorphoses,* functioned as religious propaganda as well as entertainment, but entertainment remained a key element, and religious propaganda certainly was not restricted to the genre of novels.[68] Nor are entertaining works necessarily novels; historical works intended primarily to inform were nevertheless typically written in an entertaining manner, though that was not their chief goal.[69] Works with a historical prologue like Luke's (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2) were historical works;[70] novels lacked such fixtures, although occasionally they could include a proem telling why the author made up the story (Longus proem 1–2).

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[60] Most Greek tragedies reflected and developed earlier tradition; thus in *Helen* Euripides follows the *Recantation of Stesichorus* (which violates the natural reading of Homer), yet to harmonize with Homer must have Menelaus and Helen meet in Egypt and return to Sparta in time for Telemachus's arrival in the *Odyssey.* But such constraints were much more general than with historical works (cf. how closely Matthew or Luke follows Mark).

[61] Talbert, "Acts," 72. Pseudo-Callisthenes mixes both historical and fictitious sources, plus adds his own fictions (e.g., *Alex.* 1.23), 450–750 years after the supposed events. Bowersock's examples of fictitionalized history (*Fiction as History,* 21) are also distinctly novelistic.

[62] Carson, *John,* 64–65, following Sternberg, *Poetics,* 23–35.

[63] See, e.g., Aune, *Environment,* 151–53; Bauckham, "Acts of Paul"; Keylock, "Distinctness," 210. One may compare works such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* or *Acts of John* 53–64, 73–80, where elements of the romance story line are followed, except that the women become devotees of the male teacher in chastty, devoted not to sexual love but to God's word.

[64] Some scholars have suggested some overlap in the Gospels, though acknowledging that the degree varies from Gospel to Gospel (e.g., Freyne, *Galilee,* 11).

[65] Porter, "'We' Passages," 550.

[66] See Wiersma, "Novel."

[67] Talbert, *Gospel,* 17.

[68] See Kee, *Miracle,* 193, for other propagandistic narratives in the Isis cult. It is hardly true, however, that the genre as a whole was centered on religious propaganda (Kee, *Miracle,* 193–94). For more Isis aretalogies see Horsley, *Documents,* 1:10–21.

[69] Dio Cassius 1.1.1–2; Fornara, *Nature of History,* 120–33; Palmer, "Monograph," 3, 29, citing, e.g., Cicero *Fam.* 5.12.5; Polybius 1.4.11; 3.31.13; cf. also Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Demosth.* 47. Burridge, *Gospels,* 149–51, includes entertainment among the function of many biographies; and, p. 245, complains that most of Pervo's criteria for identifying novels are so broad they apply to most historical works as well; cf. Porter, "'We' Passages," 551–52. Some fiction did occur at times in ancient biography (Chance, "Fiction"), especially when the subject had lived centuries earlier (Lefkowitz, *Africa,* 82).

[70] Cf. the interesting parallels between Acts and "institutional history" in Cancik, "Historiography." Cancik (p. 673) and others are right to recognize the influence of the genre of Acts on Luke, but the Gospel's focus on a single person still makes it a "life"; no rule prohibited an overlap between biography and history.

In contrast to novels, the Gospels do not present themselves as texts composed primarily for entertainment, but as true accounts of Jesus' ministry. The excesses of some forms of earlier source and redaction criticism notwithstanding, one would also be hard pressed to find a novel so clearly tied to its sources as Matthew or Luke is![71] Even John, whose sources are difficult to discern, overlaps enough with the Synoptics in some accounts and clearly in purpose to defy the category of novel. Despite some differences in purpose among themselves, all four gospels fit the general genre of ancient biography: the "life" (sometimes the public life) of a prominent person, normally written to praise the person and to communicate some point or points to the writer's generation. That they also seek to propagate particular moral and religious perspectives does not challenge this distinction; biographies were also often propagandistic in a more general sense, intended to provide role models for moral instruction.[72]

Some have proposed that the Fourth Evangelist modeled his Gospel on Greek drama, especially tragedy.[73] (This proposal has, however, been more frequently applied to Mark.[74]) The Gospels are, however, too long for dramas, which maintained a particular length in Mediterranean antiquity.[75] They also include far too much prose narrative for ancient drama. Despite its inadequacy as a full-fledged generic category, however, the proposal has some merit in that it at least invites us to investigate elements of Mediterranean storytelling from this period that were borrowed from Greek drama. The forms of Greek drama pervaded Greco-Roman literature,[76] tragic touches coloring even Tacitus's writing. Thus, for example, some point out that John generally has only two or at most three active (speaking) characters at a time, which fits rules for staging in Greek drama, and he divides scenes in a manner similar to such works.[77] Paul Duke regards his "dramatic style" as so similar to classical Greek drama (in contrast with the Synoptics) that he believes the author shows some acquaintance with Greek drama. Clearly the Fourth Gospel is not a play, but it "reflects a cultural milieu in which the ironic style of Homer and the Greek tragedians had made its imprint; and in the late first century few locations would have precluded such an influence."[78] Jewish works for Greek-speaking audiences sometimes adapted such features.[79]

Thus some have argued that the Fourth Gospel is a biography using the mode of tragedy;[80] Witherington lists nine parallels between John and Greek tragedy, though most of the elements he lists also appear outside theater.[81] But, as most who recognize dramatic features in this Gospel concur, there is a difference between a biography with dramatic coloring and a drama; and some of the constituent parts that Aristotle insisted belong in tragedy are simply not present. For example, Jesus' interlocutors or disciples hardly function, even when acting in concert, as a typical χορικός, choral song.[82] Of the necessary six parts Aristotle identifies in tragedy, John lacks song, though he includes elements such as plot and character (Aristotle *Poet.* 6.9, 1450a); yet nearly all poets include all these characteristics (*Poet.* 6.11). Not only novelists but historians strove to develop internally consistent narrative worlds,[83] and among historical writers, those from whom one would expect such attempts at consistency of plot and character, most are biographers.

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[71] Cf. also Hengel, "Problems," 212.

[72] E.g., Aune, *Environment,* 36; see further below.

[73] See Domeris, "Drama." The Gospel also pictures Jesus' ministry as a trial (e.g., Kobelski, "Melchizedek," 193; Lincoln, *Lawsuit Motif;* van der Watt and Voges, "Elemente"), but this is not the most prominent aspect of the Gospel's portrayal.

[74] Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel,* especially on the plot, 51–78; idem, "Tragedy"; Stock, "Mystery Play"; Stone, "*Oedipus*"; cf. Via, *Kerygma,* 99–101; Weeden, *Mark,* 17; Cox, "Tragedy," 316–17; Hengel, *Studies in Mark,* 34–36. On the plot, see Aune, *Environment,* 48.

[75] Burridge, *Gospels,* 225.

[76] Cf., e.g., Arrian *Alex.* 3.22.2–6; for interchange between drama and rhetoric see Scodel, "Drama and Rhetoric." Stricter historians could, however, criticize others' elaborations intended to evoke pathos (Polybius 2.56.7, 10–11).

[77] Koester, *Symbolism,* 36; Ellis, *Genius,* 8.

[78] Duke, *Irony,* 141. He thinks that John used these features for a Jewish purpose. Cultural Roman pessimism, however, may contribute alongside Greek tragedy.

[79] See esp. Josephus. Schmitt, "Form," finds parallels in Wis 1:1–6:21 (although other scholars would dispute some of these).

[80] Witherington, *Wisdom,* 4; Culpepper, "Plot."

[81] Witherington, *Wisdom,* 4–5.

Some have argued that the Gospels fit the genre of history and not biography.[84] Dihle argues that though the Gospels are "lives," they differ from Greek lives because they cannot trace moral development in one they regard as God incarnate.[85] He argues that Roman biographies fall closer to history, starting with Suetonius.[86] This argument, however, appears problematic: did Tacitus (in his *Agricola*) suddenly develop a new genre in the same era as Suetonius without prior models? Plutarch's biographies also include considerable historical content. Moreover, historical works focused on a particular individual were "lives" *(bioi),* the most natural category in which ancient readers would place the Gospels. (Only Luke might appear more questionable, because it is paired with Acts, which is increasingly recognized as a historical monograph.) Thus we turn directly to the biographical genre.

## Biographies

In more recent years scholars have been returning to the consensus that the Gospels represent biographies in the ancient sense of the term.[87] We might compare them especially with philosophers' *bioi,* which honored founders of philosophic schools and continued their teachings.[88] Like epistle, biography (the *bios,* or "life") was one of the most common literary genres in antiquity; thus it is not surprising that much of the NT consists of these two genres.[89] Graham Stanton regards as "surprisingly inaccurate" the older views of Bultmann and others that the Gospels were not biographies.[90]

Richard Burridge, after carefully defining the criteria for identifying genre and establishing the characteristic features of Greco-Roman *bioi,* or lives,[91] shows how both the

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[82] Aristotle *Poet.* 12.1–3, 1452b.

[83] See Stibbe, *Gospel,* 32–34.

[84] Dihle, "Biography," 381.

[85] Ibid., 379.

[86] Ibid., 383–84.

[87] So, e.g., Aune, *Environment,* 46–76; Stanton, *Jesus,* 117–36; Robbins, *Teacher,* 10; Burridge, "People," 121–22; idem, "Biography, Ancient"; Cross, "Genres," 402–4; Frickenschmidt, *Evangelium als Biographie;* for aretalogical biography, see Wills, *Quest.* Some of these writers (e.g., Stanton, *Gospels,* 19) reverse an earlier skepticism toward the biographical proposal (see Stanton, *New People,* 64; cf. Aune, "Problem"). Cf. also Hodgson, "Valerius Maximus."

[88] See e.g., Culpepper, *John,* 64–66. Some later examples of this form may borrow the gospel form (see Dillon and Hershbell, "Introduction," 25, who also suggest that John's Gospel may well have been available).

[89] Robbins, *Teacher,* 2–3.

[90] Stanton, *New People,* 63; idem, *Gospel Truth,* 137.

[91] For criteria for genre, see *Gospels,* 109–27; for pre-Christian Greco-Roman biographies, 128–53; for later ones, 154–90.

Synoptics and John fit this genre.[92] So forceful is his work on Gospel genre as biography that one knowledgeable reviewer concludes, "This volume ought to end any legitimate denials of the canonical Gospels' biographical character."[93] Arguments concerning the biographical character of the Gospels have thus come full circle: the Gospels, long viewed as biographies until the early twentieth century, now again are widely viewed as biographies.

## *1. Greco-Roman Biography and History*

Classifying the Gospels as ancient biography is helpful only if we define some of the characteristics of ancient biography, particularly with respect to its historiographic character. As noted above, although biographies could serve a wide range of literary functions,[94] ancient biographers intended their works to be more historical than novelistic.[95] First-century historiography often focused on notable individuals.[96] The central difference between biography and history was that the former focused on a single character whereas the latter included a broader range of events.[97] History thus contained many biographical elements but normally lacked the focus on a single person and the emphasis on characterization.[98] Biographies were less exhaustive, focusing more on the models of character they provided (Plutarch *Alex.* 1.1–3).

Ancient biography differed from modern biography in some historiographic respects. For instance, ancient biographies sometimes differed from their modern namesakes by beginning in the protagonist's adulthood, as in many political biographies (e.g., Plutarch *Caesar* 1.1–4), the first-century *Life of Aesop,*[99] and in Mark. In contrast to modern historical biography, ancient biographers also did not need to follow a chronological sequence; most felt free to rearrange their material topically.[100] Some scholars maintain that Peripatetic biographies were literary biographies ordered chronologically, insofar as was possible;[101] Alexandrian biographies were arranged more systematically or topically.[102] Although these types were never followed exactly, and chronological biographies appear to have been rare,[103] Luke seems to fall into the former category (following the order of Mark almost exactly except for several very significant exceptions), whereas Matthew (who is influenced more by Jewish encomium conventions) follows the more common topical format (compare his five topical discourse sections). Many Jewish interpreters doubted that the biblical accounts of Moses at Sinai were arranged chronologically (cf. 4Q158).[104] Nor did early Christians expect the Gospels to reflect chronological sequence; Augustine suggested the evangelists wrote their Gospels as God recalled the accounts to their memory (*Cons.* 21.51; for Mark, see Papias in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39).[105]

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[92] Ibid., 191–219 on the Synoptics, and 220–39 on John.

[93] Talbert, "Review," 715; cf. also Stanton, *New People,* 64.

[94] Burridge, *Gospels,* 149–52, 185–88. For the divergence, see further Barr and Wentling, "Conventions," 81–88, although I would not regard all their examples as biographies.

[95] For substantial overlap between the biography and history (as well as other) genres in antiquity, see Burridge, *Gospels,* 63–67.

[96] Fornara, *Nature of History,* 34–36, 116.

[97] Lucian *Hist.* 7; also Witherington, *Sage,* 339, citing Plutarch *Alex.* 1.1–2.

[98] See Fornara, *Nature of History,* 185.

[99] Drury, *Design,* 29.

[100] Cf., e.g., the accidental repetition in Plutarch *Alex.* 37.4; 56.1. This contrasts with the more chronological practice of historians (e.g., Thucydides 2.1.1; 5.26.1), although even most historians tended to follow events to their conclusion and not simply strict chronology (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 9; *Letter to Gnaeus Pompeius* 3).

[101] For examples, see Aune, *Environment,* 34, 63–64 (e.g., the lives of Aesop, Homer, Secundus, and Herakles); cf. ibid., 82.

[102] Aune, *Environment,* 31–32. Disordered chronology was not problematic to ancient readers; thus the writer of 4 Maccabees is aware that the mother's speech should occur at a certain point in his narrative, and says so (12:7; cf. 2 Macc 7), but chooses to recount it later. Cf. the four categories of ancient biography in Ferguson, *Backgrounds,* 307.

[103] Stanton argues that our only actual example of a purely Peripateic biography is not chronological (Stanton, *Jesus,* 119–21). He contends that, of extant biographies, only Tacitus's *Agricola* is

Some also argue that ancient biography, in contrast to modern biography or novels, plays down characterization, but this is not accurate. Characterization was often accomplished by how a story was told rather than by specific comments,[106] but such comments do appear often enough in biographies,[107] and rhetoricians often described a person's character directly to make a case (*Rhet. ad Herenn.* 4.50.63). Theophrastus even provides, in graphic and often humorous ways, thirty basic character types (such as a flatterer or one overly talkative) that offer various kinds of examples (*Char.* passim). At other times the storytelling was certainly sufficient. Even in Greece's ancient epic poetry, the stark characters of wrathful Achilles, proud Agamemnon, and clever Odysseus are impossible to miss. Ancient literature abounds with developed examples of dysfunctional relationships; for example, Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* appeared exceptionally susceptible to Aeneas because she had never recovered from her first lover's death. In contrast to some later psychologizing approaches, some ancient biographers also proved reluctant to speculate concerning their characters' inner thoughts, though this again is not a rule (see Arrian *Alex.* 7.1.4).

History, too, was written differently then than in modern times. Biographies were essentially historical works; thus the Gospels would have an essentially historical as well as a propagandistic function. As Aune writes,

> . . . while biography tended to emphasize encomium, or the one-sided praise of the subject, it was still firmly rooted in historical fact rather than literary fiction. Thus while the Evangelists clearly had an important theological agenda, the very fact that they chose to adapt Greco-Roman biographical conventions to tell the story of Jesus indicates that they were centrally concerned to communicate what they thought really happened.[108]

Ancient biographies and histories were different genres, yet (as the contemporary debate over the genre of Luke-Acts shows) the former can draw on the principles of the latter enough to allow considerable overlap (thus our examples in this chapter from ancient histories as well as biographies). Yet claiming a basically historical function by ancient standards does not mean that the Gospel writers wrote history the way modern historians

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genuinely chronological. Topical arrangement suited episodic narratives about a person (Hemer, *Acts,* 74). Although historical writing and thus biography (Suetonius, Plutarch, *Life of Aesop,* etc.) involved some chronology, it was not the most *significant* feature of any kind of ancient biography.

[104] See Wise, "Introduction to 4Q158."

[105] An aged person might recall many events provided he were permitted to recite them randomly rather than in order (Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.4).

[106] Stanton, *Jesus,* 125; idem, *Gospel Truth,* 139; Burridge, *Gospels,* 205, 208; in John, see Burridge, *Gospels,* 229–30. Characterization is in fact central in ancient biographies (Fornara, *Nature of History,* 185).

[107] E.g., Cornelius Nepos 4 (Pausanias), 1.1. Josephus adapts some biblical characters, adding virtues (cf., e.g., Feldman, "Jehoram"). Matthew (8:26; cf. 6:30) reduces Mark's "unbelief" to "little faith."

[108] Aune, "Biography," 125; cf. 64–65. Shuler, *Genre,* regards his subject (Matthew) as primarily encomium, or laudatory, biography; but such a specific genre probably did not exist (Burridge, *Gospels,* 88).

would; ancient historiography proceeded on principles different from those of modern historiography. (To insist otherwise is to force ancient works into a genre that did not yet exist.) Because ancient historians lacked most historiographic tools that are now commonplace and were concerned to produce an engaging as well as informative narrative,[109] their motives in writing and hence their treatment of details do not conform to modern standards of historical analysis.

One should also note that writers had their own *Tendenz* (tendentious emphasis), for instance Polybius's pro-Roman *Tendenz*[110] or Josephus's apologetic attempt to whitewash his people from excess complicity in the revolt while simultaneously appealing to the dignity of his Roman readership.[111] (Although the *Cyropaedia* is something of a historical romance, it appears noteworthy that Xenophon's Cyrus even reflects some Socratic ideas—e.g., *Cyr.* 3.1.17!)[112] Likewise, they would expect morals to be drawn from their stories.[113] Ancient historians felt that history taught moral lessons,[114] and that if one understood why events happened,[115] not merely historians but also statesmen could use them as precedents (παραδείγματα).[116] Thus some felt that historians should choose a noble subject, so their work would contribute to good moral character as well as information (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.2.1). Historians frequently included moralizing narrative asides to interpret history's meaning for their readers, illustrate the fulfillment of prophetic utterances, or provide the author's perspective (e.g., Polybius 1.35.1–10; Diodorus Siculus 31.10.2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 7.65.2; Dio Cassius 1.5.4; Arrian *Alex.* 4.10.8; Cornelius Nepos 16 [Pelopidas], 3.1).[117]

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[109] Aune, *Environment,* 80, 95. Ancient writers, unlike many modern ones, did not feel that these were mutually exclusive goals. Thus the author of 2 Maccabees notes that he employed many possible sources, but that his document was also written in such a way as to be enjoyed and easily remembered (2:24–25). One can write essentially factual accounts in the entertaining style of current fiction (cf., e.g., Sterling, *Sisters,* 78, on Harriet Brent Jacobs's style).

[110] Cf. Momigliano, *Historiography,* 71–73. One may contrast the unexpected degree of impartiality in the Athenian Thucydides' description of the Peloponnesian War. Impartiality claims are most common for those writing of recent events, when patronage associations could be thought to bias them (Witherington, *Acts,* 49).

[111] Often noted, e.g., Mason, *Josephus and NT,* 60–71, 77–81; cf. ibid., 196–98. For Josephus's pro-Flavian propaganda, see Saulnier, "Josèphe."

[112] Cicero *Quint. fratr.* 1.1.8.23 argues that Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* was intended to teach proper government, not primarily to report historical truth.

[113] Often noted, e.g., Mason, *Josephus and NT,* 63. Outside the genre, one may consider, e.g., Pindar *Encomia* frg. 121; Theophrastus *Char.* proem 3; Philostratus *Lives* 2.1.554; Athenaeus *Deipn.* 1.10e, on what could be done with Homer; or Aesop's morals in his *Fables* (e.g., 172); for theology in rabbinic stories, see Pearl, *Theology,* passim; even Tacitus felt no constraint to avoid editorial statements at times (e.g., *Ann.* 4.33).

[114] See Frei, "Apologetics," 56, noting that this view was also influential in eighteenth-century England.

