

THE GOSPELS' GENRE AS SCRIPTURAL HISTORIOGRAPHY:
APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED FROM RONALD REAGAN'S BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Everyone agrees that genre is one of the primary keys to interpreting a text, but in the case of the gospels almost no one actually treats the subject that way. Many biblical scholars do try to determine the gospels' genre, but how they answer that question typically has little or no impact on how they interpret the text. This state of affairs results from a fundamental error in the methodology commonly applied to this question. The root of the problem is that the way biblical scholars typically ascertain the gospels' genre does not reflect the way in which real authors and readers determine genre in the real world. The result is that scholars typically pay lip service to the idea of genre as key to interpretation while in reality assuming that interpretation is the key to genre. Applying a more realistic methodology leads not only to a different generic label for the gospels, but to a different understanding of the message their authors intended to convey.

The Importance of Genre

If most people today tend not to take the question of genre very seriously, it is usually because their knowledge of a book's genre is simply taken for granted. They usually do not think about it explicitly, but it is there in the background, molding their interpretation of what they read. It is like the air one breathes, which constantly moves into and out of the body without notice—until that movement is restricted, at which point one's utter reliance upon oxygen suddenly demands our conscious attention. In like manner, assumptions about genre become evident only when one encounters a book that contradicts those assumptions and then they make themselves known with surprising force.

Contemporary Americans are accustomed to taking for granted the broad generic distinction between fiction and nonfiction. The depth of this belief is evident in the fact that one of the most controversial books to be published recently in America excited passions precisely because it straddled this generic boundary. Many books on the fringes of various political and religious spectrums have been published over the last few decades, but none of them excited such nation-wide anger and alarm as Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*.¹ Although marketed as Reagan's official biography and written in corresponding nonfiction style complete with footnotes, *Dutch* is suffused with fictional elements throughout. The author writes from the viewpoint of a fictional character, who was a contemporary of Reagan's and participated in the events of his life. Morris not only injected his fictional persona into real events but also made up conversations and documents and even footnoted some of the imaginary documents. The reader would be alerted to the genre mix-up on the dust cover blurb, but there is nothing within the text of the book that gives a clue to the fictional character of the author's persona and much of his

¹ Random House, 1999.

narrative. It was not just the general public that saw this mix of genres as a kind of literary sacrilege—many historians were just as incensed at the book’s blatant transgression against the norms of their own genre. One professor, aghast at the thought that someday a reader might pick up the book without the dust jacket and never realize that this nonfiction text included fiction, exclaimed in outrage: “Let’s call it biofiction or biofantasy or bioimaginings, but not biography, which has a venerable tradition.”²

Consider the contrasting reception experienced by another book, identical in form insofar as the text reads like nonfiction and comes complete with footnotes, many of which cite imaginary sources: Michael Crichton’s *Eaters of the Dead*, which was later made into the movie, *The 13th Warrior*. The text of Crichton’s novel claims to be an actual manuscript written in the tenth century as the memoirs of an Arab traveler to the Vikings, published and annotated by modern scholars. No controversy attended this book’s debut; indeed it was met with widespread critical approval although it, like *Dutch*, mixes fiction and nonfiction without informing the reader one from another. The difference in reception between these two books illustrates a fundamental presupposition that people today apply to the modern genres of fiction and nonfiction: in the genre of fiction, nonfictional material can freely mix with the fictional material, but in the genre of nonfiction, no fictional material at all is allowed unless it is explicitly marked as such.³ If Morris’s book had been marketed as fiction, it would not have generated a controversy. The nonfiction versus fiction generic distinction is a deeply ingrained expectation that profoundly influences how people interpret what they read, though the ways in which this expectation operate are rarely thought about explicitly.

The first century knew nothing of the modern distinction between fiction and nonfiction, but ancient authors and readers had just as deeply entrenched beliefs, albeit unspoken, about the genres of their own culture. If our understanding of *Dutch* is so profoundly affected by our view of it as fiction or nonfiction, it stands to reason that ancient readers’ understanding of the gospels, and the way the evangelists went about writing them, was profoundly affected by the way they saw these texts fit into their own culture’s system of genres. And since the Gospel of Mark is generally seen as the earliest gospel, Dennis MacDonald does not exaggerate when he calls the search for Mark’s genre “the elusive Holy Grail of gospel studies.”⁴

Biblical Scholarship on the Gospels’ Genre

Modern scholars generally assume that the genre of a text can be determined by comparing its form and content to genres current in that text’s contemporary culture. Since nothing

² Joyce Appleby, quoted by Kate Masur in *Perspectives*, December 1999. <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1999/9912/9912new1.cfm>>.

³ The difference in the way the Morris and the Crichton books were received is also, of course, because few people really care much about getting right what happened in the tenth century, but even medieval historians did not object to Crichton’s book. No one objected because mixing nonfiction and fiction in a fictional narrative is deemed to be normal.

⁴ Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2000), 3.

quite like a gospel existed before the first gospel was written, different ways of looking at form and content lead in different directions. Before the late twentieth century, scholars generally saw the gospels as an essentially new genre. Later came recognition that this stand is untenable: new genres can develop out of existing ones, but no one writes in a generic vacuum. As Michael Vines puts it, “Genre functions as a conventional bridge between author and reader, therefore an utterly new genre would be either incomprehensible, or at least seriously prone to misinterpretation.”⁵

Once recognition of this fact of literary life took hold, the search was on for the genre or genres that most likely gave birth to the gospel genre. Depending on which aspects of the text’s form and content any given scholar considers most important, a wide variety of genres from contemporary Greco-Roman and Jewish culture have been advanced as candidates, including aretalogy, encomium, memorabilia, Socratic dialogue, Greek tragedy, Homeric epic, apocalyptic Jewish Novel, and Greco-Roman biography.⁶ Over the last couple of decades, the last of these—Greco-Roman biography—seems to have become the majority view. That view is vigorously championed by Richard Burridge, and for him it leads to the conclusion that the gospels must have been intended to be historically accurate in the same sense that we today think of historical accuracy:

So we may conclude that the authors of the gospels were aware of the βίος nature of their work. Similarly, their audiences must have realized this; as Hengel says, “The ancient reader will probably have been well aware of the differences in style and education, say, between Mark and Xenophon; but he will also have noticed what the gospels had in common with the literature of biographical ‘reminiscences’—and unlike the majority of German New Testament scholars today, he did not mind at all regarding the evangelists as authors of biographical reminiscences of Jesus which went back to the disciples of Jesus themselves.”⁷

Another way of looking at Burridge’s line of thought is to recognize that he is essentially assigning the gospels to the modern genre of nonfiction and that he is also applying to them the modern belief in the sacrosanct character of that genre as free from the contamination of fiction. Biography cannot mix with “biofiction, biofantasy, or bioimaginings.” Burridge’s point of view is understandable, for the belief that the genre of biography is necessarily a sub-genre of nonfiction runs deep in modern readers. Even an academic ostensibly trying to understand the ancient world on its own terms would find it hard to break free of this presupposition. However, seen in these terms, the revolution in

⁵ Michael E Vines, *The Problem of Markan Genre: the Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 8. Richard Burridge states this more strongly: “any idea of the gospels as unique, sui generis works is a nonsense: authors cannot create, and readers cannot interpret, a total novelty”; see *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 247. See also Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s Work in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 50.