[115] See, e.g., Polybius 2.56.13; 3.32.2. Ancient historians did not, as some contend, ignore lines of cause and effect (Rajak, *Josephus,* 102).

[116] Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 5.56.1; Polybius 3.31.11–13. Rhetoricians used παραδείγματα, human examples, to make moral points in their speeches (*R.A.* 6.80.1; *Rhet. Alex.* 8.1429a.21–1430a.13; Cicero *Sest.* 48.102; cf. also Kennedy, "Survey of Rhetoric," 21). On such historical "paradigms" see also Diodorus Siculus 37.4.1; Herodian 3.13.3. One could advance one's case by contrast or comparison (e.g., Demosthenes *On the Embassy* 174; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Demosth.* 33; as a literary device, see Shuler, *Genre,* 50; Stanton, *New People,* 77–80, 83).

[117] Hedrick is thus certainly right to reject John's narrative asides as evidence of redaction ("Unreliable Narration," 132–33, 142; also O'Rourke, "Asides"; Tenney, "Footnotes"; for narrative

Dionysius of Halicarnassus lists three purposes for writing history: first, that the courageous will gain "immortal glory" that outlives them; second, that their descendants will recognize their own roots and seek to emulate their virtue; and finally, that he might show proper goodwill and gratitude toward those who provided him training and information.[118] Elsewhere he includes among history's lessons the virtue of piety toward the gods (*R.A.* 8.56.1). Livy claimed that history teaches a nation's greatness and what one may imitate (Livy 1. pref.10).[119] Polybius opened his massive history by explaining that the most effective behavioral corrective is "knowledge of the past" (Polybius 1.1.1, LCL 1:3).[120] The emphasis on imitating ancestral wisdom and learning from both positive and negative historical examples is at least as old as classical Athenian rhetoric (Aeschines *False Embassy* 75–76; Lysias *Or.* 2.61.196) and remained in Roman rhetoric (Cicero *Sest.* 68.143). Second-century C.E. orators continued to expound morals from fifth-century B.C.E. Greek history (Maximus of Tyre *Or.* 6.5); later orators also used Plutarch's *Lives* this way (Menander Rhetor 2.4, 392.28–31).

Jewish people understood the Bible's narratives as providing moral lessons in the same manner: the writers recorded examples of virtue and vice for their successors to emulate or avoid (Philo *Abraham* 4; 1 Cor 10:11). They could likewise employ postbiblical models as examples of virtues (e.g., 4 Macc 1:7–8). Because Josephus repeats so much of the biblical narrative in the *Antiquities,* one can readily note the way he adapts biblical characters to accentuate their value as positive (Isaac;[121] Joseph; Moses; Ruth and Boaz; Samuel;[122] Hezekiah;[123] Jehoshaphat;[124] Josiah;[125] Daniel; Nehemiah[126]), negative (Jeroboam; Ahab[127]), or intermediate moral models.[128]

No less than other historical writers, biographers frequently sought to teach moral lessons from their stories;[129] one could in a sense learn from great teachers of the past by proxy, as disciples of their recorded teachings.[130] Cornelius Nepos, in fact, declares that biographers dwelt on the virtues of their subjects in ways that historians did not, and

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asides in histories and biographies, see Sheeley, *Asides,* 56–93; for parenthesis as a rhetorical technique, see Rowe, "Style," 147; Black, "Oration at Olivet," 87, citing Quintilian 9.3.23; Anderson, *Glossary,* 89–90). Further, even longer digressions are common in ancient literature (e.g., Josephus *Life* 336–367; Aune, *Environment,* 30, citing, e.g., Thucydides 1.97.1; ibid., 93–95, 102). Although character development was not a central focus of ancient biography, Josephus's portrayal indicates a (negative) development in Herod the Great's character.

[118] Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.6.3–5; cf. Diodorus Siculus 15.1.1; 37.4.1.

[119] On the hortatory value of history in Roman historians, see Fornara, *Nature of History,* 115–16.

[120] For Polybius's appreciation for history's political value, see Fornara, *Nature of History,* 113.

[121] For a more detailed study of Josephus's adaptations see Feldman, "Isaac."

[122] Feldman, "Joseph," "Moses," and "Samuel"; Levison, "Ruth." Hata, "Moses," emphasizes the apologetic value of Josephus's portrayal of Moses against anti-Semites.

[123] See Josephus *Ant.* 10.24–35; Begg, "Illness"; Feldman, "Hezekiah."

[124] See Josephus *Ant.* 9.1–17; Begg, "Jehoshaphat"; Feldman, "Jehoshaphat."

[125] See Begg, "Josiah"; Feldman, "Josiah."

[126] See Feldman, "Daniel," "Nehemiah."

[127] See Feldman, "Jeroboam," "Ahab."

[128] Noah appears positive, but Feldman, "Noah," thinks Josephus reduced his role because he was ancestor of the Gentiles. In idealizing characters into various types, Josephus may also have used standard Hellenistic typologies for women characters (Sarah as the good wife, Potiphar's wife as evil, etc.; cf. Amaru, "Women").

[129] Burridge, *Gospels,* 150; cf. Dihle, "Biography," 367–74.

[130] Robbins, *Teacher,* 110–11.

intended their work for less technical audiences (16 [Pelopidas], 1.1). Biographers also could write for apologetic and polemical reasons.[131] Some ancient biographers emphasize moral lessons in their stories more than others; some writers, like Plutarch, vary in their moralizing even from one biography to the next.[132]

At the same time, the *Tendenz* of the documents does not destroy their historical value; as Jewish scholar Geza Vermes points out, "a theological interest is no more incompatible with a concern for history than is a political or philosophical conviction," and we can allow for these in interpretation.[133] The better historians like Polybius felt that their work should include praise and blame for individuals, but that—in contrast to the practice of many writers—they should pursue truth and fairness (Polybius 8.8), properly evaluating the right distribution of praise and blame (Polybius 3.4.1). They felt free to critique their heroes' shortcomings (e.g., Arrian *Alex.* 4.7.4; 4.8.1–4.9.6), and most biographies mixed some measure of praise and blame (e.g., Plutarch *Cimon* 2.4–5; Cornelius Nepos 11 [Iphicrates], 3.2).[134] One could tell a less than flattering story even about one's own teacher, though apt to report especially favorable matters about him (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.21.602–603).[135] One could also criticize some activities of other figures one regarded highly.[136] Of course some teachers were regarded as exceptional; Xenophon has only good to report about Socrates (*Mem.* 4.8.11), and it is hardly likely that early Christians would find flaws in one they worshiped (cf. later Iamblichus *V.P.* passim). But normally disciples respected their teachers enough to preserve and transmit their teachers' views accurately, even when they disagreed with them, rather than distort their teachers' views to fit their own.[137] Further, when one's source could not recall the substance of a speech, a biographer might not try to reproduce it (Eunapius *Lives* 484). Much history may be written by the victors,[138] but even in ancient historiography triumph did not always dictate bias.[139] All ancient historians and biographers, like many modern ones, had important agendas; they used history to shed light on their own time, no less than did the

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[131] Burridge, *Gospels,* 151, 180; for apologetic autobiography, cf., e.g., Josephus *Life* 336–367; 2 Cor 11:8–33; Gal 1:11–24.

[132] Burridge, *Gospels,* 68–69.

[133] Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism,* 19; cf. Levinskaya, *Diaspora Setting,* 2; Hemer, *Acts,* 79–90.

[134] For Plutarch, see Lavery, "*Lucullus*"*;* honoring subjects could, but need not, produce distortion (Fornara, *Nature of History,* 64–65). Rhetorical conventions appeared in ancient biography, but more in rhetorical biographers such as Isocrates (see Burridge, "Biography"). Forensic speech, where a primary object was legal victory, was naturally another story (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 8).

[135] One might be thought biased when writing about close friends (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.33.628), but Tacitus wrote freely of his father-in-law (*Agricola;* see below). One pupil reportedly did omit some of his teacher's sayings, but because they were rhetorically inappropriate (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.29.621).

[136] Eunapius *Lives* 461 (on Iamblichus, who is supernatural in 459); Plutarch *Marcus Cato* 5.1, 5; 12.4; for writers' style, Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 1. One could also disagree with the dominant view of one's school (e.g., Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 117.6).

[137] See e.g., Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 108.17, 20, 22; 110.14, 20; Musonius Rufus 1, 36.6–7 (Pythagoras's disciples differed, but this was considered noteworthy—Valerius Maximus 8.15.ext.1). Occasionally pupils could even turn against their teachers (Eunapius *Lives* 493), but in such a case they would no longer claim his authority for the source of their teaching.

[138] Thus Xenophon, largely accurate in what he reports in the *Hellenica,* nevertheless proves biased by what he omits of Thebes's greatness (Brownson, "Introduction," ix–x), although he remains our "best authority" for the period (xi).

[139] Cf. the respective roles of Pompey and Caesar in Lucan *C.W.* passim.

Gospels.[140] But had the Gospel writers wished to communicate solely later Christian doctrine and not history, they could have used simpler forms than biography.[141]

Thus the Gospel writers' purpose is historical as well as theological. As readers of the OT, which most Jews viewed as historically true,[142] they must have believed that history itself communicated theology.[143] In the context of a Jewish covenantal understanding of history as the framework for God's revelation, the earliest Christians must have been interested in the history of Jesus.[144] The NT writers claimed to use genuine history as their evocative myth, purporting to announce historical truth in the public arena.[145] Uncomfortable as this claim may make some modern students of the material, it deserves to be taken seriously. The most frequent counterclaims—that the earliest church experienced radical amnesia before our earliest record or that the disciples offered their lives to defend willful deception—stretch the bounds of historical credibility far more, relieving modern interpreters from having to address philosophically foreign constructs only by permitting our own bias to eliminate testimony for supernatural phenomena engrained in the tradition.

The Fourth Gospel is both historical *and* literary/theological. Of the four canonical gospels, John is certainly the most literary/theological, but a forced choice between reporting of historical tradition and theological interpretation of that tradition is no more appropriate here than with the other gospels. There are simply too many points at which this Gospel includes what sounds like pure Johannine theology yet is in fact confirmed as earlier tradition by parallels in the Synoptics (see commentary, ad loc.). Unless one dates John first and claims that the Synoptics or their sources drew from John, John shows some dependence on earlier tradition, although thoroughly reworded in his own idiom. If John's central claim is the Word's enfleshment (1:14), he claims not to merely interpret the church's faith but to interpret also "the apostolic witness concerning Jesus' historical self-disclosure."[146] Thus the Paraclete recalls and interprets history, aiding the witnesses (14:26; 15:26–27).[147]

## *2. How History Was Written*

Sometimes modern scholars write as if ancient historians and biographers lacked proper histiographic care or interest, but such a sweeping judgment neglects too much evidence. History was supposed to be truthful,[148] and historians harshly criticized other historians whom they accused of promoting falsehood, especially when they exhibited self-serving agendas.[149] A writer who consistently presents the least favorable interpretation, ignoring the diverse views of his sources, could be accused of malice.[150] (Ancients did, however, permit biography more freedom to be one-sided in praise than academic history.)[151] Biographers might also evaluate witnesses' motives; Antiphon's report about Alcibiades is suspect because he hated him (Plutarch *Alc.* 3.1). To a lesser extent, they critiqued those who unknowingly got their facts wrong.[152] This emphasis did not mean that historians could not omit some events[153]—indeed, ancient historiographers demanded selectivity and sometimes made that a major distinction between "history" and "chronicles"[154]—but it did prohibit the creation of events.

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[140] Aune, *Environment,* 62 (citing especially Isocrates *Nic.* 35; *Demon.* 34; Polybius 1.1.2; Livy 1.pref.10–11; Plutarch *Aemilius Paulus* 1.1; Lucian *Demonax* 2). An interpretive framework and even nonhistoric genre need not obscure all historical data; e.g., *Sib. Or.* 5.1–50 recites recent history accurately from its author's conceptual standpoint (i.e., including legends he assumes to be historical), despite some confusion (cf. 5.460–463).

[141] Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism,* 20.

[142] E.g., even the allegorist Philo in *Creation* 1–2: Moses refused to invent fables.

[143] Thus, e.g., the features that Acts shares with OT historical works confirms that Luke intended to write history (Rosner, "History," 81).

[144] Wright, *People of God,* 426. Interest in history distinguished the Christian movement from Mithraism, with its more cosmic emphasis (see Martin, "Mithraism"), but fits the typical commitment of ancient historians (Hemer, *Acts,* 63–70). The Qumran sect emphasized inspired interpretation yet preserved authentic memory of their founding Teacher (Stuhlmacher, "Theme," 13; cf. comment on 14:26), albeit not at length.

[145] Wright, *People of God,* 471.

[146] Ridderbos, *John,* 7, 13.

[147] Ibid., 14–16.

Aristotle noted that the difference between "history" and "poetry" was not literary style, for one could put Herodotus into verse if one wished; but that history recounts what actually happened whereas poetry tells what might happen.[155] Thus historical inquiry required not merely rhetorical skill but research (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.1.2–4; 1.4.2),[156] and those thought guilty of inadequate research or acquaintance with their subjects were likely to be doubted (Arrian *Ind.* 7.1).

Accounts could naturally be expanded or abridged freely without question.[157] Whereas Josephus expands on some biblical narratives while he follows accurately the sequence and substance of the account,[158] 2 Maccabees openly claims to be a careful abridgment of a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene.[159] Among Theon's rhetorical exercises is the practice of "expanding" and "condensing" fables:[160] "We 'expand' by lengthening the speeches-in-character in the fable, and by describing a river or something of this sort. We condense by doing the opposite."[161] When applied to other kinds of narrative, this need not tamper with historical details; aside from adding details known from other sources and adding some description that is either implicit in the narrative or inherently probable in itself, Theon's example for expanding a *chreia* does not make much change in its basic meaning.[162] Likewise, Longinus explains amplification (αὔξησις) as adding more and more phrases to bring home the point with increasing force.[163]

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[148] E.g., Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.26; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 8.

[149] Josephus *Life* 336–339; Diodorus Siculus 21.17.1; Lucian *Hist.* 24–25. Those who claimed the superiority of their own works, however, risked the charge of impudence (Josephus *Life* 359).

[150] So Plutarch *Malice of Herodotus* 3–7, *Mor.* 855C–856B (but in defense of Herodotus, Plutarch's other extant sources may have followed a *favorable* bias; Plutarch may have his own bias because of Herodotus's critique of Boeotia, Plutarch's homeland). Perhaps more plausibly, cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Letter to Gnaeus Pompeius* 3, on Thucydides' grudge against Athens.

[151] So Polybius 10.21.8, contrasting depiction of someone in his history with an earlier biography he had written about the same person.

[152] Diodorus Siculus 1.37.4, 6.

[153] E.g., Josephus *Life* 339; *Ag Ap.* 1.60–66; Dio Cassius 1.1.1–2 (though Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 7.66.5; 11.1.1–6 emphasizes that he chose accuracy over brevity). Josephus *Life* 365–367 boasts that Agrippa II testified to the accuracy of his work but offered to supply additional information. In novels as well, retellings could omit some details (e.g., Chaereas's kick in Chariton 2.5.10–11).

[154] Whittaker, "Introduction," li–lii, citing Lucian *Hist.* 4–6, 27.

[155] Aristotle *Poet.* 9.2, 1451b; thus poetry is more philosophical, conveying general truths, whereas history conveys specific facts (9.3, 1451b).

[156] Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.24–25 also criticizes those more interested in showing off rhetorical skill than in historical truth. Even the best historians employed standards of rhetoric, but they used more restraint (McCoy, "Thucydides," 29–31; cf. also Witherington's addendum, 23–32).

[157] This calls into question early form-critical studies that supposed that the tradition's tendency was nearly always expansive; see Sanders, *Tendencies,* 19, 46–87, 88–189, 272; cf. Stein, "'Criteria,'" 238–40. Even oracles, which were considered divine utterances, could be expanded; see Aune, *Prophecy,* 58.

[158] Cf., e.g., Begg, "Blanks," on Josephus *Ant.* 9.29–43 and 2 Kgs 3:4–27.

[159] 2 Macc 2:24–25, noting that the author followed the *rules* of abridgement (2:28).

[160] *Progymn.* 4.37–42.

Similarly, that Matthew often abridges Markan accounts was no more problematic than the process of abridgement is today, and may have been welcomed. Greco-Roman writers and rhetoricians appreciated conciseness in a narrative, provided that it did not impair clarity or plausibility.[164] Expansion was sometimes due to the passage of time and consequent growth of tradition;[165] in other cases, long stories were sometimes continually abbreviated over time.[166] Both poets and prose writers sometimes added clauses nonessential to the meaning or removed essential ones simply to make the arrangement sound better (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lit. Comp.* 9).

Inserting sayings from sayings-collections into narrative, or adding narratives to sayings, was considered a matter of arrangement, not a matter of fabrication.[167] One thing reminding the narrator of another was a common rhetorical technique for transition.[168] It seems to have been understood that sayings in collections were redacted, rather than recited verbatim.[169] Thus Phaedrus feels free to adapt Aesop for aesthetic reasons, meanwhile seeking to keep to the *spirit* of Aesop (Phaed. 2.prol.8). And paraphrase of sayings—attempts to rephrase them without changing their meaning—was standard rhetorical practice, as evidenced by the school exercises in which it features prominently.[170] Such paraphrase provided a degree of rhetorical freedom, and in the case of familiar lines would prove more aesthetically appealing than verbatim repetition.[171]

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[161] *Progymn.* 4.80–82 (trans. Butts).

[162] *Progymn.* 3.224–240. In *Progymn.* 2.115–123, Theon compares elaborations in earlier historical sources. Elaboration (ἐργασία) was especially useful for rebuttal (*Progymn.* 1.172–175).

[163] Longinus *Subl.* 11.1; cf. Menander Rhetor 2.3, 379.2–4.

[164] Theon *Progymn.* 5.39–43, 52–53; Phaedrus 2.prol.12–13; 3, epil. 8–9; 4, epil.7–9; Philostratus *Hrk.* 29.6; in speeches, e.g., Diogenes Laertius 7.1.20; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 55; *Demosth.* 18, 20, 24; *Lysias* 5; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.4.569. One could, however, be too brief at times (Phaedrus 3.10.59–60; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *2 Amm.* 2).

[165] In Jewish sources, cf., e.g., *ʾAbot R. Nat.* 7, §21 B (for a pseudonymous claim to have personally witnessed something that earlier tradition simply reports). For a halakic example, cf. Hoenig, "Kinds of Labor." Amplification and embellishment are thus more characteristic of the apocryphal gospels (Carmignac, "Pré-pascal").

[166] Cf. Blomberg, "Thomas," 195, especially on the *Gospel of Thomas* (in which additions primarily reflect gnostic themes, but which was especially abbreviated to streamline, as were Matthew and Mark).

[167] Theon *Progymn.* 4.73–79, on adding narrative to a fable or the reverse (although the narrative is added as a parallel, not as a setting, for the fable). Authors could add maxims to narratives (*Progymn.* 5.388–425) or combine preexisting narratives to relate two or more of them at once (5.427–441). The alternative to combining narratives was simply to relate them in episodic fashion, as Mark sometimes does; this was acceptable for most readers, if not according to the highest literary fashions (Drury, *Design,* 30; cf. Smith, *Magician,* 109).

[168] Quintilian 9.2.60–61. Cf. the discussion of catchwords in Gerhardsson, *Memory,* 145–49, 153; in the Gospels, cf. Bultmann, *Tradition,* 325–26.

[169] Cf., e.g., the redactional structure of *m. ʾAbot* 2:9, where Johanan ben Zakkai asks five disciples a question in positive form, commending the answer of the fifth; when he repeats the question in negative form, he receives mainly the same answers in negative form, and again commends the fifth.

[170] Theon *Progymn.* 1.93–171; cf., e.g., Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.9.23–25 with Oldfather's note referring to Plato *Apol.* 29C, 28E (LCL 1:70–71).

Thus even writers intending to write accurate history could "spice up" or "enhance" their narratives for literary, moralistic, and political purposes.[172] This is not to say that good historians fabricated events; but they did often alter or add explanatory details to events.[173] Authors differed among themselves as to how much variation in detail they permitted, but some writers who wanted to guard the historical enterprise from distortion had strong feelings about those who permitted too much.[174] Thus the second-century rhetorician Lucian objected to those historical writers who amplified and omitted merely for literary or encomiastic purposes (i.e., to make the character look better).[175] The earlier historian Polybius reports graphic bloodshed (15.33), but claims that, unlike some other writers, he avoids amplifying it for sensationalism (15.34); indeed, he savages another writer for sensationalism and excess accommodation of tragic conventions (2.56.1–11; with examples, 2.57.1–2.63.6). Diogenes Laertius often cites his sources, and does not fabricate material to produce symmetry in his accounts (for instance, while he cites letters from some ancient philosophers, he apparently has none to cite for others like Socrates, in contrast with some pseudonymous Cynic epistles attributed to Socrates). Often later biographers simply repeat what earlier biographers said (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 1).

To be sure, many ancient writers pointed out the obscurity of the earliest reports, from centuries earlier, while demanding a much higher standard of accuracy when handling reports closer to their own period.[176] When writing about characters of the distant past, historians would have to sort through legendary as well as actual historical data, and might well have difficulty ascertaining which was which.[177] Thus, for example, Plutarch, when he writes about Theseus, who reportedly lived over a millennium before him, proposes to purify "Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History" by determining what is probable and credible.[178] This means that ancient historiography sometimes had to settle for historical verisimilitude, rather than high probability (by modern standards) concerning the events ancient historians reported.[179] Many critically evaluated their mass of sources, sorting what they regarded as credible from what they did not.[180] Somewhat like the form critics' criterion of coherence, consistency of reported behavior with a person's known behavior provided a criterion for evaluating the probability of ancient sources' claims.[181] They might recognize exaggeration in an account, while averring that genuine historical tradition stood behind it,[182] or might regard an account as too implausible altogether.[183] Thucydides even takes into account the material remains of Mycenae in evaluating the *Iliad*'s reliability (1.10.1–2) and takes into account the relative dates of his sources (1.3.2–3). Plutarch disputes Herodotus's claim (9.85) on the basis of the numbers and an extant inscription (*Aristides* 19.5–6). Writers closer to the events they describe are normally considered more reliable (Plutarch *Malice of Herodotus* 20, *Mor.* 859B).

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[171] Contrast tedious repetition in some earlier literature, e.g., Homer *Il.* 8.402–408, 416–422 (except the change from first to third person).

[172] See esp. Lyons, *Autobiography,* 29–32. Lyons advises reading such texts critically, not completely rejecting their historical value (p. 66). Vividness was important for rhetorical style (Cicero *De or.* 2.45.189; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 7), and some writers might add details to augment dramatic effect (Plutarch *Alex.* 70.3).

[173] Aune, *Environment,* 82. Shuler, *Genre,* 50, cites Aristotle *Rhet.* 1.9.5 to the effect that it is appropriate to bestow praise on a man who has not actually done a given work, if his character is such that he would have done it. But this may imply praise for character or for already reported deeds consistent with that character rather than intentional fabrication of events.

[174] Thus, for instance, Polybius criticized "tragic historians," who "improperly combined fictional drama with factual history" (Aune, *Environment,* 84). Yet tragic elements, praised in poetry (Quintilian 10.1.64), were not out of place in even the strictest of historians. Without fabricating events, Tacitus certainly stamped many of them with tragic coloring (e.g., *Ann.* 5.9).

[175] Shuler, *Genre,* 11–12; cf. Bowersock, *Fiction as History,* 1–27. See esp. Lucian *Hist.* 7–13; in *A True Story* 1.4 he complains that novelizers failed to recognize how obvious their "lies" were. Herodian (1.1.1–2) shares this criticism despite his own rhetorical adjustments (cf. Whittaker, "Introduction," xxxviii–xxxix)! The complaint also appears in mythography (cf. Philostratus *Hrk.* 24.1–2).

[176] E.g., Thucydides 1.21.1; Livy 6.1.2–3; 7.6.6; Diodorus Siculus 1.6.2; 1.9.2; 4.1.1; 4.8.3–5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.12.3; *Thucyd.* 5; Pausanias 9.31.7; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.15, 24–25, 58; cf. Bowersock, *Fiction as History,* 1–2. Some also considered the earlier period qualitatively different because of divine activities (Hesiod *Op.* 158–60, 165; Arrian *Alex.* 5.1.2), but others mistrusted its reports because of such unusual events (Thucydides 1.23.3).

[177] Some, like the author of the *Life of Aesop,* may simply string together all the available popular traditions into a narrative. These traditions had grown over six centuries (see Drury, *Design,* 28–29).

But even if they could not achieve historical certainty about events of the distant past, their attempts to reconstruct the likeliest past indicates that historical writers were *concerned* with historical probability, as many of them plainly affirm.[184] Even when writing about characters from a period for which the evidence was no longer clear, good historical writers tried to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate sources.[185] Thus Arrian often evaluates various reports by comparing them; he notes that one story too prominent to ignore is not reported by any of the eyewitness writers, hence is probably unreliable (Arrian *Alex.* 6.28.2).[186] In more recent as well as in older times, of all possible sources, eyewitness and firsthand sources were the best;[187] likewise, ancients could also recognize the superior value of sources published while living eyewitnesses could either confirm or dispute the accounts.[188] Others could cite an allegedly genuine letter to challenge other traditions (Plutarch *Alex.* 46.1–2; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.1.562–563). Of course, whether for bias or memory lapse, even eyewitnesses did not always agree on details, and this would require some weighing of individual testimony (Thucydides 1.22.3). When such distinction between accurate and inaccurate sources was impossible, writers often simply presented several different current opinions on what had happened.[189] A writer might simply admit that he did not *know* how something happened (Sallust *Jug.* 67.3).

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[178] Plutarch *Theseus* 1.3. Arrian accepts but explains on rationalistic grounds some old legends (*Alex.* 2.16.6).

[179] See Dio Cassius 62.11.3–4; Aune, *Environment,* 83; Fornara, *Nature of History,* 134–36.

[180] E.g., demythologizing in Thucydides 1.21.1–2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.39.1; 1.41.1 (cf.1.84.4); *Thucyd.* 6; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.1.554; recognizing how propaganda helped create legend (Arrian *Alex.* 4.28.1–2); applying a criterion of coherency with known customs of a report's day (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 9.22.1–5); reporting stories as difficult to believe and recommending the reader's use of discretion (Livy 4.29.5–6; 23.47.8); or examining chronological and other tensions within a text (Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos,* il–l [citing Philostratus *Hrk.* 23.5–6; 25.10–13]).

[181] Arrian *Alex.* 7.14.4–6. The same criterion could apply, however, in fictitious composition or historical reconstruction based on plausibility (cf. Aristotle *Poet.* 15.4–5, 1454a; Theon *Progymn.* 1.46–52; 2.79–81; 8.2–3; in a history, see, e.g., Dio Cassius 62.11.3–4).

[182] E.g., Livy 3.8.10.

[183] Aulus Gellius 10.12.8–10. Some could also caution readers not to be too skeptical of an account that otherwise appeared implausible (Sallust *Catil.* 3.2; Plutarch *Camillus* 6.4).

[184] E.g., Josephus *Ant.* 20.156–157; see more extensively Mosley, "Reporting," passim. Even Josephus *Life* 336–339 attests to historians' concern for accuracy.

[185] Excepting when a consensus view was available (cf. Livy 1.1.1).

[186] Hearsay without eyewitness testimony is much less credible (Arrian *Ind.* 15.7).

[187] See Josephus *Life* 357; *Ag. Ap.* 1.45–49, 56; *War* 1.2–3; Xenophon *Hell.* 6.2.31 (refusing to believe a report until an eyewitness was available); Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 7; Seneca *Nat.* 3.25.8; 4.3.1; Arrian *Alex.* 1.pref.2–3; 6.11.8; Cornelius Nepos 23 (Hannibal), 13.3; 25 (Atticus), 13.7; 17.1. Historians often preferred sources closer in time to the events reported (Livy 7.6.6; 25.11.20).

Their methods for evaluating that probability usually stressed inconsistencies and unlikelihood, as in ancient lawcourts, rather than questioning the sources behind the writers' own sources. Thus Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*R.A.* 4.6.1) challenges an event recounted in earlier histories because of intrinsic improbabilities in their accounts.[190] But the interest of historical writers was essentially historical, even when their sources, mixed with centuries of accretions, were no longer pure.

That ancient historians, biographers, and anothologists depended on earlier sources is not in question; they frequently cite them,[191] and often cite varying accounts, even when preferring one above another.[192] Arrian prefers his two earliest sources, which generally agree, above others, and chooses between them when they diverge;[193] when sources diverge too much, he frankly complains that the exact truth is unrecoverable.[194] Plutarch cites five sources for one position and nine for another, plus an extant letter attributed to the person about whom he writes; but he then adds that the minor divergence does not affect our view of his hero's character (the main point for him; *Alex.* 46.1–2). Valerius Maximus, a more popular and less careful writer than some others, rarely cites his sources (and often confuses his data), but he mentions them occasionally when they diverge (e.g., 5.7.ext.1; 6.8.3). Earlier exaggerated contrasts between elite and popular literature aside, the Gospels (to some extent with the exception of Luke) do not reflect an elite audience.

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[188] E.g., Josephus *Life* 359–366. Of course, the events were freshest in a witness's mind immediately after the events (Lysias *Or.* 20.22.160), but testimony within the generation was accepted.

[189] E.g., Diogenes Laertius 1.23: "But according to others"; 6.1.13; 8.2.67–72; Plutarch *Lycurgus* 1.1; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.21.516; 2.5.576; *p. Soṭah* 9:13, §2. Historical distance also increased the possibility of gratuitous errors, as in 4 Macc 4:15 (Antiochus Epiphanes was Seleucus's younger brother rather than his son, but the mistake is understandable).

[190] Cf. also Pausanias 9.31.7; Plutarch *Isis* 8; and Theon's reasons for thinking the account of Medea murdering her children implausible (*Progymn.* 5.487–501; cf. 3.241–276, 4.112–116, 126–134). Arguments from probability and/or internal consistency had become standard (e.g., Demosthenes *On the Embassy* 120; *Against Pantaenetus* 23; Aristotle *Rhet.* 1.15.17, 1376a; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 3.35.5–6; 11.34.1–6; Arrian *Alex.* 3.3.6; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.219–220, 267, 286; 2.8–27, 82, 148; *Life* 342, 350; Acts 26:8).

[191] E.g., 1 Kgs 14:19, 29; 2 Kgs 23:28; 1 Chr 27:24; 29:29; 2 Macc 2:24–25; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.6.1; Arrian *Alex.* 6.2.4; Plutarch *Alex.* 31.2. Rabbis, too, emphasized citing sources for traditions (e.g., m. *Abot* 6:6; b. *Nid.* 19b). Even a novelist might occasionally remember to provide verisimilitude by providing a source (Apuleius *Metam.* 9.30).

[192] E.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.87.4; 3.35.1–4; 8.79.1; Livy 9.44.6; 23.19.17; 25.17.1–6; Appian *R.H.* 11.9.56; 12.1.1; Plutarch *Alex.* 31.3; 38.4; *Demosth.* 5.5; 29.4–30.4; *Them.* 25.1–2; 27.1; 32.3–4; Apollodorus 1.4.3; 1.5.2; 1.9.15, 19; 2.3.1; 2.5.11; Ovid *Fasti* 6.1–2, 97–100; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.4.570; Pausanias 2.5.5; 2.26.3–7; Arrian *Alex.* 4.9.2–3; 4.14.1–4; 5.3.1; 5.14.4; 7.14.2; 7.27.1–3; Herodian 7.9.4; 7.9.9; Cornelius Nepos 7 (Alcibiades), 11.1; 9 (Conon), 5.4; *p. Soṭah* 9:13, §2; see further Livy in LCL 12:320 n. 2. Occasionally historians also found ways to harmonize traditions (Diodorus Siculus 4.4.1–5). Outside history, see, e.g., *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* 323; Parthenius *L.R.* 11.1–3; 14.5. Cf. Ovid's account of Lichas's end (*Metam.* 9.225), which diverges from Sophocles *Trach.* 777–782; he claims dependence on prior tradition, but his emphasis on metamorphoses certainly accounts for which tradition he prefers!

[193] Arrian *Alex.* 1.pref.1.

[194] Arrian *Alex.* 3.3.6.

Often ancient writers cited sources, however, only when various sources disagreed (or when the writer wished to criticize them).[195] The Gospels do not explicitly cite sources, perhaps in part because of their relatively popular level but also probably in part because they report recent events on which sources have not yet diverged greatly (like, e.g., Tacitus, who naturally does not need to cite many sources on his father-in-law *Agricola*). It is possible that they also follow some Jewish conventions on this point; in some such works we can identify the sources only because they are extant (e.g., 1 Esdras blends Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah with some midrash).[196] Including material missing from earlier extant sources is not necessarily a sign of fabrication. A writer providing information missing in some earlier historians sometimes was drawing from sources unavailable to the other historians, whether those sources were written, oral, or both.[197]

## *3. Evaluating the Accuracy of Particular Works*

Although we often lack direct access to firsthand ancient sources, we can look to the ancient historical writers who still had access to such sources, then test them to determine the degree of their fidelity to those sources. Comparing different ancient historians such as Herodian and Dio Cassius turns up discrepancies, but also confirms that both use substantial historical data.[198] Such a comparison will also reveal that such writers did not always choose to cover the same ground; thus, for example, there are many omissions in Herodian, but hints of the information suggest that he did not lack the information itself.[199]

Although ancient historians did not always have access to the best sources for earlier eras, their treatment of more recent history was more dependable. The Roman historian Tacitus, for instance, recorded much of the history of first-century Rome, often using imperial annals.[200] He is widely regarded as one of the most reliable sources for the history of this period. When Tacitus wrote biography, he maintained the same standard he had upheld in writing Roman history: although his *Agricola,* a biography of his father-in-law, has a particular agenda (to praise his father-in-law while condemning the depravity of the Flavian era), it is certainly historically reliable. Indeed, Tacitus as Agricola's son-in-law also had firsthand acquaintance with the data he reported.

Other historians reporting contemporary or recent events were also substantially reliable, although one must consider how critically each writer used his sources and how freely he adapted them. Suetonius's biographies of the twelve Caesars provide critical information to modern historians of antiquity; they are less reliable than Tacitus, but where Suetonius errs it is generally by depending too uncritically on his sources, not by fabricating material. Other historians and biographers, like Livy and Plutarch, took much more freedom to moralize and spice up their narratives. Similarly, Lucan's war poetry could play on the grotesque yet impossible images of his tradition.[201] But, as noted above, even Plutarch plainly believes that he is using historical data to make his moral points, and his record frequently parallels other historical sources. Historians did make errors,[202] but could expect their successors to expose their errors when discovered (Diodorus Siculus 4.56.7–8).

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[195] See Hemer, *Acts,* 65.

[196] Josephus does not always state his sources, Nicolas of Damascus being an important exception; even Livy can mention that there are many sources while citing only one (Livy 42.11.1).

[197] Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.6.1, 3. Oral and written traditions sometimes overlapped (Jeremias in Hennecke, *Apocrypha,* 1:95).

[198] Whittaker, "Introduction," xlv–xlviii.

[199] Ibid., xlviii–lii.

[200] Ancients also accepted historical sources that were not annalistic, year-by-year reports (Aulus Gellius 5.18.6–7).

Josephus may provide an example of a freer historian. Josephus's history and autobiography are dominated by his apologetic *Tendenz.*[203] Crossan wryly but accurately remarks of Josephus's *War,* "Nobody from the highest aristocracy on either side is guilty of anything."[204] Even many of his adaptations of biblical accounts emphasize points pleasing to his Roman sponsors and Gentile audience.[205] Nevertheless, archaeology confirms that he usually gets right even many minor details unaffected by this *Tendenz,* even to the color of paint on Herod's bedroom wall[206] (although his accuracy has exceptions).[207] Inscriptions likewise sometimes confirm his accuracy on disputed details, against other historians.[208] He retells the same event in different ways in different books, a practice that does not suggest that the event never happened, but that he presents it from a different perspective.[209] While not striving for modern standards of historical accuracy, "wherever he can be tested, he can be seen to have been a pretty fair historian."[210]

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[201] Because weapons pierced Catus from both sides, the blood did not know which way to flow (Lucan *C.W.* 3.586–591).

[202] E.g., Dio Cassius 48.26.2 (see LCL note), contradicting Josephus (who was earlier; Josephus *Ant.* 14.359–369; *War* 1.268–273) and himself (Dio Cassius 49.22.6); Herodian 3.4.3 (see LCL n. 1); 3.9.3 (LCL n. 3).

[203] As often noted (e.g., Harrington, "Bible," 245; Sanders, *Judaism,* 6; on the autobiography, Mason, *Josephus and NT,* 41–42, 73–76). Clearly Josephus exaggerated in his own interests, though we (with Krieger, "Verwandter") are not sure that he did not belong to the priestly aristocracy.

[204] Crossan, *Jesus,* 93. Josephus had too much to lose to tell the truth in all respects. Sometimes the Romans apparently accepted the excuse that a small band had forced others to resist Rome (Livy 24.47.6, 213 B.C.E.).

[205] Cf., e.g., Begg, "Amaziah," "Nahum," and "Uzziah"; Feldman, "Asa," "Ezra," "Joseph," "Manasseh," "Pharaohs"; cf. also the transformation of Ahasuerus into a fully positive character in Josephus *Ant.* 11 (Feldman, "Ahasuerus"). Begg, "Gedaliah," suggests that some of Josephus's reports *may* also reflect influence from his experience. Not all changes stem from this motive; it is unlikely that Josephus avoids Nineveh's repentance because of Roman antiproselytism views (Feldman, "Jonah"), given his reports of many conversions elsewhere, and still less likely are some parallels drawn between the Jonah story and the Argonautica (Hamel, "Argo").

[206] E.g., Syon, "Gamla"; Cotton and Geiger, "Yyn"; Mazar, "Josephus"; Feldman, "Introduction," 45–46; Thackeray, *Josephus,* 49. Cf. also Josephus's claims concerning an Essene gate (*War* 5.142–45), in Riesner, "Gate"; Pixner, "Gate"; Pixner, Chen, and Margalit, "Zion." If one ignores his use of numbers (population estimates and distances), topographic confirmations show him generally reliable (Safrai, "Description"). Ancient speech-writing conventions allowed more compositional flexibility in speeches, which Josephus utilized freely; but form criticism has demonstrated that the Gospel traditions serve a different purpose; see on the sayings tradition, below.

[207] Fischer and Stein, "Marble." Less demonstrably, some have suggested that his use of conventional forms in his suicide accounts militates against the accuracy of his battle suicides (Newell, "Forms").

[208] Cf. Kokkinos, "Felix."

[209] Wright, *People of God,* 378, also comparing Luke 24:51; Acts 1:3. Cf. also the divergent details in Josephus and Philo on the same events (Theissen, *Gospels,* 149). Josephus follows but apparently modifies some literary sources (see Pucci Ben Zeev, "Reliability").