⁶ For an excellent survey of scholarly literature on the subject, see Vines, *Markan Genre*, 1-31. Some in-depth examinations of the gospels’ genre include Burridge, *What are the Gospels*, Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 50-60; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Is Mark’s Gospel a Life of Jesus? A Question of Genre* (Marquette University Press, 1990) and her “Genre and the Gospels,” *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 239-246.

⁷ Burridge, *What are the Gospels*, 246.

scholarly thinking about the gospels' genre, in which the majority view made a transition from classifying the gospels as *sui generis* to classifying them as biography, turns out to be no revolution at all. In both cases, the vast majority of scholars implicitly interpret the gospels as if they are instances of the broad modern genre of nonfiction, and this is what governs their interpretation of the works.⁸

The view of ancient biography as conforming to modern presuppositions about the nonfiction genre is itself questionable,⁹ but it is not the issue to be addressed in this article. Nor do I intend to address in detail the great mass of evidence that has been adduced by Burridge and others in defense of their various conclusions about the gospels' genre. Instead, my purpose here is to call into question the common assumptions about which data are relevant, assumptions shared by nearly all of those who have tried to determine the gospels' genre, and which have led them to look for the primary evidence in the wrong places.¹⁰

How Authors and Readers Actually Determine Genre

What tends to be missing in modern biblical scholarship is a realistic consideration of how authors and readers actually determine genre. Burridge's approach is typical, insofar as his argument is based exclusively on characteristics of the text, and often on characteristics that require statistical analysis to see their significance. The data cited by Burridge include such things as the percentage of sentences that have Jesus as the subject of the verb,¹¹ the relative amount of the text that is focused on Jesus, the relative number of settings in the narrative that follow Jesus, similarities to popular literature in the language style, and so forth. Mary Ann Tolbert reaches a different conclusion but bases her analysis on the same kinds of evidence: she finds that the style and content of the Markan story is more similar

⁸ This is often implicit and sometimes even explicit as an unquestionable assumption. A symposium about intertextual relationships in the Bible, for example, introduces its subject with these words: "The exegete analyses texts which are demonstrably non-fictional, whereas the literary scholar only analyses fictional texts. Since biblical texts are non-fictional, it is only natural that questions both as to the context in which those texts originated and as to their history and origin should be crucial in biblical research. At the same time the question comes up what the biblical text has to do with the events that preceded it and led to the writing of it. These questions are not discussed in the same way in literary studies." See Sipke Draisma, ed., *Intertextuality in Biblical writings* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 9.

⁹ See the discussion in Vines, *Markan Genre*, 4.

¹⁰ I will add, however, that even for those who share the assumption that the most important determinant of genre is a text's content and form, the conclusion that the gospels fit the genre of Greco-Roman biography is suspect; Burridge's is the most thoroughly developed version of these arguments, and for an excellent summary and critique of them see the blog by Neil Godfrey, <<http://vridar.wordpress.com>> (posts on 1/17, 1/20, and 1/29/2011). The author is not a scriptural scholar per se but is a thorough researcher and a trenchant critic of the scholarly literature he reviews.

¹¹ An appendix in Burridge's book presents a long series of computer-generated pie charts tallying the percentage of times verbs refer to various subjects in various ancient works of literature. (Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, 308-21)

to popular novels of the ancient world than it is to biographies.¹² Vines divides his predecessors into those who focus on form and those who focus on content, while he asserts that he looks at both, but in effect the difference is in what he chooses to emphasize from the same types of evidence. He too focuses on internal characteristics of the text, for his argument is that what matters most is the apocalyptic understanding of history expressed in the text.

The list could be extended with any number of additional examples, and the problem with all of them is that the form and content of a text is not the primary determinant of genre. In other words, the typical approach to this question in modern scholarly literature doesn't reflect the actual processes by which either authors or readers determine the genre of a work. The typical approach taken by scholars implicitly assumes that the reader of a literary work would have to read the entire text before figuring out what its genre is. It is as if that task could be done only by carefully analyzing the entire text for statistically significant differences and similarities compared to other works whose genre was already known.

One way to gain some insight into why this is problematic is to think carefully about your own experience with literary genre. There are two fundamentally perspectives to consider: that of the author and that of the reader. If one is the writer, one typically decides upon the genre before he or she begins writing: one knows right at the start when writing an email or a novel, a greeting card or a technical support web page.¹³ Genre is a function of one's intention. The writer would typically follow the conventions associated with the chosen genre—most of the time not sprinkling smiley faces in the technical support page text, nor using colloquial language in an academic article.

For the reader—and this is where the typical scholarly analysis of the gospels departs from real life—genre is determined before reading begins. If you select a text to read, it is usually because you have a reason for reading it; something is known about it before you begin reading and part of what you know is its genre. When you read an email you know it's an email. When you pick up a book from the nonfiction book stacks of the library, you know it's a nonfiction book. When you open the pages of a scholarly journal, you know you are going to read a scholarly article. You do not read through the whole text, thinking to yourself about all the ways in which the text is similar to or different from genres you know, and determine the genre only when you're done reading and have analyzed the data. If you find second-person informal style in an academic paper—such as I have switched to in this paragraph only to make the point—it might strike you as strange because that is contrary to academic article conventions in the discipline of biblical studies, but it does not

¹² Phrases like “popular literature” or “popular novel” are inherently misleading. As Gamble has pointed out, there really was no such thing as popular literature in anything remotely like the sense we think of today when we use such terms. The closest corollary in the ancient world was “light reading for the small minority who could read and those who also read the more serious literature available to them.” (Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 39)

¹³ As with all general rules there are exceptions. One could, for example, start writing a blog post and turn it into an academic article or a novel later, but then when the change is made the change one would be aware of it. It would be a very rare situation for someone else to publish a blog post as a novel without the author's knowledge and consent and without revisions to make it suitable for the change in genre.

occur to you that you are reading an email or a blog. I could have written this entire article in such style, and if you found the article in an academic journal, you would nevertheless recognize it as an academic article.

The point is that there is no such thing as a free-floating text, no such thing as letters and words floating through the ether without physical presentation, such that one can only determine genre by the character of the text itself. The context in which a text is presented is the primary determinant of generic expectations and assumptions. What made the difference in the reception of *Dutch* and *Eaters of the Dead* is the way they were marketed and presented, not in the generic conventions of the text. If *Dutch* had been marketed as fiction there would have been little or no controversy. There is no evidence that this principle was any different in the ancient world than it is today. Relatively few scholars who examine the question of the gospels' genre recognize this. Harry Gamble is one biblical scholar who acknowledges the importance of the way a text is presented:

... genre is presupposed in the act of writing and in the act of reading, and though they may not correspond absolutely, the aims of writing and reading can meet only if recognizable generic signs are provided either in the text or in the situation where the text is received and read, or both. A sense of the genre of any particular text is essential to its comprehension: the reader must be able to judge what sort of writing is being read.¹⁴

A few even recognize not just the importance, but the priority of evidence pertaining to “the situation where the text is received or read.” K. L. Noll states plainly, “Social situation of reception is the primary consideration in the determination of a genre of communication.”¹⁵

Applying Different Generic Criteria to the Gospels

Gamble asserts that scholars have generally not paid enough attention to the actual ancient manuscripts and their physical characteristics:

The failure to consider the extent to which the physical medium of the written word contributes to its meaning—how its outward aspects inform the way a text is approached and read—perpetuates a largely abstract, often unhistorical, and even anachronistic conception of early Christian literature and its transmission.¹⁶

Just as today it makes a difference whether one finds a text on the nonfiction shelf of the library, in an email, or in a blog, the manner in which an ancient text was preserved and presented matters:

¹⁴ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 38.