While adding details and perspectives, he even retains the stories of David's sin with Bathsheba (*Ant* 7.130–131) and Uriah's murder (7.131–146), though—perhaps with an eye toward anti-Judaic polemic like Apion's sources—he omits the episode of the golden calf (*Ant.* 3.95–99). Yet this "substantial" accuracy hardly keeps him from interpreting his sources in strategic ways for his Hellenistic audience. After promising to add nothing to Moses' laws (*Ant.* 4.196), he finds in Moses' laws a specific prohibition against theft from pagan temples (*Ant.* 4.207), a prohibition against women's testimony (*Ant.* 4.219) and the requirement of seven judges per city (*Ant.* 4.214). Numerous studies have traced Josephus's adaptation of biblical accounts, but whereas the degree of adaptation varies from one account to another, one should also note the degree of fidelity to the basic biblical account.[211]

That the Gospels purport to be historical biography is clear, but this does not by itself confirm the reliability of all details or even the reliability of the sources the Gospels use. That the Gospels use recent traditions and that those which can be checked (especially Luke) are careful in their use of sources suggests that the Gospels should be placed among the most, rather the least, reliable of ancient biographies. We will consider this issue further after surveying Jewish biographical conventions and their penchant for haggadic expansion.

## *4. Jewish Biographical Conventions*

Penned in Greek, probably to Diaspora audiences, the canonical gospels reflect Greco-Roman rather than strictly Palestinian Jewish literary conventions.[212] That is, they share more external characteristics with Diaspora or aristocratic Palestinian Jewish biographies in Greek than they do with many of the Palestinian works composed in Hebrew or Aramaic. Such a statement does not, however, detract from the Jewishness of the Gospels, since Jewish historical writing in Greek generally adopted Greek historiographic conventions, as suggested below for Josephus.[213] In contrast to other Greco-Roman biographies, however, the Gospels, like Diaspora Jewish historical texts, show considerable stylistic and theological influence from the LXX. Further, the Gospels vary among themselves in the degree of their Palestinian character: Matthew and John, whose readers apparently have closer continuing ties with Palestinian Judaism, probably reflect more Palestinian literary influences than Mark and Luke.[214]

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[210] Sanders, *Judaism,* 6. Many claims against his reliability are overstated; see, e.g., Rajak, *Josephus,* 9–10.

[211] For specific examples of Josephus's adaptations, see, e.g., Begg, "Jotham," "Fall," "Putsch," and "Jehoahaz" (improving the character); Feldman, "Elijah," and other articles by Feldman noted above; Gafni, "Josephus," 126–27. In Josephus's case, the claim not to have added or omitted anything seems pure convention, however (Feldman, "Hellenizations," 133).

[212] Bultmann, *Tradition,* 369, exaggerated their Hellenistic character (though allowing some Palestinian tradition); contrast Barrett, *Jesus,* 6. Aune explains Gospel biography by deliberately "oversimplifying" it as exhibiting "Hellenistic form and function with Jewish content" (*Environment,* 22). Hellenistic narrative techniques were standard in Jewish documents written in Greek (e.g., Cohen, *Maccabees,* 43).

[213] Greek conventions for praising heroes or deities were also sometimes transferred to Jewish heroes; cf., e.g., Van der Horst, "Children."

[214] This is not to deny that the latter depend on ultimate Palestinian sources (Hengel, "Problems," 238–43, for example, supports the ancient tradition of Mark's dependence on Peter) but to argue that they articulate their Gospels for a more pluralistic milieu.

The methodology of Hebrew and Aramaic Palestinian Jewish texts concerning historical figures diverges at significant points from that of Greco-Roman historical writing. Since the Palestinian Jewish roots of the Jesus movement affected Diaspora Christianity, a brief consideration of Jewish biographical conventions may be useful in discussing the traditions behind the Gospels. Failing this, yet more importantly for our purposes, they may be useful in understanding literary techniques particularly adapted by Matthew and John.

Although many individuals feature prominently in the Hebrew Bible and in early Jewish literature, only rarely is a document devoted to a person in such a way that it would be called biography in the sense discussed above; usually the treatment of an individual is part of a larger narrative. Job, Ruth, Judith, Jonah, Esther, Daniel, and Tobit all have books about them in the Greek Bible, but the events rather than the characters dominate the accounts.[215]

The various reports of events in the lives of pious rabbis are too piecemeal to supply parallels to biographies like the Gospels,[216] but it is possible that some of these stories were collected and told together like some of the brief philosophical lives in Diogenes Laertius. Since no such early collections are extant, however,[217] rabbinic sources can add little to our discussion of Jewish "biography." In contrast to Josephus or Tacitus, rabbinic texts are primarily legal, and incidental biographical information tends to serve more purely homiletical than historical purposes.[218]

Some Jewish writers did compose self-contained biographies, though again, not all of them fit the conventions discussed above. Philo's expositions of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses idealize the figures only to communicate Philo's philosophical lessons,[219] though this observation does not negate the evidence for his use of Hellenistic biographical conventions.[220] A collection called the *Lives of the Prophets,* with genre parallels in the Greek lives of poets, resembles the briefer lives.[221] Josephus's accounts about Moses in his *Antiquities* often follow Hellenistic philosophical biography[222] and novelistic conventions;[223] so also his treatment of Jacob,[224] Joseph,[225] Samson,[226] Saul,[227] Zedekiah,[228] and the Akedah narrative.[229] Thus Cohen lists both 2 Maccabees and Josephus among Jewish works of history owing "more to Herodotus, Thucydides, and Hellenistic historiography than to Kings and Chronicles."[230]

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[215] Stanton, *Jesus,* 126; Aune, *Environment,* 37. Granted, the Gospels could draw on biblical narratives focused on persons as well as on Hellenistic sources (Hengel, "Problems," 219–20); but the suggestion that ancient Near Eastern models provided the later Greek emphasis on individual characters (cf. Dihle, "Biography," 366–67) is overstated.

[216] Against Bultmann, *Tradition,* 57. Gerhardsson, *Memory,* 181–89, comments on narrative in rabbinic tradition, since disciples learned from their teachers' lives as well as from their words; but as Gundry ("Genre," 101) points out, this still does not correspond to what we have in the Gospels, nor to the enormous tradition that must stand behind them.

[217] Neusner, *Biography,* is skeptical even of the attributed sayings. There is certainly nothing comparable to the early nineteenth-century collection of tales, "In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov," available in English in Ben-Amos and Mintz, *Baal Shem Tov.*

[218] Neusner, *Legend,* 8.

[219] Stanton, *Jesus,* 127.

[220] Cf. Canevet, "Genre" (Moses as commander-in-chief). Like other Hellenistic Jewish writers, Philo adjusts biblical accounts where necessary to suit his idealization of virtues; cf. Petit, "Exemplaire." Philo can nevertheless prove accurate when reporting events surrounding more recent personages (Smallwood, "Historians").

[221] Aune, *Environment,* 41–42.

[222] Van Veldhuizen, "Moses," 215–24.

[223] Silver, "Moses" (on Josephus *Ant.* 2:243–253 and Artapanus in Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 9.27). Runnalls, "Campaign," suggests that Josephus indirectly challenged Artapanus's account; but the use of the same tradition demonstrates the inroads that Hellenism had made into Moses haggadah (cf. Rajak, "Moses"). Aristobulus (second century B.C.E.) frg. 4 (Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 13.13.5) possibly divinizes Moses with the vision of God. Some Jewish writers may adapt Orphean and Heraclean

But parallels with broader classes of Jewish narrative literature can also provide insight into Jewish historiographic and novelistic methods. In Aramaic and Hebrew as well as in Greek, such texts could combine both historiographic and novelistic traits without apology, depending on the nature of the text in question. Biblical narratives were often adapted by later storytellers and eventually formalized into separate accounts;[231] storytellers especially favored Pentateuchal characters for this sort of development.[232]

Although these reworkings are not strictly midrash nor Targum,[233] certain midrashic or haggadic principles are sometimes at work in their composition.[234] Some, like Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities (L.A.B.),* follow the biblical text very careful (often virtually quoting the text), though adding many details.[235] Others, like *Assumption of Moses,* have very little to do with the biblical text beyond the characters and a basic story line. The degree of freedom depended also on the nature of one's work: whereas the LXX preserves

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motifs (cf. Philonenko, "Juda"), and some euhemeristically identify pagan figures with biblical ones (e.g., Ps-Eupolemus in Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 9.17.9).

[224] Feldman, "Jacob."

[225] Aune, *Environment,* 107.

[226] Feldman, "Samson."

[227] Feldman, "Saul."

[228] Begg, "Zedekiah," argues that Josephus portrays him as something of a tragic hero, following Aristotelian conventions.

[229] Feldman, "'*Aqedah*." Joshua may become a Jewish Pericles (Feldman, "Joshua"). See other citations from Feldman above.

[230] *Maccabees,* 194; cf. in general Attridge, "Historiography," 326; cf. Eisman, "Dio and Josephus." Even his apology for his "substandard" Greek fits rhetorical conventions for lowering audience expectations and may be compared with Anacharsis's reported apology to the Athenians (Anacharsis *Epistles* 1.1–6). Other Hellenistic Jewish historians probably employed similar techniques (cf. Rajak, "Justus of Tiberias," 92). Egyptians and Babylonians likewise sought to present their histories in Greek in that period of Hellenistic cultural dominance (Bartlett, *Jews,* 7).

[231] See, e.g., Fisk, "Bible"; Harrington, "Bible." Harrington, 242–43, does not think these reworkings constitute a distinct genre, since some (like *Jubilees* and Assumption of Moses) purport to be apocalypses, while others (he gives Chronicles as an example) purport to be straightforward historical narrative.

[232] Cf. *Jubilees; Life of Adam and Eve; Assumption of Moses; History of Joseph* (of indefinite date); *L.A.B.* (which proceeds through 2 Sam. 1); *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs; 1–3 Enoch* (esp. the Book of Noah in *1 Enoch*); 1Q19 (1QNoah; related to *1 En.* 8:4; 9:4; 106:9–10; see Fitzmyer, *Scrolls,* 16); 4Q459; *Genesis Apocryphon;* cf. Yadin, "Commentaries." Some of those from Qumran are probably pre-Qumranian (Milik, "Ecrits").

[233] Harrington, "Bible," 242.

[234] On *Life of Adam and Eve* cf. Johnson, "Adam," 252; *L.A.B.* borrows lines from other passages of Scripture; etc. Goulder, *Midrash,* 30, is probably right when he argues that midrash is creative, but it seemed to the rabbis who engaged in it as if they were deriving all their data from inferences in the text; in many cases, however, antecedent interpretive traditions may be verified from other sources (e.g., postbiblical traditions in Theodotus; cf. Fallon, "Theodotus," 786). Haggadic traditions were probably more easily remembered than halakic ones (Gerhardsson, *Memory,* 147).

[235] On the nature of *Jubilees'* revision of Genesis and Exodus, see Vanderkam, "Jubilees." Hellenistic writers like Hecataeus and Manetho had adapted earlier history to meet the contemporary needs, and it is not surprising that Jewish writers of this period sometimes did the same (Mendels, "History").

incidents of patriarchal deception, Philo and apocryphal works often played down such deception, and Josephus took a middle path.[236] We find a continuum between historical works and novels composed around historical characters, and can best distinguish the two by evaluating their measure of fidelity to sources the writers accepted as historically accurate, especially the OT.

Like other Greco-Roman literature, ancient Jewish literature generally permitted variation in detail. Although amplification in matters of halakah was sometimes discouraged,[237] the practice was especially frequent in narratives, to answer questions posed by a narrative[238] or to heighten the praise of God or the protagonist,[239] sometimes by fanciful midrash.[240] Sometimes writers added details for literary purposes, to make a better story;[241] this could include names,[242] sometimes arrived at midrashically or for symbolic value.[243] (This practice is hardly surprising; Greeks also elaborated their sacred stories, filling in details over the centuries.)[244] One could emphasize a theme already present in one's source by reiterating it where it appeared and occasionally adding it elsewhere.[245] Similarly, negative incidents could be toned down,[246] omitted,[247] or justified[248] in the character's favor.

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[236] Freund, "Deception."

[237] ʾ*Abot R. Nat.* 1 A. What would have been considered *explanatory* amplification of the words of sages was, however, part of the scribe's traditional vocation (Meeks, *Moral World,* 117, on Sir 39:1–2).

[238] E.g., Demetrius the Chronographer (third century B.C.E.), frg. 5 (Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 9.29.16); *Jub.* 4:1, 9; 12:14; 13:11; 27:1, 4–5 (Esau and Jacob, vs. Isaac and Jacob); *p. Ketub.* 12:4, §8 (fanciful midrash).

[239] 2 Macc 2:1–8 (expanding Jeremiah's mission); *Jub.* 29:14–20 (rhetorically contrasts Jacob's respect for his parents with Esau's disrespect); *T. Job* 9–15 (see *OTP* 1:832); *T. Jos.* 3:1; cf. Josephus's expansion of Philistine casualties (*Ant.* 6.203; cf. 1 Sam 18:27, though the LXX reduced them).

[240] *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 4:3 ("the rabbis" on Solomon); *Gen. Rab.* 43:3; *Exod. Rab.* 10:4; *Pesiq. Rab.* 49:5; cf. Artapanus on Pharaoh's behavior toward Moses in light of 1 Sam 18:17, 21–25 (Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 9.27.7). Genre conventions also could dictate amplifications; *Joseph and Aseneth,* a Hellenistic romance, incorporates features ideal in such romances.

[241] *Jub.* 11:14–15; 13:18, 22; possibly 4Q160, frg. 3–5, 7*; Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 50:26; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Exod 13:19.

[242] *Jub.* 11:14–15; *Liv. Pro.* 19 (Joad) (§30 in Schermann's Greek text); Josephus *Ant.* 8.231; *L.A.B.* 40:1 (on Pseudo-Philo in general, cf. Bauckham, "'Midrash,'" 67); Plutarch *Alex.* 20.4–5 (questioning Chares' report).

[243] See Rook, "Names," on patriarchal wives in *Jubilees.*

[244] See the discussion in Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos,* li–lii.

[245] As *L.A.B.* does in its polemic against idolatry (Murphy, "Idolatry").

[246] *L.A.B.* 12:2–3 (Aaron's sin with the golden calf). *T. Job* 39:12–13 *(OTP)*/39:9–10 (Kraft), 40:3/4 seems concerned to soften God letting Job's children die for his test.

[247] *Jub.* 13:17–18 (conflict between Lot's and Abram's servants), 14:21–16:22 (omitting Sarah's problems with Hagar, though they surface in 17:4–14), 29:13 (omits Jacob's fear); *T. Zeb.* 1:5–7 (Zebulon did not act against Joseph). On *Jubilees* (e.g., Abram passing off his sister as his wife), see Wintermute, "Jubilees," 35–36; Josephus, cf. Aune, *Environment,* 108; in Greco-Roman literature, see Shuler, *Genre,* 50 (following Cicero *Part. or.* 22). The same tendency of tradition may be noted in the Chronicler's omission not only of David's but also Solomon's sins reported in Samuel-Kings (cf., e.g., Williamson, *Chronicles,* 236).

[248] CD 4:20–5:3 (David's polygamy); *Jub.* 19:15–16 (Rebekah, in light of current morality); 27:6–7 (how Jacob could leave his father); 28:6–7 (Jacob's sororal polygyny); 30:2–17 (Simeon and Levi); 41 (Judah and Tamar both made more innocent, though Tamar's deed is interpreted as deathworthy); 1QapGen 20.10–11 (Sarah rather than Abraham proposes the pretense that she is his sister); *Jos. Asen.* 23 (Levi and Simeon); *T. Jud.* 8–12 (whitewashing Judah, and to a lesser extent Tamar, though Judah confesses it as a lesser sin; cf. the improvement of both in *Tg. Neof.* 1 on Gen

This could range from the sort of "twist" on a narrative acceptable in modern journalism to fabricating details to explain what was not said. While John, like the Synoptics, is far more like Greco-Roman biography than like such "rewritten" biblical accounts, these Palestinian Jewish narrative techniques must also be considered as part of his general milieu.

Variations in the tradition and/or its editing in these sources were also not problematic;[249] a greater degree of freedom in telling the story was then permitted than is standard in historically-oriented works today. As Anderson says about 4 Maccabees, "the discrepancies between the descriptions of the tortures administered to the first son and the other six, here and in 2 Mac, indicate no more than that the story circulated in different forms or that each writer claimed his freedom to shape up the narrative in his own way."[250]

Thus a wide variety of writing techniques was available in ancient Jewish as well as broader Greco-Roman writing related to history, and the Gospels could fall anywhere in this range. Intending to be essentially historical in the events they report, in principle they could vary in the accuracy of their details.[251] Further, as we noted above, paraphrase of sayings was standard Greco-Roman rhetorical practice; Jewish interpreters also regularly employed paraphrase in communicating what they took to be the biblical text's meaning,[252] a practice some interpreters deem relevant to understanding John's relation to the earlier Gospel tradition.[253]

## The Gospels as Historical Biography

Although all ancient biographers attempted to write historical accounts, some succeeded at this enterprise better than others. Factors that affected their reliability include how recently the events described occurred, and how closely the writer followed his sources.

In contrast to the contention of some early form critics,[254] early Christians were undoubtedly interested in the life and character of Jesus from the beginning.[255] It is interesting that, by contrast, Qumran literature has thus far provided no sustained account of the

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38:25; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 38:25–26); *T. Iss.* 3:1 (cf. Gen 49:15); *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 49:28 (all twelve patriarchs were equally righteous).

[249] Cf. the variant forms of some sayings in *Ahiqar* (*OTP* 2:482).

[250] Anderson, "4 Maccabees," 555. Here the freedom is probably that of the author of 4 Maccabees, who appears to expand earlier sources, whereas 2 Maccabees probably stays closer to its sources, since it is an abridgement.

[251] Cf. Robinson, *Problem,* 60.

[252] Cf., e.g., 4Q422, a homiletic paraphrase of Genesis (Elgvin, "Section"); see further below on rewritings of biblical history.

[253] Chilton, "Transmission"; idem, "Development," suggests that Gospel traditions were transmitted and developed in ways similar to targumic traditions. For the view that John developed Jesus' message in a manner analogous to the Targumim, which included interpretive amplification but sought fidelity to the meaning, see Taylor, *Formation,* 116.

[254] The negative use of the criterion of dissimilarity (as applied to Jesus' continuity with early Judaism and early Christianity) has been severely critiqued in recent years: Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 16; Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism,* 21; Stanton, *Gospels,* 161; idem, *Gospel Truth,* 143; Borg, *Conflict,* 21; Stein, "'Criteria,'" 242–43; France, "Authenticity," 110–11; Catchpole, "Tradition History," 174–76; Young, *Theologian,* 257; Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:173; Brown, *Death,* 1:19.

[255] See Stanton, *Jesus,* 4–9; Chilton, "Exorcism," 253, against some earlier scholars, contrasts with modern biography notwithstanding. Skepticism toward traditional form criticism has prevailed especially since Sanders, *Tendencies* (Theissen, *Gospels,* 5; Hill, *Matthew,* 58; Stuhlmacher, "Theme," 2–12; cf. Gamble, "Literacy," 646).

community's founder and the events that brought it into existence, although the documents repeatedly allude to these occurrences. The existence of the Gospels themselves, and the role assigned to Jesus in them, testify that early Christianity had a greater interest in the history of its founder than many comparable contemporary movements did.[256] As W. D. Davies puts it, "The first alternative is to believe that for some time after his death and resurrection what Jesus did and said was neglected and so forgotten," and as Christians needed sermon material they "created their own sayings or borrowed material from Jewish and Hellenistic sources and ascribed them to Jesus. The other alternative is to recognize that what Jesus actually taught was remembered by his followers and adapted by the churches as the need arose. On grounds of historical probability, the second alternative is the more likely by far."[257]

Luke thus mentions that there were already many written narratives before he set out to write one of his own (Luke 1:1). Since writers steeped in the OT would want to testify in historical terms concerning the one they regarded as the fulfillment of Israel's history, the nature of gospels was somewhat predetermined from the start. What form would a Gospel writer have used to describe Jesus' life even if he wished to *avoid* the genre of biography?[258] Nevertheless, the Gospel writers would have known that the Gospels would have been read in the Greco-Roman world as "lives" of Jesus.

The Gospels draw on various Septuagintal,[259] contemporary Jewish, and Greco-Roman narrative conventions to communicate their portrait of Jesus. Whether or not, or the degree to which, Matthew drew on Jewish midrashic conventions is hotly disputed;[260] there is no a priori cultural reason to suppose that he did not:

> For if even an exacting Greek philosopher could purvey as his master's teachings his own highly advanced development of them, how much more might a midrashically, haggadically oriented Jew do something similar. . . . In the Jewish sphere we find the freedom of midrash and haggadah alongside careful memorization and passing on of both the written and the oral law.[261]

But it should be noted that narratives concerning recent teachers were usually not revised quite as freely as narratives about biblical characters; of many stories about Hanina ben Dosa, none was clearly composed simply on the basis of OT texts.[262] And while Matthew undoubtedly adapts his sources somewhat more freely than does Luke,[263] if we may judge by his use of Mark, he adapts them far less than Josephus, and especially *Jubilees* and Pseudo-Philo *(L.A.B.),* adapt the OT.[264]

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[256] Stanton, *Jesus,* 128.

[257] Davies, *Invitation,* 115.

[258] Cf. Shuler, *Genre,* 85 (on encomium biography); idem, "Hypothesis." Shuler asserts that encomium biography is the Greco-Roman pattern to which the gospels are closest; cf. the mild cautions of Talbert, *Gospel,* 13. Most biography was, of course, somewhat encomiastic (Josephus *Life* fits this category; see Neyrey, "Encomium"), but writers like Suetonius tend away from this direction (cf. Talbert, *Gospel,* 17).

[259] E.g., Elisha narratives; cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* 162.

[260] In favor are Goulder, *Midrash,* passim; Drury, *Design,* 45 (on gospel redaction in general); Gundry, *Matthew,* 628 (citing *Jubilees,* Josephus, and others who took similar liberties but respected the biblical text as God's word). Against are authors such as Scott, "Intention"; Cunningham and Bock, "Midrash"; Payne, "Midrash." See especially the reservations of Chilton, "Midrash," 27–28 on the narrower and broader senses of "midrash."

[261] Gundry, *Matthew,* 622.

[262] France, "Historiography," 114–16. He also points out that writers could draw OT parallels without revising the narrative (e.g., 1 Macc; ibid., 122).

[263] His greatest measure of freedom (and therefore higher level of "Mattheanisms") may be in the birth narratives, where his sources may be oral and not already shaped; but, as Soares Prabhu has

To test the accuracy of the authors of the Synoptic Gospels one must test their use of sources. Evaluated by this criterion, they appear among the more accurate of ancient historians.[265] One can confirm this relatively easily by examining a collection of Synoptic Gospel parallels. Most scholars agree that the written narratives that Luke included among his sources (Luke 1:1) included Mark and what has come to be called "Q,"[266] although debate on the nature of "Q" (as a whole document,[267] as oral tradition[268] or as a composite of sources)[269] continues.[270] (Some have offered reconstructions of Q that are far more specific than the evidence warrants;[271] Q should not at any rate be used to "reconstruct the whole theological outlook" of its community.)[272]

When one examines Luke's use of these sources, one is repeatedly impressed with his restraint. Granted, Matthew and Luke exercise freedom in arranging and editing Mark and other sources that they share in common; but this editing must be judged minimal by ancient standards, not affecting the content as substantially as those who cite this "freedom" often assume.[273] That the Gospel writers themselves saw such variation as within their permissible range may be suggested by Luke's triple recounting of Paul's conversion with differences in details each time, though the core of the story remains the same.[274] Where Mark and "Q" overlap (e.g., Mark 1:7–13 with Matt 3:7–4:11/Luke 3:7–17, 4:1–13; Mark 3:22–27

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shown *(Quotations),* Matthew's tradition has shaped the citation of OT texts as much as the texts have shaped his use of prior tradition.

[264] Cf. also France, "Historiography," 118–19.

[265] See especially Luke's use of Mark; cf., e.g., Perry, *Sources,* 7, 19–20; Jeremias, *Parables,* 69; Ramsay, *Luke,* 47, 80 (although Ramsay overstates the case). On Mark's style, see Pryke, *Style.*

[266] Many scholars have been reticent to define Q too narrowly; cf. Burkitt, *History,* 123; idem, *Sources,* 42–43; Dodd, *Parables,* 39; idem, *More Studies,* 70; Cadbury, *Making,* 98; Jeremias, *Theology,* 38–39. Cf. Koester, *Introduction,* 2:46, for the likely suggestion that Q was used in various stages of redaction. See especially the caution of Sanders, *Tendencies,* 276–79.

[267] This is more likely, given the common sequence of Q in Matthew and Luke (though Ellis, "Criticism," 35, doubts this common sequence), where Matthew's topical order does not account for a variation; cf. also Schweizer, *Jesus,* 124–25; Tuckett, *History,* 34–39.

[268] Betz, *Jesus,* 22.

[269] Cf. the questions of Gundry, "Genre," 105 n. 31; Petrie, "Q"; Perry, *Sources,* 11.

[270] Some dispense with Q altogether: Drury, *Design,* xi, 121; Farrer, "Q"; Abogunrun, "Debate"; Goulder, "Q," 234; Farmer, *Problem;* Longstaff, *Conflation,* 218; Murray, "Conflator"; Thompson, *Advice* (common traditions); Lowe and Flusser, "Synoptic Theory"; Young, *Parables,* 129–63; Linneman, "Gospel of Q," 7–11. Such suggestions have, however, been vigorously contested (cf. Martin, "Q"; Grant, "Clock"; idem, *Hellenism,* 120; see esp. Tuckett, *History,* 1–39).

[271] E.g., Edwards, *Concordance;* idem, *Theology of Q;* esp. Mack, *Myth,* 69, 84; idem, *Lost Gospel,* 6, 73–80. Mack and others create an "early" recension of Q that fits their hypothetical reconstruction of early Christianity, but this approach is circular, as most scholars would acknowledge (see Overman, "Deciphering," 193; Witherington, *Sage,* 215; Johnson, *Real Jesus,* 52–53; Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 2:177–80; Stanton, *Gospel Truth,* 73–74; Theissen, *Gospels,* 204; Catchpole, *Quest,* 6; Boyd, *Sage,* 136–39; Keener, "Critique").

[272] Stanton, *Jesus,* 5; Hengel, *Atonement,* 35; Aune, *Prophecy,* 213; Keck, "Ethos," 448; Witherington, *Christology,* 223; idem, *Sage,* 211–12. Q's theology probably does not differ appreciably from Mark's (Meadors, "Orthodoxy"; cf. Witherington, *Sage,* 233–36).

[273] Compare Josephus's demonstrable additions, omissions, conflations, and rearrangement, some of which is similar to, and some of which contrasts with, what we know of the Gospels from redaction critics; cf. the data in Downing, "Redaction Criticism."

[274] See the discussion in Dunn, *Acts,* 117; he notes, however, that the words of dialogue remain identical each time (p. 121). Cf. also Luke 24:47–51; Acts 1:8–11.

with Matt 12:24–30/Luke 11:15–23), one gains a similar impression of Mark's faithfulness to the preexisting tradition.[275] Although the differences in the accounts may be more striking to a reader accustomed to harmonizing the Gospels, the points of comparison are generally far more striking when one takes into account that the first three gospels were written at different times, from different possible sources, and to different audiences.

Furthermore, even at their latest possible date of composition, they derive from a period close to the events, when the influence of eyewitnesses of the events remained prominent in the early church. Some scholars may place the dates too early, but even on the consensus datings of the Gospels, they must stem from a period when eyewitness testimony remained central to the church,[276] and at least Luke seems to have had direct access to eyewitness corroboration for some of his traditional material (1:1–4). Ancient rhetoricians regularly attack the credibility of witnesses for a contrary position (e.g., Josephus *Life* 356), and courts sometimes dismissed the reliability of some kinds of witnesses on account of their gender or social status.[277] One would, however, be hard-pressed to view the earliest disciples' witness as fabrication, given the price they were prepared to pay for it.[278]

Luke also claims to have investigated matters thoroughly (1:3). Historians valued such investigation, which often included traveling to the places where events had reportedly occurred,[279] and criticized those who failed to accomplish it as well as possible.[280] Whereas Roman historians consulted records, the Greek model normally entailed travel and consulting with available eyewitnesses,[281] although many even in the eastern Mediterranean fell short of this ideal. Evidence strongly suggests that Luke fits the more reliable end of the spectrum.[282] Luke's claim to investigation and his dependence on available eyewitness tradition are especially likely if the "we" sections in Acts, which include a meeting with James the Lord's brother in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17–18), may be attributed to the author and not to someone else's travel journal[283] or to a fictitious literary device.[284] Whereas "we" appears in novelistic texts, it appears no less in historical texts; its function depended on the genre of the text.[285] Further, the "we" sections in Acts may well reflect a travel journal, but it was far more likely Luke's own than another's, for Luke is too skilled a writer to leave a secondary source in his narrative unedited. Given the correspondence of the "we" sections to appropriate geographical intervals (16:11–18, 20:6) and the lack of emphasis the writer gives to his own presence (although known to his patron Theophilus and perhaps his implied audience, he remains in the background and appears rarely), the "we" most likely means, as ancient readers would have normally understood, "we."[286] If "we" includes the author or even identifies merely an eyewitness source, Luke may be accepted as all the more dependable.

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[275] Cf. Bultmann, *Tradition,* 13; Wenham, "Note"; Peabody, "Tradition." Jacobson, "Q," argues that Mark and Q indicate separate traditions. While this is true for the most part, Mark may have used Q, adopting some material from it (cf. Catchpole, "Beginning"); Q is probably pre-Markan (see Theissen, *Gospels,* 232). For various agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, see Neirynck, *Agreements.*

[276] Some recent scholars have dated the Gospels quite early; see, e.g., Robinson, *Redating;* Wenham, "Gospel Origins"; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction* (79, 99, 117, 167). Although I am personally inclined to date only Mark before 70 C.E. (Luke perhaps in the early 70s; Matthew the late 70s), in general arguments concerning the situation and date of the Synoptics lack the objective data supporting those of most NT epistles; arguments advanced for earlier dates thus merit more serious consideration than they usually receive.

[277] E.g., Justinian *Inst.* 2.10.6; Josephus *Ant.* 4.219; *Sipra VDDeho. pq.* 7.45.1.1.

[278] Cf., e.g., Paul's appeals to public knowledge of his sufferings (1 Cor 4:11–13; 15:30; Phil 1:7; 1 Thess 2:2, 9), though he had much to lose (Gal 1:13–14, 23–24).

[279] Appian *R.H.* pref.12. If the events were recent, it could include interviewing eyewitnesses (Thucydides 1.22.2–3; cf. Xenophon *Apol.* 2; Plutarch *Demosth.* 2.1–2); prosecutors preparing cases also did such research (Lysias *Or.* 23.2–8, §§166–167).

[280] Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 7.1.4, 6; Herodian 1.1.1–2; cf. Sallust *Catil.* 3.2.

[281] Polybius 12.25d.1–12.25e.7 critiques Timaeus for failing to do research beyond the many documents available to him and (for the sake of his critique) even ranks field research and interpretive political context above documents (12.25i.2).

[282] See Witherington, *Acts,* 26–34.

[283] That Luke uses diary extracts (Foakes-Jackson and Lake, "Evidence," 158–59; MacGregor in Morton and MacGregor, *Structure,* 41; Cadbury, *Making,* 60–61; Dockx, "Compagnon") is probable, given the precision of his details.

[284] Dibelius, *Studies,* 202–3.

Like some other early Christian writers (Acts 26:26; 1 Cor 15:6; 2 Cor 12:12), Luke also appeals to "public knowledge" (1:4); he has investigated these matters, but his audience, including his probable patron Theophilus, already has some knowledge about them. Appeals to public knowledge such as that contained in documents,[287] claims offered among those who could have refuted them (such as the living eyewitnesses in positions of prominence in the church; cf. Gal 2:9),[288] or appeals simply to what was widely known (e.g., Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.107; Xenophon *Agesilaus* 5.6) carried tremendous rhetorical weight.

Whatever else may be said about the Fourth Gospel's genre, it must fall into the same broad category as the Synoptics;[289] while it may be strictly independent from the Synoptics (see comments below), it is unlikely that John developed the gospel form independently, and it strains credulity to think that Johannine Christians in either Asia or Syria would be unaware of other written gospels circulating in the Christian communities. (Mark, at least, had circulated for two to three decades, was widespread enough to serve as a major source for Matthew and Luke, and was probably not alone; cf. Luke 1:1.) The genre of the Synoptics is clearly historical biography,[290] so the same would likely follow for John.[291]

That the Synoptic Gospels represent substantial historical data does not, however, demonstrate the *degree* of the historical character of the Fourth Gospel. Each of the four canonical gospels applies the biographical genre slightly differently,[292] just as many different *Lives* even in Plutarch vary to some degree in content.[293] The Fourth Gospel in some respects resembles political biographies (as in Cornelius Nepos) because of its polemical material, and in more respects resembles philosophical biographies (as in Diogenes Laertius) with their focus on philosophers' teachings;[294] but neither category actually defines John's specific genre.

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[285] Cf. Aune, *Environment,* 124. For instance, "we" is fictitious in the *Pseudo-Clementines* because the narrative is fictitious, but the author was clearly present in the narrative world; since the account in Plutarch *Dinner of Seven Wise Men* 1, *Mor.* 146BC, takes place centuries before Plutarch's birth, readers again would have recognized it as a literary fiction.

[286] See Dupont, *Sources,* 167–68; Munck, *Acts,* xliii; Fusco, "Sezioni-noi"; cf. Ramsay, *Luke,* 17–18. Maddox, *Purpose,* 7, cites the famed classicist A. D. Nock as regarding the allegedly fictitious "we" of Acts as "virtually unparalleled and most improbable for a writer who makes as much claim as Luke does to historiography."

[287] E.g., Josephus *Life* 342; *Ag. Ap.* 1.20, 23, 28–29. On the lack of public archives in the modern sense in republican Rome (though texts were deposited), see Culham, "Archives."

[288] Also for other historical matters, e.g., Josephus *Life* 363–366; *Ag. Ap.* 1.50–52; Xenophon *Agesilaus* 3.1. Such appeals also appeared in fiction, but the purported evidence should be considered as authentic within their *story* world (see Philostratus *Hrk.* 8.12, 14, 17).

[289] E.g., Stibbe, *Gospel,* 55.

[290] Ibid., 55–57; see discussion above; Keener, *Matthew,* 8–36, 51–68.

[291] Stibbe, *Gospel,* 57–59. He concedes that John reapplies Mosaic and Elijah traditions (pp. 59–60) but argues that John employs both biblical and Hellenistic biographical techniques (pp. 60–63).

[292] Cf. the rhetorical differences noted by Kennedy, "Rhetoric of Gospels."

[293] Burridge, *Gospels,* 68–69.

Neither among the Synoptics nor elsewhere is there a single, precise parallel to John's interpretation of Jesus. For example, one could compare John's interpretive technique with Josephus. In his *Antiquities* Josephus interprets Jewish history for a Gentile audience, creating new speeches where necessary to fit the model of a Hellenistic history. But Josephus writes for a far more literate and hellenized audience than John does, and writes a Hellenistic history, not a biography. Some Jewish works concerning Pentateuchal characters elaborate fancifully, but where we can test him from Synoptic material, John departs from the extant Jesus tradition less than these works depart from the biblical text.

Like the Synoptics and other historical works, but in contrast with early Jewish and Christian novels, John mostly avoids the frequent and imaginative appearances of heavenly beings (although John, like most ancient historical works, does not lack supernatural appearances altogether—cf. 12:28, 20:12). Many early Jewish works give considerable narrative play to heavenly characters and regularly present God speaking; in the Fourth Gospel, however, Jesus himself is usually the voice of God. The narrative style might more resemble Tobit minus supernatural beings like Raphael and Asmodeus, but with the incarnation added; or like 1 Maccabees if it were biographical rather than historical monograph. It resembles the historical sections, or sections in his day *regarded* as historical sections, in the LXX. John develops a skillful plot from pre-Johannine traditions, yet also expounds Jesus' identity more explicitly than the Synoptics do, especially in the dialogue and discourse material (which differ from the Synoptics far more than his narrative does). His discourse expositions may follow a freedom allowed by Jewish and other Greco-Roman historical writers. We will explore below in chapter 7 of our introduction whether his christological evaluations genuinely cohere with authentic Jesus tradition. Here we can only pose such questions, and below provide the best answers the data will allow.

Given its differences from the Synoptics, it is not surprising that the genre of the Fourth Gospel has been compared with other "gospel" traditions, which exhibit far more resemblances to novels than to Greco-Roman biography.

## Noncanonical Gospel Traditions

The apocryphal gospels tend to display second-century tendencies far removed from a Palestinian tradition; they exhibit many more clearly secondary and tendentious features than the earlier gospels ultimately received as canonical by the majority of the church.[295] The *Gospel of Peter* is not docetic and has some apocalyptic elements, but it would be difficult to argue that this text, with its self-rolling stone, walking cross, and other features uncharacteristic of the Jesus tradition, is earlier than the canonical gospels.[296] The apocryphal gospels seem concerned to fill in missing details of Jesus' life,[297] and in genre are closer to novels than to biographies.[298]

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[294] Cf. Witherington, *Wisdom,* 4; Culpepper, *John,* 64–66.

[295] See Wright, "Apocryphal Gospels"; cf. Burkitt, *Sources,* 17; Dibelius, *Jesus,* 20; Sanders, *Figure,* 64. A nongospel narrative, *Acts of Paul and Thecla,* may display proto-Montanist tendencies; reports of Maximilla's and Priscilla's adherence to Montanus (cf. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.16) resemble that of chaste women in these texts who leave husbands to cleave to ministers of the word.

[296] Wright, "Apologetic"; cf. Jeremias, *Sayings,* 17.

With regard to literary form, the gnostic gospels are nothing like the canonical gospels; they are called gospels only because they purport to convey good news.[299] Much of what we find in the gnostic "gospels" are random sayings collections that include both sayings of Jesus and later gnosticizing words attributed to him. Most "new" sayings in the gnostic "gospels" are hardly early, though these collections may preserve or adapt some agrapha as well as sayings also reported in our canonical gospels;[300] the collections as a whole are tendentious in a gnosticizing (and hence later) direction and lack most of the sort of early Palestinian Jewish material frequently found in the Synoptics and John.[301]

Some have argued that apocryphal and gnostic gospels reflect a form earlier than that of the canonical gospels and similar gospels no longer extant.[302]

> Starting from a study of the apocryphal gospels, Helmut Koester has argued that their forms are not developments from those of the canonical gospels but are rather related to earlier types of gospel literature such as sayings collections, aretalogies (miracle collections), and apocalypses. As a result, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas should be seen in a trajectory from Q, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas from collections like the Johannine Semeia source, and the Apocryphon of John from revelations like the Apocalypse of John.[303]

In principle, these genre considerations are not objectionable; sayings collections are as old as Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern proverbs, ʾ*Abot*, and Greek collections of philosophers' witticisms.[304] It is not unlikely that the *Gospel of Thomas* intentionally follows a similar form as a sayings collection; but acknowledging this does not require us to retroject incipient gnosticism into earlier Christian sayings collections, or to imply that the sayings genre was opposed in principle to narrative gospels, as some scholars have thought.[305] Sayings and narratives were regularly reported separately or combined at will in antiquity,[306] reports of sages' teachings frequently incorporated accounts of their lives or settings for their sayings,[307] and Ahiqar's wisdom sayings and narrative were probably already combined more than half a millennium before the Gospels were written.[308] Early Christian tradition and use of genre was also not likely isolated in a single stream; where Paul's incidental use attests Jesus traditions, these traditions attest both Q and Markan forms, and some of the Q material is more like Matthew whereas some is more like Luke.[309]

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[297] Jeremias, *Sayings,* 18–19; compare the function of some Jewish haggadic works above.