¹⁵ K. L. Noll, “The Evolution of Genre in the Book of Kings: The Story of Sennacherib and Hezekiah as Example,” in P. Kirkpatrick and T. Goltz, eds., *The Function of Ancient Historiography in Biblical and Cognate Studies* (T&T Clark, 2008), 30-56; here: 45 n.56. See also p.43.

¹⁶ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 42.

All aspects of the production, distribution, and use of texts presuppose social functions and forces -- functions and forces that are given representation, or inscribed, in the design of the text as a concrete, physical object.¹⁷

Moreover, what we learn about the production and distribution of the text does tell us about the author's intention, for as Gamble points out, each of the gospel authors

... was self-consciously engaged in literary composition and therefore sensible not only of his own compositional techniques and theological aims, but also of the prospects for the valuation, circulation, and use of his work.¹⁸

Therefore, a more realistic approach to the determination of genre would result in giving priority to a very different kind of evidence than the internal text characteristics that scholars typically analyze. The physical evidence of how the gospel texts were preserved should be central, not incidental, to the search for their genre.

To date, the most insightful investigation into aspects of the physical evidence that may have a bearing on genre is the one that David Trobisch presents in his book *The First Edition of the New Testament*.¹⁹ From a broad survey of the earliest manuscripts that preserve New Testament books, Trobisch concludes that a spontaneous and haphazard process could not have resulted in the uniformity of certain characteristics that we find in the manuscripts. This leads to the conclusion that the manuscripts derive from a single archetype, which in turn suggests that a single editor or publisher deliberately created the entire package at some very early date.²⁰ In other words, the earliest evidence we have that witnesses to how the New Testament texts were presented to their readers indicates that they were presented as scripture, in a New Testament counterpart to what was destined to become seen as the Old Testament.

Trobisch's theory turns the entire field of canon history on its head: instead of a long history of independent writings gradually being assembled into a whole, the whole is promulgated at once, and there's a long history of ultimately failed attempts to dispute parts of it. Such a complete rethinking of canon history has unsurprisingly failed to take the conservative world of biblical scholarship by storm, but the evidence is too strong to be dismissed out of hand. Since even the earliest surviving manuscripts of the gospels share the common characteristics that Trobisch cites,²¹ in effect we have no clear evidence that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 101.

¹⁹ Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. A German edition preceded the English edition: *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1996). For a summary of the evidence presented in this book, see my review article, "David Trobisch and David Parker on the Origin of the New Testament, the Historical Jesus, and How Manuscripts Can Reveal What Texts Conceal" in *JOCABS* 2(2009):1. <<http://www.ocabs.org/journal/index.php/jocabs/article/view/41/16>>.

²⁰ For a project of this scale multiple editors and copyists would most likely be involved, but I am using the words "editor" and "publisher" in the singular to reflect the idea that the project was led by one person or undertaken by a single team with a clearly-defined set of goals.

²¹ This is not the place to present Trobisch's evidence in detail, but parts of it, the *nomina sacra* and codex format, are discussed below.

any of them originally circulated independently before being assembled into the canonical collection we now know as the New Testament. Even if one chooses to reject the package-publication theory, the picture that best fits the actual physical evidence is of a unified church leadership that produced this literature and tightly controlled its propagation over an extended period of time.

The nature of the physical evidence does not just indicate that a single group controlled the production and distribution of the gospels; it also indicates that these texts were specifically aimed at Christians, rather than being intended for broad evangelistic purposes. As Gamble observes, the system of abbreviations called the *nomina sacra* is found fully developed already in the earliest surviving manuscripts, and it witnesses to the intention that only readers familiar with the system would be reading the manuscripts:

The system of *nomina sacra*, though not an esoteric code, stands out as an in-group convention that expressed a community consciousness and presumed a particular readership.²²

In-group conventions, in works whose production and distribution was carefully controlled, suggests an intention to write and publish authoritative scripture, for scripture is aimed at a religious community, not at people outside that community.²³ Another distinctive feature of the earliest surviving New Testament manuscripts compared to other works of literature is their codex (book) format which replaced the scroll format that was the universal standard at the time. As Gamble observes, this too could be indicative of an intent to publish the New Testament texts as scripture, since the scroll format for non-scriptural texts persisted for a period of time:

The existence of a late second-century roll of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (P. Oxy. 405) could suggest that works of scholarship, as distinct from scriptural texts, persisted for a while in roll form in Christian scholastic circles.²⁴

Against Heresies may be taken as a representative kind of text aimed at the Christian community yet not intending to function as authoritative scripture. Such texts characteristically identified their author and cited other individuals or texts as authorities for the theological points they tried to make. By contrast, the gospel texts do not identify their authors and do not appeal to any other authority than the Old Testament. In other words, they speak with an authoritative voice aimed at the Christian community, and this authority was bolstered by the editors who attached to these texts the names of individuals

²² Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 75, 78.

²³ Outsiders might read it, but it would not be scripture to them and would not be aimed at them.

²⁴ Ibid., 80. Gamble also notes that "There is no justification in bibliographic terms, for example, for an a priori discrimination between scriptural and nonscriptural texts, not only because the scriptural canon had not yet been determined, but also because the methods of producing and circulating texts were the same for all texts." (p. 94) However, this involves some confusion between the words "scriptural" and "canonical" which is not present in the quotation from p.80. A work may well have been intended as scripture, and received by some for a while as scripture, without necessarily making it into the final form of the canon. Indeed, even if Trobisch's theory is correct and the New Testament was a unitary publication by a single church leadership group, that does not preclude there being other groups who endeavored to produce and get acceptance for their own scriptural works.

whose personal authority would be unimpeachable due to a direct connection to Jesus. Therefore, both internal and external evidence suggests that the genre originally intended by the authors, editors, and publishers, and the genre indicated by the way in which the texts were presented, and thus the genre as received by the original audience, was that of authoritative scripture.

Scripture as a Genre

Most scholars are looking for finer-grained literary categories when they use the word “genre,” but scripture versus non-scripture is just as important a generic starting point for the first-century Christian community as fiction versus nonfiction is for present-day Americans. It is true that when the gospels were written, the New Testament canon had not yet been fixed, but this has no bearing on whether any individual work was intended by its author to function as scripture or was received by its original audience as scripture. Different communities could have differing views about which specific writings should be considered scripture, while agreeing on the essential characteristics of scripture per se.

What is clear from the use of the word γραφή within the earliest Christian texts is that scripture is a class of literature that is invested with divine authority by those who see it as scripture. The essential characteristic of scripture is its authoritative voice. Scripture is not read simply so that the reader might become more knowledgeable about something, or to learn the truth about something in order to satisfy curiosity; it is read with a view to finding out how God decrees that one should think and behave. A given work might or might not be written with express intent that it function as scripture. In some cases (such as, perhaps, some of the Psalms), a work written for other purposes might be appropriated by a community as scripture. However, when an author consciously writes scripture, his or her primary purpose would not be to inform or entertain but to influence, with intent to use scriptural authority to shape a community in some way.

Paul’s epistles clearly fit this description, and they were apparently received as scripture from the beginning,²⁵ which means they were most likely intended to function as scripture from the beginning. Regardless of who wrote them, their authoritative status depended on the personal authority of the apostle who was credited with authoring them. Because the authors of these letters could depend on the name of Paul for authority, they were free to adapt a non-scriptural genre (that of literary epistle) to the exigencies of the early Christian community’s situation. But an author setting out to create scripture without the benefit of an authoritative name would be in a different situation. The texts of the gospels are anonymous. Although in parts of John the author self-identifies as one of the disciples, that is not the case at all in the synoptics, in which the author speaks with an implicitly authoritative voice but with no reference to where that authority might come from. An author composing a new work in such a situation would not break out in a totally new literary direction but would follow the precedent of what worked in similar situations

²⁵ As discussed earlier, the manuscripts of the epistles and those of the gospels share the same characteristics. See also 2 Peter 3:16, in which Paul’s epistles are classified as scripture.

in the past. Such precedents would be readily found in the Old Testament, which provided examples of what worked in the past and in any case dominated the literary world of early Christianity, as Gamble notes:

The force of Christian dependence on Jewish scripture for the question of the literary culture of early Christianity is not much appreciated, and its implications have been neglected under the influence of form criticism's preoccupation with oral tradition.²⁶

Within the genre of scripture as represented by the Old Testament, there was a limited range of sub-genres such as historical narrative (comprising the Torah, the Former Prophets, and works such as Chronicles), prophetic oracles (the great prophets and the twelve), psalms, and wisdom literature. Of the known sub-genres, the gospels best fit into the historical narrative category.

More specifically, insofar as the gospel narrative constitutes a story about the origin of the Christian faith, the closest parallel is to the Torah and to the prior prophets (Joshua and the books of Samuel and Kings). The latter are often called "historical" books while the Torah is not, but this distinction is result of modern generic sensibilities. Genesis is sometimes seen to be more myth or legend than history, but in fact the texts themselves present the whole story starting with creation as a single continuous historical story. Within this body of literature are sections that parallel in many ways what we find in the gospels, most notably the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories, which, as will be seen later, may have been a model for the gospels.

Some scholars do recognize the gospels' character as historical narrative, and categorize them generically within a broad genre of historiography rather than biography. Eve-Marie Becker categorizes Mark as historiography²⁷ but observes that while the evangelist can be compared to historians he isn't one because he "does not give any explicit references concerning his authorship nor concerning his methodology in working with literary sources."²⁸ This is a problem only when one compares Mark to non-scriptural historiography. Other scholars who opt to view Mark as creating a new "gospel" sub-genre

²⁶ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 23. See also my conclusion below, which points out that viewing the gospels as a scriptural genre undermines the foundations of oral tradition theory and form criticism methodology.

²⁷ "The framework within which the Gospel literature is situated can be referred to as 'historiography' in the broader sense: the Gospel of Mark reports the Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου [beginning of the gospel] by way of a narrative of the events (*ereignisgeschichtlich*) at the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel. In the frame of the macro-genre of Hellenistic historiography the Gospels represent a special early Christian form of literature (εὐαγγέλιον) closely related to 'historical monography.'" (Eve-Marie Becker, "The Gospel of Mark in the Context of Ancient Historiography," in P. Kirkpatrick and T. Goltz, eds., *The Function of Ancient Historiography in Biblical and Cognate Studies* [T&T Clark, 2008], 124-134, here: 127) Adela Yarbro Collins takes a similar line and quotes Aune as observing that the word ἀρχή (beginning) with which Mark begins is a technical term that means a "complete examination of an historical phenomenon must be based on its origins"—and it is used in that way mainly in historical works, not biographies. (Is Mark's Gospel a Life of Jesus, 28-29)

²⁸ Becker, "Gospel of Mark," 130.

of “historiography” acknowledge that there is no need to look to Greco-Roman models. In their commentary on Mark, J. Donahue and D. Harrington observe that Mark’s only pretexts are the Hebrew scriptures—the earliest gospel contains no quotation from any Greco-Roman author and no significant public figure is even mentioned except Herod and Pilate. Therefore they conclude that the other literature is really irrelevant:

Although study of the proposed Greco-Roman models is intrinsically interesting and helpful for a broader understanding of the world that may have been confronted by early Christian preaching, it is more fruitful to view Mark as a ‘gospel,’ not a unique but at least a distinctive genre of literature, which presents the Pauline Christ-event (also called “gospel”) in a narrative form, and which weaves together diverse traditions (including the Old Testament) to create a unified story of saving significance of the public life, death, and raising up of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁹

Donahue and Harrington propose that the genre one needs to know when one reads Mark in order to interpret it as intended is simply biblical narrative:

If awareness of genre is a necessary entrée to proper interpretation, then potential readers of Mark may be lost in the welter of proposals. Even if there may have been no single model that Mark followed, his work is most at home in the realm of biblical narrative.³⁰

An understanding of the character of historical narrative in the Old Testament texts is thus critical to understanding the gospels.³¹

Fiction versus Nonfiction in Scriptural Historiography

As noted earlier, few generic assumptions are more powerful in our own culture than those underlying the modern conceptions of fiction and nonfiction. Consequently, few scholars can resist the temptation to fit ancient literature into that system. One of the best ways to see why that does not work in the case of scriptural historiography is to observe the dispute between biblical scholars Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg over whether scriptural historiography is fiction, fictional history, historical fiction, or history. For Alter,³² the Bible (to both of these scholars, “the Bible” means what Christians call the Old Testament) is a

²⁹ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 16.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Some scholars caution against assuming that all of the gospels are the same genre; see, for example: Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction-History of the Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1968), 212, and Vines, *Markan Genre*, 25. However as a practical matter the other gospels are not different in their “social situation of reception,” and not sufficiently different in their form or content to reach a significantly different conclusion about their genre. As for their form and content, each shows evidence of having been modeled after Mark (or vice versa if one considers Mark to be later), and having been modeled after Old Testament scriptural historiography. The warning about considering the possibility of different genres applies only to genre at the level of an academic classification scheme, a level that the original author was not interested in, had no impact on the original audience, and is outside the scope of this article.

³² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (San Francisco: Basic, 1981).

mix of fiction and history, with the parts set in earlier times more like historicized fiction, and the parts covering relatively recent periods more like fictionalized history.

Under scrutiny, biblical narrative generally proves to be either fiction laying claim to a place in the chain of causation and the realm of moral consequentiality that belong to history, as in the primeval history, the tales of the Patriarchs, and much of the Exodus story, and the account of the early conquest, or history given the imaginative definition of fiction, as in most of the narratives from the period of the Judges onward.³³

How does one know it is fiction? One indicator is the fact that the authors write as though they know things no historian could know:

What a close reading of the text does suggest ... is that the writer could manipulate his inherited materials with sufficient freedom and sufficient firmness of authorial purpose to define motives, relations, and unfolding themes, even in a primeval history, with the kind of subtle cogency we associate with the conscious artistry of the narrative mode designated prose fiction.³⁴

Narratives set in more recent times do the same thing with a slightly more historical base. King David did exist, says Alter, but no historian would know what the author of the David stories purports to know:

... these stories are not, strictly speaking, historiography, but rather the imaginative reenactment of history by a gifted writer ... He feels entirely free ... to invent interior monologue for his characters; to ascribe feeling, intention, or motive to them when he chooses; to supply verbatim dialogue (and he is one of literature's masters of dialogue) for occasions when no one but the actors themselves could have had knowledge of exactly what was said.³⁵

Biblical narrative in fact offers a particularly instructive instance of the birth of fiction because it often exhibits the most arresting transitions from generalized statement, genealogical lists, mere summaries of character and acts, to defined scene and concrete interaction between personages. Through the sudden specifications of narrative detail and the invention of dialogue that individualizes the characters and focuses their relations, the biblical writers give the events they report a fictional time and place.³⁶

The biblical author is thus neither more nor less a historian than Shakespeare:

The author of the David stories stands in basically the same relation to Israelite history as Shakespeare stands to English history in his history plays. Shakespeare was obviously not free to have Henry V lose the battle of Agincourt, or to allow someone else to lead the English forces there, but, working from the hints of historical tradition, he could invent a kind of *Bildungsroman* for the young prince Hal; surround him with invented characters that would serve as foils, mirrors,

³³ Ibid., 32-33.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Ibid., 35.