[298] Cf. Aune, *Environment,* 151–53, especially on apocryphal acts; cf. Bauckham and Porter, "Apocryphal Gospels," 71. Koester, "One Jesus," 158–59, overly skeptical about the canonical gospels, finds barely any historical truth in the apocryphal ones.

[299] Jeremias, *Sayings,* 18; Burridge, *Gospels,* 249–50; Wright, *People of God,* 410–11.

[300] Though Mack, *Lost Gospel,* 6, appeals to the massive number of *agrapha,* most appear in late documents, and even the small number of *agrapha* accepted by Jeremias are at most possibly authentic (Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:113). Our very inability to distinguish accurate and inaccurate agrapha underlines the value of our earlier written documents (Hofius, "Sayings").

[301] Jeremias, *Sayings,* 26–28; on *Thomas,* cf. ibid., 18; Stanton, *Gospels,* 129; Chilton, "Thomas," 171; Blomberg, "Thomas," 195–196; idem, "Where," 24; Wright, *People of God,* 437–43. See Stanton, *Jesus,* 129–35, who addresses very significant contrasts between the canonical gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas* (which itself is closer to our canonical samples than other Nag Hammadi material is).

[302] Possibly including the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* (P. Vielhauer in Hennecke, *Apocrypha,* 1:144), though this may be a secondary expansion of Matthew into Aramaic (Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:116).

[303] Talbert, *Gospel,* 8–9. Later Koester came to view the canonical gospels as "aretalogical biographies." On the assumption that Q was purely a sayings gospel, others have compared it to *Thomas;* see, e.g., Mack, *Lost Gospel,* 182; but cf. Keener, "Critique."

[304] That ʾ*Abot* and wisdom literature share the same rhetorical forms (Gottlieb, "Abot") supports the likelihood that early sages like Jesus spoke and were understood in part as wisdom teachers.

[305] Kelber, *Gospel,* 199–211; Boring, *Sayings,* 201–3, provide examples of this approach; contrast Gundry, "Genre," 103–7. Of course, even the related proposal that "Q" is entirely a sayings source with no narrative is highly questionable; that the narrative passages in Matt 3:1–12/Lk 3:2–14 and Matt 8:5–10/Lk 7:1–10 occur at the same junctures in their respective narratives (the second

While sayings collections, like narratives, could be either early or late, both the gnostic texts and their more "orthodox" second-century competitors are clearly later, expansive, and considerably farther removed from the Palestinian Jesus tradition than the canonical gospels. Most scholars today agree that even the *Gospel of Thomas* in its present form (for about one-third of its sayings) is gnostic;[310] because it has parallels to every stratum of gospel tradition and some of its sayings follow others solely because of the sequence in the canonical gospels, most scholars today acknowledge that *Thomas* in its current form depends on the Synoptics.[311] Other texts contain even less authentic material. *Secret Gospel of Mark,* for instance, is probably a forgery dating from somewhere between the late second and the twentieth centuries.[312] Apart from a few sayings in *Thomas,* it is unlikely that any of the apocryphal or gnostic gospels reflect any degree of authentic Jesus tradition.[313]

Noting that the gnostic "gospels" are often sayings collections does, however, eliminate the hope of a complete comparison with our present Fourth Gospel, despite its distinctive speeches. As noted above, all four gospels fall into the range of biography, but gnostic "gospels" constitute an entirely different genre.[314]

Conclusions concerning them should not, therefore, be read back into studies of the extant first-century gospels, although if any of the four gospels would tend toward this

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immediately following Jesus' sermon on the mount/plain) indicates a sequential (hence also written and not just oral) tradition at these points (cf., e.g., Theissen, *Gospels,* 226).

[306] Besides the sayings-chreiai and action-chreiai were mixed chreiai, including both sayings and action (Theon *Progymn.* 3.22–23); sayings-chreiai also could include both statement and response (*Progymn.* 3.27–28). Sayings could also be reported from separate sources after narrating a "life," without implying that the two genres were contradictory (e.g., Plutarch *Timoleon* 15.1); cf. Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.5.574); most often biographies included both (Valerius Maximus 1.pref.1).

[307] E.g., episodes from Aesop's life in a collection of his fables (Phaedrus 2.9.1–4); cf. the combination of sayings and deeds in Diogenes Laertius.

[308] Cf. Lindenberger, "Ahiqar," 480–82.

[309] Richardson and Gooch, "Logia," 52.

[310] Stanton, *Gospel Truth,* 87; Wright, *People of God,* 437–43.

[311] E.g., Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:123–39. The consensus is summarized, e.g., in Blomberg, "Where," 23–25. In the final analysis, even among scholars who see some early traditions in *Thomas,* very few hold that *Thomas* itself actually predates the Synoptics (Johnson, *Real Jesus,* 89).

[312] Stanton, *Gospel Truth,* 93; Neusner, "Foreward," xxvii; cf. Losie, "Gospel." Brown, *Death,* 297, dates it earlier, to ca. 125. As late as the 1700s some writers followed the ancient convention of pretending to translate ancient writings seen by no one else (Lefkowitz, *Africa,* 111).

[313] Stanton, *Gospel Truth,* 77–95; Sanders, *Figure,* 64. Most of this material depends on the canonical gospels; see Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:114–23; on the *Gospel of Peter* and its hypothetical "Cross Gospel," see Brown, *Death,* 1317–49; Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 1:117–18. The fiction of "secret" traditions works much better for originally secretive groups such as the Pythagoreans (cf. Iamblichus *V.P.* 35.252–253, 258–260) than where something like the public apostolic tradition was already in place.

[314] See Burridge, *Gospels,* 249–50; Wright, *People of God,* 410–1; also Smith, "Gospels," 13–14 (noting that gnostic gospels cannot be construed, unlike the Synoptics and John, as seeking to continue the biblical story).

later type, it would have to be the late-first-century Fourth Gospel. John follows the narrative format also attested in the Synoptics, though developing cohesive discourses and dialogues at much greater length (see our next chapter).[315] But although gnostics read and developed John, John's speeches are neither gnostic nor mere collections of sayings. Because the Fourth Gospel deals much less with the stream of tradition we are able to test from the Synoptics, examinations of John's relation to history are far less provable than those of his prior siblings. Other putative sources for the Fourth Gospel remain hypothetical.[316] The extent of John's reliability as a historical source, if ascertainable, will therefore have to be determined on other grounds. If one turns to the question of the burden of proof, we should ask how historically reliable John appears to be where we can check him. Once the question is framed in such terms, we must return to passages where John's story runs parallel to that in the Synoptics.

## Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel

The assumptions of traditional source criticism have proved tenuous in the study of Greco-Roman literature. Writers could depend on a variety of sources and might not need written sources for events that had occurred in their lifetimes.[317] The case of the Synoptic Gospels is different, where the degree of overlap in particular accounts recited indicates a literary relationship at least between Mark and the other gospels; but the problem is even more difficult in the Fourth Gospel than among most Greek and Roman historians.

Moody Smith's *Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel* proved a decisive critique of Bultmann's source theories,[318] and since then these theories have been widely regarded as unproved, except for his signs source (on which see below).[319] Bultmann's stylistic criteria have failed to persuade scholars, particularly in the discourses.[320] Source criticism on this Gospel is far less popular today, though it has not died out.[321] In the 1970s Sydney Temple argued for a very substantial "core" of the Gospel that was quite early,[322] but has not been widely followed. Some scholars have continued to arrive at brilliant but unverifiable constructions of sources. Thomas Brodie, for instance, finds all of Mark, much of Matthew, parts of Luke-Acts, and Ephesians in this Gospel.[323] A. J. Blasi adopts a sociological approach to identifying sources,[324] but unconvincingly presses too far behind the extant texts. The leading advocate of source criticism on the Fourth Gospel today probably remains Robert Fortna.[325] Von Wahlde also has offered significant work in this area.[326]

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[315] For this reason, Dunn, "John," 322, situates John somewhere between the Synoptics and gnostic gospels.

[316] It is often the case, as Ellis, *Genius,* 3–4, has suggested, that Johannine source theories have more evidence against them than in their favor.

[317] Whittaker, "Introduction," lxi–lxii.

[318] Smith, *Composition.*

[319] Sloyan, *John,* 11. Bultmann's version of the signs source is also open to critique (see Witherington, *Wisdom,* 9–10).

[320] Ashton, *Understanding,* 50.

[321] For a survey of positions see Sloyan, *John,* 28–49.

[322] Temple, *Core;* for reconstruction of his "core," see 255–82.

[323] Brodie, *Quest,* 101–20, 128–34.

[324] Blasi, *Sociology.*

[325] E.g., Fortna, *Predecessor.*

[326] Von Wahlde, *Version;* idem, "Terms."

Nevertheless, sources are next to impossible to distinguish in this Gospel, as most contemporary commentators recognize.[327] As Margaret Davies contends with reference even to the putative signs source, Bultmann and others made valiant attempts, but all "fail because of the Gospel's impressive stylistic unity."[328] Schnackenburg followed Bultmann in regarding future eschatological material as redactional, but since other parts of early Christianity held future and realized eschatology together in tension, it makes little sense to exclude these passages that textually and stylistically belong to the whole.[329] An analysis of plot and rhetorical structures fails to coincide with earlier scholarly divisions of the Gospel based on source or redactional theories.[330] Even earlier scholars most inclined to distinguish redactions and locate displacements recognized its stylistic unity.[331] C. K. Barrett accepted John's use of the Synoptics and acknowledged that he used other sources now unrecoverable, but otherwise thought that all other source criticism of the Gospel was pure speculation.[332]

Some scholars have modified or at least qualified their earlier source-critical views. Fernando Segovia, who produced a substantial source-critical study on the Farewell Discourses,[333] now writes in the forefront of Johannine literary criticism, and recognizes much more unity and coherence in the text.[334] John Ashton concedes that in his earlier, monumental work *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* he accepted too uncritically the common older view of various versions of the Gospel. Although he continues to think there were two editions, he admits that he is no longer sure;[335] authors could certainly tinker with their work, but the image of various editions of books may be "somewhat misleading" before printing presses from the fourteenth century.[336] In our view, if the Gospel had an earlier form (aside from its early draft stage, which was probably not circulated), it may have been the oral form in which the beloved disciple and/or the Fourth Evangelist preached it.[337]

The Fourth Gospel functions as a unity, as various comments in our commentary will emphasize. Claiming that the Gospel is a unity does not mean that every element within it readily fits every other element without extrinsic context for both; but such dissonances need not in every case imply distinct sources.[338] As literary deconstructionists have repeatedly shown, such incongruities appear often enough in unified works. This certainly includes ancient Mediterranean works that through most of their ancient history were treated as unities regardless of the disparate oral sources on which they might depend. Thus Harpalion's father Pylaemenes mourned for him in Homer *Iliad* 13.658—but Pylaemenes, Harpalion's father, had already died in 5.576.[339] The story world of the *Iliad* appears inconsistent when Hephaistos took a full day to fall from heaven (*Il.* 1.592), but Thetis could leap directly from Olympus into the sea (*Il.* 1.532), Athene could dart immediately to earth (*Il.* 4.78), and Ares could flee swiftly from earth to heaven (*Il.* 5.885). Some accounts appear inconsistent with the extrinsic world we know: the dog Argos, admittedly old, recognizes Odysseus, though according to the story line, Odysseus has been away twenty years, much longer than a normal dog's life (Homer *Od.* 17.292, 301–302).[340]

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[327] E.g., Beasley-Murray, *John,* xxxviii–xliii; Carson, *John,* 41–44; Witherington, *Wisdom,* 6–7; for the current consensus, Schnelle, "Blick." Cf. Kysar, *John,* 12. This was recognized (and stated eloquently) as early as the source critic Streeter in *Gospels,* 377–82.

[328] Davies, *Rhetoric,* 259–60.

[329] Cf. ibid., 264–65.

[330] Staley, *Kiss,* 71.

[331] E.g., MacGregor, *John,* xli.

[332] Barrett, *John,* 17.

[333] See Segovia, *Relationships.*

[334] See Segovia, "Tradition History."

[335] Ashton, *Studying,* 113.

[336] Ibid., 112. To be sure, various written editions are not impossible; the verb tenses in Cornelius Nepos 25 (Atticus), 13–18, may suggest that these chapters are revisions for a second edition.

[337] See Feuillet, *Studies,* 146; Carson, *John,* 46. Blomberg, *Reliability,* 45, suggests some "loose weaving together of orally preached material" (following Lindars, *Behind;* idem, "Discourse and Tradition"; cf. Thatcher, "Riddles in Gospel").

[338] A more reliable indicator would be the different texture of an account, such as perhaps the tragic material about Panthea in Xenophon *Cyr.* 6.1.31–45; 6.3.11–17; 7.1.29–32; 7.3.3, 13–16.

In Ovid's patchwork of stories, the Bears constellations appear unable to descend into the ocean in *Metam.* 2.171–172, yet they became constellations more than fifteen years later (2.497; cf. 2.401–416, 505–507), when they are prohibited from descending into the sea (2.508–531). If one reads the Latin in its most common sense, then Alpheus is both father of Arethusa (Ovid *Metam.* 5.487) and a river god who tries to rape her (5.599–641, likely suggesting inadequate editing of distinct stories). But if such divergences represent sources (which is quite possible), these sources are forever unrecoverable to us today.[341] Such inconsistencies also appear in historical works, such as Livy's claim that a Numidian's nephew is a brother's son (28.35.8) at one point and a sister's son (27.19.9) at another; this may stem from different sources[342]—or from an oversight of Livy's. Although Plutarch reports a detailed tradition (possibly partly legendary) from his own hometown, many pieces of the story fail to cohere because much is missing (why did the Romans not hunt Damon in *Cimon* 1.5–6 [though they do appear in 2.1–2]?). Pseudo-Callisthenes seems to accept conflicting versions of Alexander's paternity (*Alex.* 1.1–14, 30, 35); Parmenion also remains general after being removed from that office for conspiracy (*Alex.* 2.9, 17). In other cases inconsistencies may stem from writers' faulty interpretations, as ancient historians recognized (Polybius 3.8.1–11; 3.9.1–5). Orators expected and exploited inconsistencies in their opponents' accounts (e.g., *Rhet. Alex.* 5.1427b.12–30; 9.1430a.14–21; 10.1430a.26–27).

Some tensions are contradictions; others remain simply tensions, and both tensions and contradictions can represent either inadequately harmonized sources or simply an overarching structure to the narrative inadequate for harmonizing all its details.[343] No finite narrative, even if it reflects many aspects of history, can be complete; it may omit some details that would make fuller sense of others. But this incompleteness does not mean (*pace* radical deconstructionists) that the narrative is *inadequate* for the basic purpose for which it is written (whether history, fiction, or some other purpose).

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[339] More loosely, if one allows for hyperbole and figurative language, one may compare the conflicting claims for Cassandra and Laodice in Homer *Il.* 3.124; 13.365–366. Likewise, sleep came on Zeus in *Iliad* 1.610–611, but 2.2 reports that Zeus could not sleep that night. Cf. perhaps the Muse (Homer *Od.* 1.1) and Muses (*Od.* 24.60).

[340] Though not completely unheard of. Some ancients also critiqued inconsistencies in Homer; see Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos,* xli–l.

[341] Many inconsistencies in Valerius Flaccus's version of the *Argonautica,* however, may stem from the work's unfinished state (Mozley, "Introduction," viii; the end of book 8 is incomplete). By contrast, Menken, *Techniques,* 26, 275–77, demands too much precision, as if John counted the number of words or his literary units were always easily discernible; or to a lesser extent, the excessive detection of chiasmus in Ellis, *Genius;* idem, "Inclusion, Chiasm."

[342] So Livy, LCL 8:142 n. 1.

[343] Thus the means of guarding Hector's body vary between Homer *Il.* 23.184–191, 187 on one hand and 24.18–21 on the other, but they are not beyond harmonization.

## John, Historical Tradition, and the Synoptics

The thesis of Johannine dependence on the Synoptics has been argued often and thoroughly.[344] It has been argued that John used Matthew; both Johannine and Matthean tradition probably originated and developed in Syria-Palestine.[345] Scholars more often affirm that John used Luke,[346] though common sources might explain the relationship better,[347] and one writer even suggests conversely that Luke's research (Lk 1:3) may have included interviewing the beloved disciple.[348] More commonly scholars deny John's direct dependence on Luke, appealing instead to minor coincidences and dependence on similar traditions.[349] Most often scholars who think John used another Gospel suggest that he used Mark.[350] Some also argue that John believed his tradition superior to that of the Synoptics and critiqued them accordingly.[351]

But many parallels indicate only John's use of pre-Synoptic tradition (which could also have been drawn upon at times by Matthew or Luke independently of Mark or Q).[352] At other points he could depend on Matthean or Lukan redaction that was incorporated into subsequent preaching tradition,[353] or could have gleaned such tradition from a cursory reading of the Gospels in question without a greater degree of dependence.[354] But arguments for even marginal dependence rather than common tradition must be made with caution; a high degree of the minor parallels can be accounted for by coincidence and the simple limitations of vocabulary imposed by the common language in which they wrote.[355] Variations among the Gospels on the story of the anointing could have arisen during oral transmission; the writers could have independently drawn elements from different forms of the story[356] or two stories, conflating these elements in the process.

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[344] E.g., Neirynck, "Synoptics"; idem, "Moody Smith"; idem, "Recent Commentaries"; Dowell, "Conflict." Koester, *Introduction,* 2:178, allows the possibility in the final stage of the Fourth Gospel's redaction. Cf. Beale, "Daniel," esp. 144, on evidence for Synoptic as well as pre-Synoptic tradition behind Revelation, the author of which he takes to be John.

[345] A. M. Farrer in Muddiman, "John's Use"; cf. Gundry, *Matthew,* 2. Although the case for Matthew is not certain, it is often affirmed: e.g., Goppelt, "Church in History," 198; Zumstein, "Antioche"; Gundry, *Matthew,* 609; Ellis, *Matthew,* 6; Hengel, *Acts,* 98; some opt for Palestine, e.g., Viviano, "Matthew." For the suggestion of Matthew's *Sitz im Leben* as conflict with Yavneh or neo-Pharisaic authorities, resembling the scenario often proposed for John, cf. Davies, *Setting,* and Tilborg, *Leaders.*

[346] See the thorough treatment of scholars' perspectives on the relationship between John and Luke in Smith, *John Among Gospels,* 85–110. For agreements with Acts, see Cribbs, "Agreements."

[347] E.g., Sanders, *John,* 12.

[348] Eller, *Disciple,* 47. For the thesis that Luke may have used John in his Passion Narrative, see Matson, *Dialogue.*

[349] See Myllykoski, "Luke and John," esp. 152; for the thesis of a common document on which they depend, see Boismard and Lamouille, *Actes,* 1:15.

[350] E.g., Streeter, *Gospels,* 393–426 (plus Luke's Passion Narrative). MacGregor, *John,* x, thinks this "can hardly be questioned," though he does not presume that John had Mark directly in front of him.

[351] Vogler, "Johannes als Kritiker." Some writers did critique predecessors (see, e.g., Diodorus Siculus 1.3.1–2; Wardle, *Valerius Maximus,* 67); others, however, sought merely to supplement them (cf. Xenophon *Apol.* 1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 1.1.1).

[352] Stein, "Agreements." Cf. Smith, *Johannine Christianity,* 12: though Bent Noack has overstated the case, the parallels may indicate oral traditions that the Johannine and Synoptic communities held in common.

[353] Cf. Borgen, "Passion Narrative," 259. But much of their redaction could also depend on prior common tradition.

[354] Barrett, "Synoptic Gospels," allows that John had something akin to Mark, but that he only alluded to the material rather than depending on it as Matthew and Luke did. But John's use of Mark may have been even less significant than this, given other available sources (cf. Luke 1:1) and above all his own independent tradition.