³⁶ Ibid., 42.

obstacles, aids in his development; create a language and a psychology for the king which are the writer's own achievement, making out of the stuff of history a powerful projection of human possibility. That is essentially what the author of the David cycle does for David, Saul, Abner, Joab, Jonathan, Absalom, Michal, Abigail, and a host of other characters.³⁷

Everything Alter says fits the facts we know about the biblical narratives, and it is not difficult to see that everything he says about Old Testament historiography applies equally to the gospels. However, Meir Sternberg³⁸ has what he thinks is a radically different viewpoint. He argues that in fact there is no fiction at all in biblical historical narrative. That does not mean he thinks it is all factually accurate. No "historical" work is completely accurate; no "fictional" work is completely imaginary. Sternberg asserts that one labels a literary work's genre based on what the author's intention is, not on its degree of accuracy. History is "a discourse that claims to be a record of fact." Fiction is "a discourse that claims freedom of invention."

... what makes fictional and breaks historical writing is not the presence of invented material—inevitable in both—but the privilege and at will the flaunting of free invention.³⁹

Thus, even if the account of David is shown to be a product of the author's imagination, that does not affect its genre; it may still be nonfiction. Indeed, in the case of the Bible, the authors by no means intended the narrative to be read as fiction:

Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results. The shape of time, the rationale of monotheism, the foundations of conduct, the national sense of identity, the very right to the land of Israel and the hope of deliverance to come: all hang in the generic balance. [... The Bible] claims not just the status of history but, as Erich Auerbach rightly maintains, of the history—the one and only truth that, like God himself, brooks no rival.⁴⁰

Suppose, Sternberg wonders, someone were to tell the biblical narrator that the Babylonians have a different story that is just as valid? The response is easy to guess:

Would the biblical narrator just shrug his shoulders, as any self-respecting novelist would do? [...] This way madness lies—and I mean interpretive, teleological, as well as theological madness.⁴¹

As for the omniscience of the biblical narrator, it is the claim of inspiration that explains this feature of the narrative:

³⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

³⁸ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987).

³⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁴¹ Ibid.

[T]he narrator's claim to omniscience dovetails rather than conflicts with his claim to historicity. It is no accident that the narrative books from Joshua to Kings fall under the rubric of Former Prophets. [...] But if as seekers for the truth, professional or amateur, we can take or leave the truth claim of inspiration, then as readers we simply must take it—just like any other biblical premise or convention, from the existence of God to the sense borne by specific words—or else invent our own text. And to take it means to read the Bible on its own historiographic terms, suspending all the 'how do you know?' questions one would automatically address to a historical narrative playing by documentary rules.⁴²

Of course, Sternberg agrees that there is made-up stuff in the Bible, but that does not mean it is fiction or that the writers were deceivers. The Bible comes from an ancient world where different conventions ruled.

But if it is convention that renders Jane Austen immune from all charges of fallacy and falsity, it is convention that likewise puts the Bible's art of narrative beyond their reach. [...] Herein lies one of the Bible's unique rules: under the aegis of ideology, convention transmutes even invention into the stuff of history, or rather obliterates the line dividing fact from fancy in communication. So every word is God's word. The product is neither fiction nor historicized fiction nor fictionalized history, but historiography pure and uncompromising.⁴³

Therefore, Alter's use of the word "fiction" is simply wrong, dead wrong.

... it is doubly surprising to find him in the camp of fiction. This line having once been adopted, however, it is not at all surprising that he comes to grief. The case has never been stated so well, and the parts abound in shrewd observation, but the whole suffers from the same fatal flaw as all the previous arguments for the Bible's fictionality.⁴⁴

Both Alter and Sternberg are brilliant scholars, and neither suffers from the common tendency to religious bias that colors much if not most biblical scholarship. But both have stumbled over the rock of modern generic assumptions, and their attempt to understand an ancient culture ends up in a quibble over the meaning of emotion-charged words. Both agree that much of the content of scriptural historiography is, pure and simple, made up, the product of the authors' imagination. Both agree that the authors' intent, however, was to link their message to historical reality. Neither asserts that readers were meant to think of the content of the narrative as just the imaginary world created by a novelist.

Essentially the scholars differ only in the language they use. Alter uses the terms "fiction" and "historiography" with the meanings that they have today. To put it in the terms I am using in this article, he is classifying "historiography" as a sub-genre of nonfiction. Sternberg uses the same terms but assigns to them the meanings that he imagines they would have had at the time the Bible was written. Of the two approaches, Sternberg's is certainly more artificial since people did not use terms like fiction or

⁴² Ibid., 33-34.

⁴³ Ibid., 1987, 34-35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24.

nonfiction in the ancient world. What he accomplishes by using them in this artificial manner is to assert what Alter never disputes: the biblical writers intended to write an absolutely authoritative narrative, unlike modern fiction which one can take or leave as one likes. Both agree that in writing this authoritative narrative that purports to present history, the authors felt under little constraint to “stick to the facts.”

History versus Myth in Scriptural Historiography

The Alter versus Sternberg impasse is resolved by recognizing that “scriptural historiography” is a genre of ancient literature that simply does not fit in the present-day generic system of “fiction” and “nonfiction.” Calling the genre of biblical narrative “historical narrative” or “historiography” creates similar problems. Here again, reviewing some of the debates among scholars can help clarify not only the terminology but the character of the Old Testament genre. K. L. Noll can serve as an example of one who refuses to apply the word “history” to biblical narrative because of what the word implies in modern culture, like Sternberg rejecting the word “fiction” for similar reasons. Noll correctly observes that the word “history” carries different connotations in ancient cultures than it does in our own:

In common modern parlance (whether we like it or not), a “history” is a factual account and balanced interpretation of real events, a definition that will apply to very few ancient narratives. (Not even every passage in Thucydides will pass muster.)⁴⁵

For some scholars, the Torah is the prime example of scriptural historiography par excellence,⁴⁶ but for Noll it is not historiography at all because it was not written in order to accurately represent the past:

The narrative [of Deuteronomy] is a deliberate lie cleverly rationalized (and sometimes even willfully believed), a strategy especially motivated by the need for a past that fits present formulations of identity. Occasionally, the narrative goes beyond this to a full-fledged myth, a religiously constructed moral universe that parallels and replaces the mundane physical universe.⁴⁷

For Noll, this contravenes the generic standards of what we today call historiography so drastically that we should not use the word to describe the biblical narrative: “To call a biblical narrative a history or historiography is to say nothing useful at all, because it implies nothing with respect to the text’s function in its ancient context.”⁴⁸ Biblical narrative should not even be called “malleable history” as Ehud Ben Zvi does with respect to the narrative about King David:

⁴⁵ Noll, “Evolution of Genre,” 32.

⁴⁶ Van Seters in Blum, *et al*, 2005 51.

⁴⁷ Noll, “Evolution of Genre,” 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

Rarely does one encounter a scholar who seems to be aware of the anomaly that is created by positing an ancient scribe who both freely invented details and believed that, by doing so, he was presenting an accurate narrative about the past. [...] Therefore, if the genre is history as Ben Zvi assumes and if these narratives are the product of malleability one reasonable hypothesis would be that the authors were liars who knowingly falsified their account of the past. [...] I can see no alternative, given Ben Zvi's categories, but to conclude that the authors of the Kings account were religious fanatics incapable of distinguishing between fact and fantasy. If that fantasy is intended by its author to be received as an accurate account of a real event, the author is either a liar or delusional.⁴⁹

The assumption here is that the label "historiography" necessarily assumes intent to present "an accurate narrative about the past."⁵⁰ But that attributes to the word a technical meaning it does not necessarily always have even in the modern world. In fact, the word "historiography" does apply well to biblical narrative if a more basic meaning is applied to it, as Becker does: "... historiography can be defined as a literary narrativization of at least partially historical material (traditions, motifs, etc.)."⁵¹

Baruch Halpern also wants to avoid applying the term "historiography" to biblical narrative, for a slightly different reason: he argues that if we use that term we would have to consider the biblical texts to be either "bad history" or "fraudulent history." He assumes no great difference in the meaning of the word as used today and as used by the ancients:

But it is a common property of histories throughout the ages that they claim to be true in detail, in specifics—they claim not to contain invented details or events, rather than reconstructed ones, except as metaphorical vehicles for the presentation of the uninvented details. [...] That is, a history lodges claims to trustworthiness—the contrast is to romance, which may sometimes lodge claims to trustworthiness at a moral level, but does so only during the reading at the level of specifics.⁵²

⁴⁹ Noll, "Evolution of Genre," 40-41. Noll too wants to avoid calling the scriptural author a liar, but he finds a different way out of this dilemma by arguing that the original intent was not to deceive, but over time the text was understood differently: "What began as self-consciously fictional narrative ended as a tale of origin or, to invoke the most common scholarly label, a *Heilsgeschichte*. This shift in genre was a shift in readers' response to the text, not something intended by the authors of that text, another representative example of the Darwinian process of generic evolution. . . . Since the tale was not circulated, there is no external evidence to indicate how readers received it. In fact, there is no evidence that readers received it. (The manuscript may have been preserved unread for several human generations at a time prior to the Hellenistic period.)" (ibid., 46-47) "... texts constructed for religious purposes often employ hyperbole without any indication that the text in question attempts to portray the real world. In short, the author of S-C/S-K did not believe his narrative really happened, nor did he expect his reader to believe it, but he probably believed his narrative was true." (ibid., 51) This is also the case with Psalm 2: "This is the realm of myth—it is true but not factual." (ibid., 50).

⁵⁰ Noll states this explicitly in his conclusion: "One text evolved through several species of literary genre. But at no point can this tale be described accurately as a work of history, for the story remembers a war in a radically inaccurate way, and always was intended to do so." (author's emphasis; ibid., 56).

⁵¹ Becker, "Gospel of Mark," 127.

⁵² Baruch Halpern, "Biblical versus Greek Historiography: A Comparison," in Erhard Blum et al., eds., *Das Alte Testament: Ein Geschichtsbuch?* (Munich: Lit., 2005), 101-128; here: 102.

Then and now, a history can fail to live up to the claim to be true in specifics and still be considered a history:

There are serviceable histories, average histories, and bad histories. There are even fraudulent histories, whose authors know at some level that they are twisting the evidence from the past [...] So, while accuracy is not a defining property of historiography, the reader's assumption that the author was attempting to be accurate is.⁵³

By these standards, if biblical narrative is classified as historiography it must be either bad or fraudulent because it doesn't even try to be historically accurate.⁵⁴ He avoids that conclusion in part by the expedient of assuming that wherever authors wrote imaginary content into apparently historical texts, they were not intending their texts to be received as history; they intended to write a different genre, such as poetry or "romance" (which for Halpern essentially means fiction). As examples of narratives that were written as romance and mistakenly read as history, he cites the book of Jonah and the Yahwist narrative:

Likewise, the J source seems to transpose into a vertical, or historical, dimension the relations among Israel sections (or tribes), or among a larger group of populations with which its author was familiar, at least at second hand. Thus, it expresses certain relationships among Aramean peoples in terms of a network of eponymic kinship relations. In this respect, it is poetic rather than prosaic, analogical rather than historical. Later, it was taken to be historical, even by the redactor responsible for the combined text. That it originated as historiography, however, seems improbable.⁵⁵

He offers no evidence to back up his assertion that it "seems improbable" the author intended the text to be received as historiography. One might reasonably suppose that things seem this way because for Halpern the only alternative is to accuse the scriptural author as perpetrating a fraud.

Another way Halpern exculpates the author of a narrative that would otherwise have to be considered fraudulent is to assume that the author was writing for an "insider" audience, and only "outsiders" were deceived:

[The priestly source] P certainly represents a revisionist historical reconstruction, whether the vehicle of its presentation is history or romance. And it presents itself as authoritative about details in the past. So it may in places be regarded as a piece

⁵³ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁴ It is a common thing, of course, not to want to label scripture as fraudulent, but it often ends up leading to theories that are strained at best. Adela Yarbro Collins, for example, accepts Mark's gospel as history but asserts that it's not fraudulent because Mark believed the miracle stories (*Is Mark's Gospel a Life of Jesus?*, 45). This approach to solving the problem assumes that only miracles are ahistorical and discounts the possibility of the kind of authorial freedom that we know pervades biblical narrative. Later I will point out other ways to deal with this conundrum.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105. The same reasoning is applied to P (before introducing the outsider/insider dichotomy that I discuss next: "Most of all, P is more a vehicle for delivering a corpus of law and doctrine than it is a work evincing serious antiquarian interest. So, assuming that the author himself invented some of the variants, the work is at best more historical romance than history, more a docudrama than a documentary.")

of bad or even fraudulent historiography, like Deuteronomy. More likely, however, its author will have argued to colleagues that the narrative was roughly, rather than specifically, accurate. The insider audience [...] will not have taken it to be historiographic.⁵⁶

The “insiders” in this conjectural scenario correspond to what in New Testament days one might refer to as the church leadership:

The insider audience hangs together in the Near East, and despite internal dissent presents a common face to the outsider audience. These are thus a canon elite, a group of people who mediate the interpretation of official texts to others, and who do so as a group. This is the basis on which Judaism, and Catholicism thereafter, became religions of tradition, rather than of individual reflection on the text.⁵⁷

For the culture and age in which scripture was written, when few were literate and most depended on hearing scriptural texts read to them in a community gathering, such a conjecture carries a good deal of verisimilitude.⁵⁸ However, it skirts the issue insofar as the author and his insider audience are already in agreement and there is no need to write for the insiders. Halpern’s own analogy to explain the insider versus outsider distinction makes this clear:

The whole exercise was not very different from the formulation of government or other political press releases today, and the outsider audience was not very different from uncritical journalists who parrot government releases in the press.⁵⁹

Government press releases are not written to influence the government insiders; if there were only insiders there would be no need for slanted press releases. Likewise, the scriptural author and his insider collaborators are writing for the “outsiders” in the sense of the entire religious community other than themselves. The purpose is to influence the behavior of the community, and thus it is really the “outsiders” within the community who are the intended audience. Therefore asserting that the “fraudulent” adjective does not apply because insiders knew what the author was doing is misleading and misrepresents what the authors were doing.