Not only John's Passion Narrative[357] or the aretalogical signs source often held to stand behind his miracle stories,[358] but his entire Gospel has been viewed as independent from the Synoptics.[359] This became, in fact, the prevailing view in recent years, although new developments have evaporated what seemed to be a "consensus."[360] Although some argue that John used the Synoptics,[361] probably a greater number of scholars still hold that he simply used independent traditions that have contacts with the Synoptics.[362]

Suggesting that the Fourth Gospel is not directly dependent on the Synoptics need not imply that John did not know of the existence of the Synoptics; even if (as is unlikely) Johannine Christianity were as isolated from other circles of Christianity as some have proposed, other gospels must have been known if travelers afforded any contact at all among Christian communities.[363] That travelers did so may be regarded as virtually certain.[364] Urban Christians traveled (1 Cor 16:10, 12, 17; Phil 2:30; 4:18), carried letters (Rom 16:1–2; Phil 2:25),[365] relocated to other places (Rom 16:3, 5; perhaps 16:6–15), and sent greetings to other churches (Rom 16:21–23; 1 Cor 16:19; Phil 4:22; Col 4:10–15). In the first century many churches knew what was happening with churches in other cities (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 11:16; 14:33; 1 Thess 1:7–9), and even shared letters (Col 4:16). Missionaries could speak of some churches to others (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:1–5; 9:2–4; Phil 4:16; 1 Thess 2:14–16; cf. 3 John 5–12) and send personal news by other workers (Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7–9). Although we need not suppose connections among churches as pervasive as Ignatius's letters suggest perhaps two decades later, neither need we imagine that such connections emerged *ex nihilo* in the altogether brief silence between John's Gospel and the "postapostolic" period. No one familiar with the urban society of the eastern empire will be impressed with the isolation Gospel scholars often attribute to the Gospel "communities."

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[355] Cf., e.g., Morris, *Studies,* 16–17, critiquing the strength of Barrett's parallels.

[356] Dodd, *Tradition,* 150, 172.

[357] Ibid., 45, 150.

[358] Arguments for this source may be found in Robinson, "Trajectory," 235–38; Appold, *Motif,* 87; Fortna, "Christology," 504. Cf. Smith, "Book of Signs," 441–57, who notes (441) that one need not accept this source as distinct from the Gospel. We are inclined to agree with the judgment of Carson, "Source Criticism," 428, that none of the proposed source theories for the Fourth Gospel has been adequately demonstrated.

[359] E.g., Brown, *John,* 1:xliv–xlvii; Schnackenburg, *John,* 1:42; Dodd, "'Herrenworte,'" 86; Robinson, *Twelve Studies,* 96; Smalley, *John,* 38; Hunter, *John,* 5; Ladd, *Theology,* 219–20; Morris, *Studies,* 15–63. Gardner-Smith, *Gospels,* was an early and able proponent of this thesis, which carried much of Johannine scholarship.

[360] See Smith, *John Among Gospels,* 139–176. This book represents the most thorough treatment of different views on the question to date.

[361] Davies, *Rhetoric,* 255–59, thinks it probable.

[362] E.g., Marsh, *John,* 44–46; Yee, *Feasts,* 11–12; Smith, *John* (1999), 14; see esp. idem, *Among Gospels,* 195–241.

[363] Early Christians assumed that John knew the Synoptics and regularly compared them (Wiles, *Gospel,* 13–21); but apologetic considerations more than tradition may have shaped their communal memory.

[364] Travelers did bring news regularly (Euripides *El.* 361–62; Demosthenes *Ep.* 5.1; Cicero *Att.* 2.11; Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 47.1; P.Oxy. 32; Apuleius *Metam.* 1.26; *Apoll. K. Tyre* 8), and churches were certainly networked (1 Cor 1:11; Phil 2:19, 23; Col 1:7–8; 4:7; see Bauckham, "Gospels," 33–44; Thompson, "Internet").

[365] People often sent mail when they heard of someone traveling in the right direction (e.g., Cicero *Att.* 1.10, 13; 4.1; 8.14); one letter from as far as Britain reached Cicero in less than a month (Cicero *Quint. fratr.* 3.1.8.25). In the present day, despite the availability of a postal service, travelers to and from many parts of Nigeria, Kenya, and Cameroon still carry mail for acquaintances.

John could have known one, two, or more other published gospels and yet have chosen not to follow their model or employ them as sources in writing his own.[366] (Xenophon, for example, knows of an earlier work recounting the retreat of Greek mercenaries from Persia, mentioned in *Hell.* 3.1.2, but later composes his own eyewitness account.) If, as is likely, Mark circulated widely (and hence could provide a primary framework for both Matthew and Luke), John might even safely assume his readers' knowledge of it.[367] Certainly a few decades earlier the tradition was widely known; given its circulation in Jerusalem and Antioch, "it is historically quite unlikely that Paul would have no knowledge of the Jesus-tradition" that circulated in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Damascus, locations he had frequented.[368] By John's day, such tradition would be even more pervasive. In other words, independence need not mean anything so dramatic as that Mark and John "developed the gospel form independently."[369] John's very divergence from the Synoptics probably led to its relatively slower reception in the broader church until it could be explained in relation to them.[370]

Whether John draws directly on the Synoptics or (more likely) on independent tradition confirmed occasionally in the Synoptics, we see that the Synoptics sometimes confirm the pre-Johannine character of the events in some stylistically Johannine narratives. In addition to such occasional confirmations, some scholars note points of "'interlocking' . . . where either the Johannine or the Synoptic tradition contains puzzling material that is explained only by information from the other tradition."[371] Nor in the case of differences need we always prefer the Synoptics' "majority opinion," which may at times reflect a single stream of early tradition that coexisted with others whose emphasis differed (such as Mark and Q). D. Moody Smith has argued that at many points of divergence from the Synoptics (for example, some details of the arrest and trial) John actually provides accounts that cohere better with known historical conditions and are not generated by John's theology.[372] In working through the Gospel, my own conclusion is that John tells these stories freely without direct dependence on the Synoptics, whether we think that his source or sources are pre- or post-Synoptic. Yet while John goes his own way, he reflects earlier traditions in these cases. Because these narratives are no different in style from his other narratives, there is no reason to assume that John does not reflect earlier traditions elsewhere.

## John and Historical Tradition

A close examination of the Fourth Gospel reveals that John has rearranged many details, apparently in the service of his symbolic message. This is especially clear in the Passion Narrative, where direct conflicts with the presumably widely known passion tradition (most notably that Jesus gives the sop to Judas, is crucified on Passover, and carries his own cross) fulfill symbolic narrative functions. John's long discourses are of a different genre than the sayings collections in Q or even Mark's long "apocalyptic" discourse. Such features naturally invite us to question the nature of (or, by modern historiographic criteria, the degree of) this Gospel's historicity; certainly he is not writing a work of the exact historiographic nature of Luke-Acts.

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[366] See esp. Smith, "John and Synoptics," 425–44; also Sanders, *John,* 10; Conzelmann, *Theology,* 324; Goppelt, *Jesus, Paul, and Judaism,* 40–41; Beasley-Murray, *John,* xxxv–xxxvii; Borchert, *John,* 37–41; Witherington, *Wisdom,* 5–9; Brown, *Essays,* 194–96; Dvorak, "Relationship"; Blomberg, *Reliability,* 48–49; Köstenberger, *John,* 37.

[367] See Bauckham, "John," 148.

[368] Stuhlmacher, "Theme," 16.

[369] Against Aune, *Environment,* 20.

[370] Smith, "Prolegomena," 179–80.

[371] Blomberg, *Reliability,* 285; cf. 53–54; Morris, *Studies,* 40–63.

[372] Smith, "Problem," 267. One cannot a priori use Mark's framework, which he may have imposed on tradition, to evaluate John's reliability (Moloney, "Jesus of History").

Nevertheless, scholars who dismiss too quickly the possibility of substantial historical tradition in John ignore abundant details that would have made fullest sense only in a Palestinian Jewish setting, as well as numerous incidental parallels in the Synoptics. Some questions can be answered only by examining passages one at a time (particularly those which appear to overlap or conflict with Synoptic claims).[373] For the most part, such a comparison (see commentary) suggests that John adapts fairly freely at points (more than one would expect from a Luke, for example) but within the setting of traditional events or sayings. It is, however, appropriate to frame the discussion with some general issues here (a few of which summarize arguments above).

The Fourth Gospel, no less than the Synoptics, fits the general format of ancient biography, as we have already suggested.[374] Its purpose reported in 20:31 was a legitimate purpose in ancient biographies, especially in philosophical *bioi*.[375] The explicit centrality of Jesus' "works" in the Fourth Gospel (John 5:36; 7:3, 21; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37–38; 14:10–11; 15:24; 17:4) fits the biographical genre followed by the Synoptics and most other biographical works.[376] In its genre, John is certainly closer to the Synoptics than to "sayings sources" like Thomas,[377] and it is those most familiar with the four canonical gospels, rather than those approaching these gospels in the context of Greco-Roman literature as a whole, who are inclined to emphasize the differences most strongly.[378]

It is difficult to deny that much historical tradition about Jesus existed in the first century that was never recorded in the Synoptics. No one in Mediterranean antiquity would assume that a one-volume account sampling an oral cycle would be comprehensive; the countless allusions to other stories in Homer (e.g., to the voyage of the Argonauts in *Od.* 12.69–72) lent themselves to later development, but clearly refer to fuller stories Homer's works did not record. In the case of the Gospels, the writers themselves assume knowledge of traditions about Jesus not recorded in their Gospels (e.g., Acts 20:35; John 20:30).

It is furthermore inherently likely that early Christian leaders knew one another better and exchanged more information than scholars have often taken into account (as noted above).[379] Some scholars have also found indications that some of John's material, such as Johannine parables, seems to have skipped the processes of tradition which stand behind the Synoptics.[380] More clearly, R. A. Culpepper has demonstrated that "the reader has prior knowledge of many of the key elements of the gospel story," including some elements omitted in the Synoptics (11:2).[381] John further assumes that most of the geography of the gospel story, like Nazareth and Capernaum, is known to his implied reader, though Judean sites and the topography of Jerusalem are not.[382]

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[373] Examples of the former are 1:32–33; 6:10–13; 19:38; examples of the latter, 13:26; 18:28; 19:17; see comments on each.

[374] See Burridge, *Gospels,* 220–39.

[375] See ibid., 236–37.

[376] Ibid., 208.

[377] Wright, *People of God,* 410–11. John is distinctive but more like the Synoptics than like other documents (see Smith, *John* [1999], 21–22; Schnelle, *Christology,* 229).

[378] Burridge, *Gospels,* 220. The second-century Christians who titled the Gospel (κατὰ Ἰωάννην) classified it with the Synoptics (Burridge, *Gospels,* 222; cf. Stanton, *Gospel Truth,* 16–18, 98).

[379] See Tenney, "Parallels," although his parallels between 1 Peter and John by themselves cannot carry the case.

In contrast to scholars like Dibelius, who view the Fourth Gospel as a climax of an early Christian development blending tradition and mythology,[383] some prominent scholars have argued for substantial historical tradition in the Fourth Gospel.[384] Albright, for instance, asserts that both John's narratives and sayings material must depend on pre-70 Palestinian tradition, since they presuppose information and language that were lost after that point. John may have adapted his presentation of this material to the needs of his audience, "But there is absolutely nothing to show that any of Jesus' teachings have been distorted or falsified, or that any vital new element has been added to them."[385] Many of John's geographical details have no immediate theological significance to Diaspora readers (e.g., Cana, Tiberias), and would therefore seem to stem from his Palestinian tradition. An Australian scholar offers an analogy on a more popular level; while summarizing points where John reflects accurate knowledge of geographical details,[386] Barnett focuses on John 10:23, noting that John had no theological reason to indicate that Jesus sought shelter from winter weather in Solomon's portico. Yet "if someone wrote of a person seeking shelter from the sun on Christmas day in the Bennelong restaurant in the Sydney Opera House, it would be reasonable to conclude that he had first-hand knowledge of the Australian climate and of a Sydney landmark in the period after the year 1973 when the Opera House was completed."[387] This at least suggests that John or his source of tradition was rooted in pre-70 Jewish Palestine, where reliable traditions of Jesus would have flourished; given the incidental character of the remark, it more likely represents a historical reminiscence than a theological or literary embellishment.

Perhaps even more to the point, the Gospel is full of allusions to Jewish traditions that may have made little sense to much of his post-70 audience but that once would have illumined accounts that he relates.[388] Tabernacles traditions concerning the use of Siloam (9:7) and rivers of water from the temple (7:37–38) are a case in point (see comments in the commentary).[389] The frequent elements of Palestinian Jewish tradition in the Gospel (noted regularly throughout the commentary) support the view that what we see as Johannine tradition must have existed alongside what we see as Synoptic tradition in pre-70 Palestine.

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[380] Cf. Sturch, "Parables."

[381] Culpepper, *Anatomy,* 222–23. Davies, *Rhetoric,* 255–59, thinks John's audience may have known the Synoptic accounts, but some material John presupposes is absent from the Synoptics.

[382] Culpepper, *Anatomy,* 216–18. This would not, however, be significant for our present purposes if we posited an original Galilean audience for the Gospel (see on provenance, below).

[383] Dibelius, *Tradition,* 286. Cf. similarly Carroll, "Exclusion," 31.

[384] E.g., Westcott, *John,* liii–lxiii; for the last discourses, cf. ibid., lxiii–lxvi; Morris, *Studies,* ch. 2, "History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel," 65–138; Lea, "Reliability"; Blomberg, "Reliable"; Wenham, "Enigma"; idem, "View"; Moloney, "Jesus of History."

[385] Albright, "Discoveries," 170–71. Scholars today generally recognize early and Palestinian traditions in John (Brown, *Essays,* 188–90).

[386] Barnett, *Reliable,* 63–65.

[387] Ibid., 63.

[388] This approach is central to the argument in Blomberg, *Reliability,* esp. 285, 291.

[389] Our sources suggesting that pre-70 tradition explains these "rivers" are themselves post-70, but the tradition would probably not be known to most members of John's audience unless they had visited Jerusalem before 70.

C. H. Dodd's general case for historical tradition in the Fourth Gospel is more often cited than these arguments based on geographical details.[390] Dodd finds traditional material in the connective passages which provide a chronological framework for the Fourth Gospel.[391] The chronology of the Fourth Gospel is distinctive, and it may fit some of our other data. Contrary to what one might expect from the Gospel's theology, Jesus' ministry overlaps with the Baptist's (3:23), which probably began in 26 or 27 C.E. (Luke 3:1). This also fits the date suggested by John 2:20 (forty-six years). Presumably, John's readers would not have counted those years even if they could have, but this chronological marker points to about 27 for the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, whereas Jesus was probably crucified about 30—roughly three years later (see commentary ad loc. on these points). If Jesus was "about thirty" when he began public ministry (Luke 3:23), this may also suggest a public ministry that began in the late twenties rather than shortly before his crucifixion, as one might surmise only from the Synoptics.[392] Indeed, by the time of Irenaeus, the non-Johannine view of a year's public ministry for Jesus had become no longer acceptable—Irenaeus assumes that his readers know better than the gnostics in this regard.[393] These arguments are not foolproof. Irenaeus could depend on John here as easily as on a parallel but independent tradition,[394] and one could argue that John's structure around three Passovers is theologically motivated, to bring the shadow of the cross (and the temple cleansing) to the beginning of his ministry (2:13–14) and perhaps even to create a theological paschal context for the multiplication of the loaves.[395] Thus in the final analysis this argument of Dodd's may not prove adequately compelling.

Although Dodd's monumental work demonstrates the possibility of historical traditions in the Fourth Gospel, D. A. Carson is correct that much of the historical information cannot be verified either way.[396] As Aune notes, "the claim for historicity is generally limited to narrative sequence and topography; the task of finding genuine Jesuanic traditions in the discourse material is an arduous one, and one for which the appropriate methodological tools are currently non-existent."[397]

At the same time, the usual skepticism toward the contents of the Fourth Gospel, which has sometimes proved almost thoroughgoing, seems to be more influenced by scholars' presuppositions than by any demand of historical-critical methodology itself.[398] Granted, John adapts the gospel form (see comment below), apparently employing a considerably more creative style than Mark or Luke (though it still falls within the acceptable range of ancient biography). But John's adaptation of the Jesus tradition for his community hardly means wholesale fabrication in which Jesus merely symbolizes the community; thus, for example, Jesus is never expelled from the synagogue in this Gospel.[399]

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[390] Despite corrections on some points, Dunn, "John," 299, thinks that "its main findings" will endure.

[391] Dodd, *Tradition,* 233–47, esp. 243.

[392] On Jesus' birth before 4 B.C.E., see, e.g., Keener, *Matthew,* 102; discipleship could continue for many years (e.g., Eunapius *Lives* 461). Streeter, *Gospels,* 419–24, suggests that John's chronology, while perhaps imperfect, is all we have, since Mark does not offer one.

[393] Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.3.3.

[394] He argues against the gnostics that Christ was over fifty when he died, though baptized around the age of thirty (2, ch. 22); although this exceeds John's chronology considerably, it is probably rooted in the Fourth Gospel (8:56–57, with Lk 3:23).

[395] That John arranges his Gospel by seasons as Thucydides did (e.g., 5.26.1) could suggest deliberate chronologization; but for the dischronologization of the temple cleansing, see comments ad loc.

[396] Carson, "Tradition."

[397] Aune, *Eschatology,* 67, n. 2.

[398] See Carson, "Tradition."

Points where John overlaps with the Synoptics yet remains independent of them (e.g., 6:1–21; possibly 4:46–54) demonstrate that John freely cast all his material in Johannine idiom,[400] yet included material that is no farther removed from the source of tradition than the material in the Synoptics is.[401] Jesus' sayings in the Fourth Gospel likewise match much of the sayings material in the Synoptics (e.g., 12:25, 48; 13:16).[402] The yield would be much higher if we included not only specific parallels but also the *kinds* of materials revealing *coherency* with such content (as is sometimes pursued in Synoptic studies).[403] After an extensive study of common material, Leon Morris concludes that John, though without direct literary dependence on the Synoptics, knows the traditions they used: "My conclusion is that John is independent of the Synoptics, but that he is in essential agreement with them."[404]

My own conclusions are similar to Morris's (with the special exception of the Passion Narratives). Although my predisposition is more favorable toward the material than that of many scholars to begin with, most of my early work in John involved John's theology and literary unity, whereas historical tradition in the Gospel seemed to me an untestable matter that was largely irrelevant to the Gospel's meaning in any case. Despite the interest of my doctoral mentor, D. Moody Smith, in the question of John and the Synoptics, I had not pursued that question in any detail until examining some parallel pericopes in the early stages of preparing this commentary, an examination undertaken merely in an effort to be somewhat thorough. What surprised me was that, where John could be tested against the Synoptics, he recounted earlier traditions in the same basic idiom in which he covered ground otherwise unfamiliar to us. While current historical methods cannot locate John precisely on the continuum of historical reliability, they can demonstrate that, where we can test him, John is both historian and theologian. The focal point of our study must be his theology, but he presupposes the Jewish salvation-historical perspective in which God reveals his character (hence true theology) by his acts in history.

Indeed, John's Palestinian cast and his topographical accuracy—verifiable after 70 only by excavations in the twentieth century—lend a greater degree of credibility to John's witness in certain regards.[405] He updates some language (such as "Pharisees"; see comment on 1:19, 24) but also preserves early traditions (see comment on 7:37–39). Like other ancient writers, John could select and shape events without fabricating them;[406] as in the

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[399] Setzer, *Responses,* 84, noting that John's use of Jesus is emblematic but not allegorical, and his sources not necessarily less historical than the Synoptics.

[400] This would even be the case if one accepted the putative "signs source"; Fortna, "Locale," 60, suggests that John adapted the topography of the source, making geography more theologically prominent.

[401] See Higgins, *Historicity,* 39. Barrett, *John,* 53–54, and Westcott, *John,* lxxxiii, do not regard the differences as irreconcilable, viewing them as in some way superficial.

[402] Cf. the extensive list of parallels in Howard, *Gospel,* 267–78.