It is evident then, that there are some pitfalls to labeling the gospels’ genre as “historiography.” However, my proposal is to use the phrase “scriptural historiography” to clarify that we are talking about a very specific kind of historiography. The author’s goal is not to present an accurate record of the past, and the reader’s goal is not to learn an accurate record of the past. The author’s goal in scripture is influence the community. An audience that receives scripture as it was intended would be influenced by it, would internalize the author’s vision of the past without trying to find—or without being

⁵⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁸ See Gamble on literacy rates among early Christians. He notes that “. . . throughout the early centuries of the church only a small minority of Christians who were not clerics were literate.” (*Books and Readers*, 10) and observes that “. . . it is difficult to imagine any Christian community where either no one could read or no authority accrued to those who could.” (emphasis added; *ibid.*, 9)

⁵⁹ Halpern, “Biblical versus Greek Historiography,” 112.

influenced differently by—an alternative “accurate” vision of the past. The search for an “accurate” version of the past involves a completely different approach to the text than the conventions of the scriptural genre expect. Scriptural narratives are not written with intent to satisfy the reader’s curiosity. This is why Halpern’s concerns are misplaced and why Meir Sternberg can say that, “if it is convention that renders Jane Austen immune from all charges of fallacy and falsity, it is convention that likewise puts the Bible’s art of narrative beyond their reach.” The purpose of scriptural historiography is well described by John Van Seters’ remarks about the Deuteronomic historian:

The past was used in many different ways and by means of many distinct forms to exercise an authority over institutions, customs, rights, and behavior. An expansive portrayal of the past, however, could embody the explanation and the legitimation of all of these in one complex genre. The prestige of a dynasty, the primacy of a temple and its priesthood, the question of territorial rights and boundaries, civil and religious laws -- all could be integrated and supported by one ‘history,’ instead of using a variety of forms, such as king lists, temple legends, priestly genealogies, treaty ‘histories,’ and law codes. The genius of the Dtr history is that it attempted such a wide-ranging integration of forms in order to set forth within one work the whole foundation of Israelite society.⁶⁰

Scriptural historiography, then, is not quite like modern historiography, modern fiction, or modern non-fiction. Nor can it be equated with what moderns call “myth” although its purpose may be to do what myth is said to do: construct a moral universe. Unlike myth, the moral universe of scriptural historiography is anchored in historical reality: the word “myth” might apply to the book of Job, but is misleading if applied to the historical narratives of the Torah and the Former Prophets.

Within the historical sections of the Old Testament, the Court History of King David in 2 Samuel is often celebrated as one of the finest instances of historiography from the ancient world. But upon closer examination, Van Seters determined that it was almost entirely composed from scratch centuries after the fact in the Persian era.⁶¹ The author of that history was constrained by the name “David,” but that might be the only thing in the narrative that anchors it to historical reality in the modern sense of historical reality.⁶² Earlier biblical scholars who attributed historical reality to this narrative essentially found what they wanted to find:

What must be avoided at all cost in such discussion is the danger of anachronism; for instance, the notion that ancient scribes could engage in archival research and retrieve ancient documents for their historical accounts, or that copious records

⁶⁰ John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), 357.

⁶¹ John Van Seters, “Uses of the Past: The Story of David as a Test Case,” in Kirkpatrick and Goltz, *Function of Ancient Historiography*, 18-29, (29).

⁶² Another example is the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib, in which the author was apparently constrained only by the names of the two kings and the fact that there was a military campaign. See Ehud Ben Zvi, “Malleability and its Limits: Sennacherib’s Campaign against Judah as a Case Study,” in Lester L. Grabbe, ed., *“Like a Bird in a Cage”: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 73-105.

were meticulously kept by scribes for future use by historians. Such notions about annals and official records stored in palace and temple archives were introduced into biblical studies in the seventeenth century for apologetic purposes and have persisted ever since.⁶³

Van Seters concludes that the narrative “is a pseudo-history of David with a strong moral and political purpose, to discredit the institution of the monarchy and any messianic hope for the future.” This example illustrates the main points about scriptural historiography: the narrative is anchored to known historical facts, it is written to achieve a practical political or religious purpose, and in the furtherance of that purpose the author is free to invent whatever does not unreasonably transgress the bounds of plausibility.

Actually, the author of scriptural historiography is not just free to invent, he is compelled to invent whatever is necessary to achieve his purpose. He is not constrained by what can be established reliably or even by what he knows to be factually true. He is constrained by the necessity to get his message across to his readers without presenting to them something they would recognize as patently false. Thus, in scriptural historiography, the veneer of historicity in the modern sense of that word may be exceedingly thin, and historical facts may be—must be—misrepresented if that is what it takes to get the intended message across.⁶⁴

The Effect of Genre Assumptions on Studies of Mimesis in the Gospels

If the gospels were written and published with intent to function as scriptural historiography, we should not expect historical accuracy in details to have been particularly high on the evangelists’ list of literary goals. Yet that is precisely what most scholars who study the gospels do assume, and such assumptions have a profound effect on which interpretations of the gospels gain broad acceptance in biblical scholarship. For example, some relatively new approaches to intertextuality⁶⁵ in the gospels show great promise for clarifying the evangelists’ intentions but have faced an uphill battle for acceptance partly because of unrealistic generic expectations. Traditionally, research on relationships between texts focused on a limited number of ways in which an author used earlier texts in the composition of a new one. These ways were typically categorized into a

⁶³ Van Seters, “Uses of the Past,” 18.

⁶⁴ This can be seen in the gospels, for example, by observing how stories adopted from Mark by later evangelists are manipulated to suit the purposes of the new situation in which the later evangelists were writing.

⁶⁵ “Intertextuality” as a technical term has come to have many different meanings, most of which fit along a spectrum that has a focus on authorial intention at one end and reader reception at the other end. In other words, scholars are interested in the ways in which different texts are related to one another, either because authors have other texts in mind when composing a text, or because readers have other texts in mind when reading a text. There may be a big difference between these two ends of the spectrum, since any given text might call to a reader’s mind other texts that the author didn’t even know about. See Steve Moyise, “Intertextuality and Biblical Studies: A Review,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 23: 2: 418-31; Draisma, *Intertextuality*; and Richard Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy Andrew Huizenga, eds., *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP., 2009).

hierarchy consisting of quotations, allusions, and echoes. The first two terms mean for scholars what they do for everyone else: a quotation is a more or less word-for-word replication or paraphrase of part of an earlier text in a later text, while an allusion involves just enough similarity in wording or theme to show that the author of the later text meant to evoke part of an earlier text in the reader's mind. An "echo" is essentially a harder-to-identify form of allusion; the similarity between the earlier and the later text might be enough to imply that the author of the later text was familiar with the earlier one, but not enough to reliably indicate a conscious intention to evoke the earlier one.⁶⁶ More recently, the approach to intertextual relationships in the gospels has expanded dramatically in scope, with some scholars discovering that in the gospels, whole episodes and major features of their overall literary structure were inspired by Old Testament texts, the Pauline epistles, and even extra-biblical literature.