[403] Cf., e.g., Ensor, "John 4.35." Although I have occasionally pointed these out in the commentary, I usually have not, since historical setting, rather than historicity of genre, is this commentary's primary focus.

[404] Morris, *Studies,* 62–63.

[405] Hunter, "Trends." Streeter, *Gospels,* 393–426, thinks that John knew Mark's and Luke's Passion Narratives but had firsthand knowledge of Jerusalem.

[406] See Robinson, *Historical Character,* 15–16; cf. Strachan, *Gospel,* 85; Hunter, "Trends (Continued)."

Jewish exodus tradition upon which he depends, the theological value of the “signs” he reports depend on their historical validity, and his “witness” is valueless if taken any other way (19:35, 20:26–31).

Raymond Brown summarizes a challenge to the old consensus:

> It is well known that the categorical rejection of the historicity of John, so familiar in earlier critical exegesis, can no longer be maintained. We may still find writers stating that the Fourth Gospel cannot be seriously considered as a witness to the historical Jesus, but these represent a type of uncritical traditionalism which arises with age, even in heterodoxy.[407]

Charlesworth suggests that today nearly all John scholars “have concluded that John may contain some of the oldest traditions in . . . the Gospels.”[408]

## John’s Distinctive Style and Adaptation of the Gospel Form

Given that John is closer to the Synoptics than to other writings, and that both fall within the spectrum of the ancient biographical genre, one must still seek to account for the differences.[409] John’s narrative progressively nuances the character of the genre, adapting expectations with which readers more accustomed to such gospels as the Synoptics would have approached his work. That John’s biography of Jesus differs from those of the Synoptic writers is evident; what accounts for these differences?[410]

Certainly John’s style, first of all, is distinctive.[411] The distinctiveness is most evident in the discourses (John’s most distinctive literary feature vis-à-vis the Synoptics, discussed in our following chapter) but hardly limited to them. Because this commentary’s focus is the Fourth Gospel’s Mediterranean context, we may focus our remarks about John’s style here on the elements that lend themselves most readily to comparison with other ancient style (though, for further discussion, see ch. 2 of the introduction on discourses, and comments on individual passages).

A standard Greek grammar rightly observes that in the technical sense John’s discourses lack “rhetorical art.”[412] John’s style is uniform whether in narrative or discourse,[413] whereas rhetorically trained writers preferred to adapt speeches even to their specific audiences. Lack of indication of technical rhetorical training does not, however, imply a lack of some rhetorical strategies familiar from the milieu.[414] At various points in the commentary, we observe parallels from ancient rhetorical conventions, not because John or his aides would have consciously drawn on rhetorical training but because they are the closest available sources we have for studying speeches disseminated in an ancient Mediterranean context. Many of these parallels apply to the rhythmic patterns in Jesus' speech; such features may, however, simply represent standard techniques of oral patterning for an oral culture, an area that invites much more detailed exploration.[415]

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[407] Brown, *Essays,* 187–88.

[408] Charlesworth, “Scrolls and Gospel,” 66. Robinson, *Priority,* argued that John’s portrait of Jesus was earlier than the Synoptics (though not certain that John wrote earlier).

[409] Dunn contends for theological as well as historical differences, underlining the diversity of early Christianity (Dunn, “Question”).

[410] Ancient writers understood that different historians would report different points according to their emphases (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *R.A.* 5.56.1), but they did not believe that true histories or other works should contradict one another (Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.15, 37–38).

[411] Ancient critics also took style into account—e.g., noting how a writer employed terms elsewhere (e.g., Philostratus *Hrk.* 11.5, on Homer *Od.* 18.359, using *Il.* 21.197).

[412] Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Grammar,* §492; cf. also Stamps, “Johannine Writings,” 618–19. This could be acceptable in some sense if appropriate for the audience (cf. *Rhet. Alex.* 22.1434b.27–30); the Gospels, like most novels and other popular works, did not primarily address elite audiences (cf. Dowden, “Callisthenes,” 651).

[413] Burridge, “Gospels and Acts,” 527.

[414] The Gospel is more advanced than Mark (Burridge, “Gospels and Acts,” 530), though for a professional orator this would not have been a significant claim.

Rhetoricians normally emphasized the importance of clarity.[416] John's language is often obscure, which, though generally a rhetorical fault (and probably viewed by some as such if they encountered this Gospel), could be praised when it was deliberate.[417] It could lend an exotic character to speech, sometimes in cultic or theological settings.[418] Some thus connect John's enigmatic style with his high Christology, comparing the grand style of rhetoric.[419] The grand (μέγεθος) style was used where the subject matter was great (Menander Rhetor 2.1–2, 368.9), as in hymns to the gods (Menander Rhetor 1.1, 335.21–22).[420] As Maximus of Tyre complains, the subject of the divine merits more splendid diction than mortals can provide (*Or.* 11.1).[421] Various ancient writers found the eloquence of sublimity appropriate for lofty thoughts.[422] Some critics thus conclude that John developed various features of obscurity "to write in a way appropriate to the mysterious and profound nature of his subject."[423]

One obvious feature of Johannine style is repetition on a number of levels.[424] Although rhetoric did not recommend "a limited repetitive vocabulary," in John's case it does offer "rhetorical emphasis and amplification to the central themes"[425] (see our chapter surveying some of the key terms in Johannine theology). Narrative repetition, characteristic of oral narratives,[426] is also a paramount feature of this Gospel (see e.g., the standard comparison of the healings in chs. 5 and 9). Repetition to drive home a central point certainly was emphasized in ancient, no less than modern, persuasion.[427] Interestingly, emphatic repetition could figure into the grand style,[428] and some have suggested a connection with writing about religious themes.[429]

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[415] See Harvey, *Listening to Text.*

[416] See, e.g., *Rhet. Alex.* 25.1435a.32–1435b.24 (esp. 1435b.7–16, 19–22); Photius *Bibliotheca* 166.109a (on Antonius Diogenes *Thule*); see further Rowe, "Style," 123–24; Black, "Oration at Olivet," 84 (citing Quintilian 8.2.22).

[417] See Anderson, *Rhetorical Theory,* 17; Black, "Oration at Olivet," 88 (citing Quintilian 9.2.65–95); cf. 2 Pet 3:15–16. Stamps, "Johannine Writings," 620, cites as Johannine examples the abrupt shifts between 5:47 and 6:1 and between 14:31 and 15:1.

[418] Thielman, "Style of Fourth Gospel," 175–77 (citing, e.g., Hermogenes, *Issues* 240.24–241.9; Diogenes Laertius 4.13–14; 9.6, 16; Demetrius 2.101).

[419] Black, "Words," 221–23; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment.*

[420] Menander Rhetor roots this in Homer's grand style (2.1–2, 369.8–9).

[421] Maximus himself preferred clarity and simplicity (albeit in Atticist terms) except when pursuing such grandeur (Trapp, *Maximus,* xxxiv n. 64, cites as examples of the latter *Or.* 2.10; 10.9; 11.12; 21.7–8; 41.2).

[422] Thielman, "Style of Fourth Gospel," 173–75, cites Philo *Worse* 79; *Heir* 4; Longinus *Subl.* 9.3. Stamps, "Johannine Writings," 620, notes asyndeton as a feature of Johannine sublimity (see comment below).

[423] E.g., Thielman, "Style of Fourth Gospel," 182 (cf. John's use of solemnity, 177–78; emphasis and obscurity, 178–80).

[424] Thielman, "Style of Fourth Gospel," 172, cites John's redundant use of pronouns, sayings (e.g., 1:15, 30; 4:29, 39; 13:16; 15:20), and on a broader compositional level.

[425] Burridge, "Gospels and Acts," 527. John frequently repeats favorite theological terms even though he often varies them with favorite synonyms (see comments on theological language in ch. 7 of the introduction). For the normal preference for stylistic variety, see, e.g., Rowe, "Style," 155.

[426] See Dewey, "Oral-Aural Event," 148–49 (following Ong, *Orality,* 37–49).

[427] See, e.g., Menander Rhetor 2.3, 384.25–27.

One should note, however, that the grand style contained amplification and ornament,[430] in contrast to John's typically simple style. Simplicity often *was* a rhetorical virtue, at least in many circles.[431] Certainly, traditional rhetorical theory generally preferred plain, as opposed to flowery, style for narratives.[432]

Although his theological complexity is undoubtedly deliberate, however, some obscure features of his grammar prove more surprising. He often includes δέ where we would expect καί and vice-versa, supplies neither where we would expect a conjunction (see comment on 1:17);[433] and includes οὐν in unexpected locations. This pattern, along with often oscillating verb tenses, may reflect a loose storytelling style due to repeated retelling of the Johannine tradition. Otherwise it could resemble a deliberately abrasive κακοφωνία, unexpected syntax meant to hold attention in the forceful style of some rhetoric.[434]

John's distinctiveness is most evident to the majority of readers, however, at the theological level. Commentators regularly cite the verdict of Clement of Alexandria, preserved in Eusebius, that John differs from the Synoptics as a more "spiritual" gospel, that is, a more theologically interpretive one.[435] While this verdict is probably correct, we should note that not all early Christian writers would have concurred to the same degree. Origen regarded John's portrait of Jesus as sometimes only symbolic (although he also allegorized the Synoptics to a lesser degree); but other early Christian commentators did not agree.[436] Origen noted disagreements between John and the Synoptics but often resolved them by arguing that John made spiritual points by these divergences;[437] Theodore of Mopsuestia sometimes harmonized but sometimes treated the divergences as a sign that John was an eyewitness more accurate than the Synoptics;[438] Cyril focused on John's theology, claiming that John addressed the deeper spiritual significance of events, but also harmonized at times.[439] Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Augustine worked especially hard to harmonize John and the Synoptics;[440] the emphasis on harmonization is hardly surprising given the apologetic needs of early Christians.

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[428] See Anderson, *Rhetorical Theory,* 228 (citing esp. Demetrius 103, 211); for examples of some forms of rhetorical repetition in John, see esp. comment on 6:38–39.

[429] Thielman, "Style of Fourth Gospel," 172.

[430] See Menander Rhetor 2.6, 399.21–22; 400.7–9 (reflecting the ethos of the Second Sophistic).

[431] Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 2, 4; Menander Rhetor 2.4, 393.21–22; 2.7, 411.23–29; but cf. also 2.7, 411.29–31. On this preference in Koine, cf. Black, "Oration at Olivet," 84.

[432] Rowe, "Style," 155–56.

[433] Asyndeton also characterizes John's style (Stamps, "Johannine Writings," 620, lists 1:40, 42, 45; 2:17; 4:6, 7; 5:12, 15; 7:32; 8:27; 9:13; 10:21, 22; 11:35, 44; 20:18); on this style, see *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 4.30.41; Quintilian 9.3.50; Rowe, "Style," 136 (including Augustine *Serm.* 191.19.5); Lee, "Translations of OT," 779–80 (LXX Job 3:17; 5:10; Isa 1:23); Anderson, *Glossary,* 33–34; also in *Rhet. Alex.* 36.1442a.11–14.

[434] In a more technical sense, κακοφανία is "ill-sounding word order" (Anderson, *Rhetorical Theory,* 187).

[435] E.g., Kreitzer, *John,* 5. Other Platonists, however, might find "myth" the best vehicle for allegorical truth (see Maximus of Tyre *Or.* 4.5–6).

[436] Wiles, *Gospel,* 22–24.

[437] Ibid., 15, though Origen sometimes harmonized as well (16).

[438] Ibid., 16–18.

[439] Ibid., 19.

[440] Ibid., 14.

With his philosophic penchant for allegory, Origen clearly overstated the case, but in some sense John did engage in more theological exposition than the other gospels;[441] his great number of asides testify to considerable explanation, though much of it is historical. Certainly John's Christology invites more than historical treatment: a Gospel that speaks of "eating" and "drinking" Jesus the way other works described consuming divine Wisdom may invite mystical contemplation of the divine such as appeared in both Platonist and *merkabah* mysticism.[442] Citing examples such as the anointing story (12:1–8), which shows that John followed his sources but employed them creatively,[443] Lindars compares this Gospel with a historical play of Shakespeare that conveys real issues and character yet exhibits freedom in details.[444] Conservative scholar Bruce puts it similarly, comparing Shakespeare's interpretive paraphrase of Mark Antony's eulogy with a source like Caesar in Plutarch's *Life of Brutus:*

> What Shakespeare does by dramatic insight (and, it may be added, what many a preacher does by homiletical skill), all this and much more the Spirit of God accomplished in our Evangelist. It does not take divine inspiration to produce a verbatim transcript; but to reproduce the words which were spirit and life to their first believing hearers in such a way that they continue to communicate their saving message and prove themselves to be spirit and life . . . that is the work of the Spirit of God.[445]

Bruce believes that John's tradition was not simply "*preserved* by John and his disciples . . . it flourished as a living and growing tradition, but remained faithful to its historical basis."[446] We suspect that John displays more historical substance and interest than Shakespeare, but the analogy of Lindars and Bruce points us in a fruitful direction. John is more "impressionistic" and less "photographic" than the Synoptics, yet clearly works from historical tradition.[447] All our extant Gospels are interpretive, but John, like the others, "only gave an interpretation where there was something to be interpreted."[448]

Seeking more ancient analogies than Shakespeare, one could compare John's "spiritual" Gospel's interpretation of Jesus (as some early Christians saw it) with Plato's reading of Socrates: a more meditative interpretation of his teacher than Xenophon's or the Synoptics' interpretations of their teachers.[449] The analogy is helpful but imperfect; evidence for historical tradition in John probably exceeds that for Plato's dialogues. A stronger analogy may be two different kinds of wisdom language; Matthew records especially the sort of wisdom a sage would give in public, John the more esoteric wisdom tradition, both in keeping with Jesus the sage.[450] Yet another analogy may lie still closer at hand for a Jewish audience. If John was aware of other narrative gospels circulating (and it would be difficult to believe that he was not, even if, as we think, he did not have those scrolls open in front of him), his adaptation of the form could well rest on a precedent he found in his Bible.

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[441] MacRae, *Invitation,* 16, says that whether or not John used the Synoptics, no one doubts that John reinterprets the Jesus tradition.

[442] Cf., e.g., Maximus of Tyre *Or.* 11.7–12.

[443] Lindars, *John,* 31. Brodie, *Quest,* 153–55, emphasizes John's move from his historical sources to interpretation.

[444] Lindars, *John,* 25.

[445] Bruce, *John,* 16.

[446] Ibid., 6.

[447] As noted especially in Thompson, "Historical Jesus."

[448] Gerhardsson, "Path," 96.

[449] Appian *R.H.* 11.7.41 is skeptical of Plato's accuracy (but paradoxically takes the *Iliad* more seriously, *R.H.* 12.1.1). Cf. also the quite different portrayal of Musonius Rufus in the collections of Lucius and Pollio (Lutz, "Musonius," 12–13).

[450] See Witherington, *Sage,* 336–38.

Thus perhaps more significantly as an analogy, John's Greek-speaking Jewish contemporaries knew Deuteronomy as a sort of "second law," a more cohesive epitome or revisitation of the law from a different angle.[451] John's many speeches may resemble the lengthy deliberative speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy. This is not to suggest that John has structured his Gospel like Deuteronomy, with its blessings or curses. Nor does this Gospel directly resemble the many rewritings of Pentateuchal material from this period.[452] But the book is full of Deuteronomic and Mosaic allusions (such as Moses' signs) and comparisons favoring Jesus over Moses.[453] The prologue presents Jesus as Torah, greater than Moses; assertions of his deity frame the prologue (1:1, 18) and the gospel minus its epilogue (1:1; 20:28). Other texts also present Jesus as greater than Moses (5:45–46; 6:32; 9:28–29; 15:13–15). Jesus' final discourse in the Gospel would fulfill the same function as that of Moses in Deuteronomy, planting the narrative into the life of the future community, followed by the narrative of his death.[454] Moses was the greatest prophet because he knew God "face to face" (Deut 34:10); Jesus himself is God's face (John 1:18).

## Conclusion

The Fourth Gospel is closer in form and substance to the Synoptic Gospels than to the apocryphal and gnostic gospels, but its divergence from dependence on Synoptic tradition makes most of its contents impossible to verify (or falsify) on purely historical grounds. That John falls into the general category of biography, however, at least shifts the burden of proof on the matter of reported events (albeit not the particular ways of describing them) onto those who deny John's use of tradition for the events he describes, although the historical method cannot check the accuracy of most of his individual details. The different portrait of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel suggests that John has taken more sermonic liberties in his portrayal of Jesus, but this does not demonstrate that he lacks historical tradition on which the portrayal is base.[455] Comparisons with the Synoptics suggest that John both uses historical tradition and tells it in a distinctive way; but this pattern is more obvious for the narratives than for the more interpretive discourses, on which see the next chapter.

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[451] Deuteronomy was one of the most popular books, perhaps the most popular book, among early Jewish interpreters, if incidence at Qumran supplies a clue (Cross, *Library,* 43). Westermann, *John,* 22–23, 67, likewise compares the contrast between the interpretive speeches of Deuteronomy and Joshua, on the one hand, with Exodus and Numbers, on the other; Stuhlmacher, "Theme," 15, compares John's use of Jesus tradition with *Jubilees* or 11QT "updating" the Pentateuch.

[452] As rewritings of Deuteronomy, Ashton, *Understanding,* 472, mentions *Jub.* 1; *L.A.B.* 19; 1Q22; *Testament of Moses.* 11QTemple may function as an eschatological Deuteronomy (Wise, "Vision"); at least 11QTemple 51.11–66.11 adapts and often paraphrases Deut (Schiffman, "Paraphrase").

[453] For Moses parallels, see, e.g., Teeple, *Prophet;* Glasson, *Moses;* Herlong, "Covenant"; Lacomara, "Deuteronomy"; Ashton, *Understanding,* 472–76. In this Gospel, however, it is Jesus' disciples who are most analogous with Moses, and Jesus as God's glory (1:14).

[454] For comparisons of John 13–17 with Moses' last discourse, see our comments ad loc. Jesus' promise of the Spirit is his testament to the new community like Jacob's testamentary blessing of the tribes in Gen 49:3–27 and Moses' in Deut 33.

[455] Dodd, "Portrait," suggests that John supplements what we know from the Synoptics, but argues that the figure of Jesus stands behind both.

This impasse in deciding between John as a substantially reliable historical source (reporting events and Jesus' teachings in his own way) and John as a free adapter of relatively few traditions could be challenged more effectively if we could determine the nature of his sources. Although knowing his sources would not determine the degree of adaptation, dependence on a genuinely historically reliable source would improve our ability to trust the Fourth Gospel's historical witness to Jesus, a trust much of the Johannine community regarded as very important (1 John 4:1–6).

Given the common traditions early Christians shared, the frequency of travel in the Roman world, and the widespread circulation of at least Mark by this period, it is not unlikely that John knew some forms of the Synoptic tradition. Even where he overlaps with this tradition, however, he goes his own way, telling the story independently and probably from memory. But if the author of the Fourth Gospel, its tradition or its nucleus were himself an eyewitness—a view much disputed in recent years but consonant with the claims of the Gospel itself (1:14, 19:35; cf. 1 John 1:1)—independence from the Synoptic tradition would not call into question its essential reliability; indeed, it could (in the documentary sense) make the Fourth Gospel a step closer to the historical Jesus than the Synoptics are. If the Fourth Gospel was not dictated by but nevertheless depends on an eyewitness, its basic claims concerning events remain at least on historical par with the Synoptics. Only if no eyewitness tradition stands behind it on any level, and it was freely composed novelistically or with the most liberal haggadic adaptation (all scholars acknowledge *some* adaptation and conformity with Johannine idiom), does the Gospel fail to provide substantial historical data about Jesus. The question of authorship is therefore important for determining where this Gospel fits within the continuum of ancient biographies' treatment of history. Before we turn to that question, however, we must examine a specific form-critical matter in this Gospel that is distinctive to it vis-à-vis the Synoptics: its speech material.