Among the pioneers in this relatively new approach to intertextuality in the gospels, sometimes called mimesis or narrative intertextuality, are Thomas Brodie, Dennis MacDonald, and Michael Goulder.⁶⁷ Brodie characterizes this kind of relationship by citing one of the most well-known intertextual relationships in the world of ancient literature:

... the kernel of ancient writing was not in allusions; it was in taking hold of entire books and transforming them systematically. Virgil did not just allude to Homer; he swallowed him whole.⁶⁸

Brodie observes that the case of the Aeneid mimicking the Odyssey was not an isolated example; the bulk of Roman literature was built upon Greek literature; within the Old Testament the books of Chronicles rework the material in Genesis through Kings; and within the New Testament each Gospel reworks the contents of earlier Gospels.⁶⁹ An author who was building upon or imitating earlier literature would not always do so in a way that would be easily recognizable today, that is, by borrowing words, phrases, or sentences. As MacDonald observes,

⁶⁶ "Intertextual echo" has been proposed as an umbrella term for all of these kinds of intertextual relationships. See Moyise, "Intertextuality," 419.

⁶⁷ See Thomas L. Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel: A Source-Oriented Approach* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); *The Crucial Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000); *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004); *Proto-Luke: The Oldest Gospel Account: A Christ-Centered Synthesis of Old Testament History Modelled Especially on the Elijah-Elisha Narrative: Introduction, Text, and Old Testament Model* (Limerick: Dominican Biblical Institute, 2006); Thomas L. Brodie, Dennis Ronald MacDonald, and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explorations of Theory and Practice* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press., 2006); MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*; Dennis R. MacDonald, ed., *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International., 2001); Dennis R MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer. Four Cases From the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2003); Dennis R MacDonald, "My Turn," <http://iac.cgu.edu/drm/My_Turn.pdf>; Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); *St. Paul vs. St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); *Five Stones and a Sling: Memoirs of a Biblical Scholar* (Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd., 2009).

⁶⁸ Brodie, *Birthing of the New Testament*, 74

⁶⁹ See the lists of precedents in Thomas L. Brodie, "Towards Tracing the Gospels' Literary Indebtedness to the Epistles," in MacDonald, *Mimesis*, 104-116 (here: 107) and Brodie, *Birthing*, 23ff.

Because imitative strategies in antiquity were protean, they resist tidy taxonomies and defy detection. Authors felt free to borrow whatever they wished from any models whatever and to transform what they borrowed as they saw fit.⁷⁰ In ancient narratives such imitations usually obtain to characterizations, motifs, and plot—seldom to wording.”⁷¹

In fact, it is easier to define mimesis by what it is not than by how it is done:

Simply stated, a mimesis critic assesses a text for literary influences that one might classify as imitations instead of citations, paraphrases, allusions, echoes, or redactions.⁷²

Identifying such imitations is often difficult and requires a different methodology from the focus on wording similarity typically employed for the traditional approach to intertextual relationships. To use the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* again as an example, one cannot read portions of them and find direct allusions in the latter to the former; by reading the whole of both of them one can recognize that the latter was inspired by the former, but proving that would be a difficult enterprise indeed. Nevertheless, several scholars have proposed objective criteria that might help in identifying instances of mimesis. Their approaches vary but boil down to an attempt to establish three things: availability, similarity, and intelligibility.⁷³

Establishing availability verifies that mimesis is plausible by showing the historical likelihood that the source text was available to the author who wrote the postulated imitation text. Plausibility is strengthened if it can be shown that other authors, ideally contemporaries of the one in question, also borrowed from the same source text. Establishing similarity is the crux of the matter of course, and no formula can guarantee success in this endeavor. The best that can be done here is to create a way to roughly gauge varying degrees of similarity. Thus, Dennis MacDonald cites the importance of determining the density and order of parallels between a text and its postulated source, with extra weight applying to distinctive traits. In other words, a large number of parallels (greater density) between two texts is more significant than one or two would be. A sequence of

⁷⁰ MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 172.

⁷¹ MacDonald, “My Turn,” 1. A few of the typical patterns include elaboration (taking an idea from the source text and expanding on it); compression or synthesis (taking a section of the source text and shortening or altering it); fusion or conflation (combining elements from multiple sections of the source text into a different context); substitution of images (using different images or metaphors to express the same idea expressed in the source text); positivization (repeating a theme that the source text treats negatively but giving it a positive spin, or vice versa); internalization (change what is expressed as an external reality into an internal feeling or attitude); and form change (take content from one literary form such as an epistle, and express the same ideas in a new form such as historiography). This list is from Brodie, *Birthing*, 10-12. See also the longer list and survey of other scholars’ lists in Brodie, *Intertextuality*, 288-292.

⁷² MacDonald, “My Turn,” 1.

⁷³ See Dennis R. MacDonald, “A Categorization of Antetextuality in the Gospels and Acts: A Case for Luke’s Imitation of Plato and Xenophon to depict Paul as a Christian Socrates,” in Brodie, *Intertextuality*, 211-25.

212; MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 172ff.; Stanley E. Porter, “Further Comments on the Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament,” in Brodie, *Intertextuality*, 98-110 (here: 103); Brodie, *Birthing*, 44-46; Brodie, *Intertextuality*, 292.

parallels that happens in the same order in both texts increases the probability that the source text was used. And if any given parallel with a source text involves textual characteristics that are so unique or distinctive as to rarely be found elsewhere, that can carry substantial weight by itself.

Establishing intelligibility is the final test: does it make sense that the author in question would borrow from the source text, and does his use of the source text make sense in the context of what we know he is trying to accomplish in his own text? As an example of how the methodology works, consider Dennis MacDonald's proposal to view the transfiguration episode in Mark as an imitation of a transfiguration episode in the *Odyssey*. Availability is readily established. The Homeric epics were not only widely known in the ancient world, they were universally used in ancient Greek education, and consequently they were also widely used as literary examples to be followed. Similarity is also readily established, as the parallels to Mark are dense:

The combination of motifs in *Odyssey* 16.172-303 and Mark 9:2-10 are too close to be accidental. In both a god transforms the hero into glory befitting a deity, including the transformation of clothing: a 'well-washed cloak' and 'clothes ... dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.' The transformation produces terror and the offering of gifts in order to appease the one who was transformed. The gifts offered in both accounts were refused, the recipients of both transfigurations were scolded for making mortals divine, and the heroes in both accounts insist on total secrecy.⁷⁴

As for intelligibility, MacDonald argues that the Homeric "transfiguration" scene plays a role in a secrecy-revelation theme in the *Odyssey* just as the Markan transfiguration scene plays a role in Mark's "Messianic secret" theme.

The nature of the evidence does not permit certainty even where the methodology can be applied very effectively, as it can be in this example. On the other hand, the practice of mimesis was so widespread that it should not be ruled out when the evidence is weak. The infinitely varied patterns of mimesis "resist tidy taxonomies and defy detection," and it is quite possible that that mimesis did happen even where it is difficult or impossible to apply the established criteria.

Mimesis in Mark and the Other Gospels

In the case of the gospels, there is no lack of evidence fitting the criteria. Brodie finds ample evidence that the main narrative model for Mark is the cycle of Elijah-Elisha stories in 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 13. Among the evidence he cites: parallels at the beginning, middle, and end of the two narratives; similar overall length; similar narrative character of short episodes at the start spiraling into longer ones later in the narrative; similar abrupt and enigmatic endings; and similar motifs, such as juxtaposition of north and south geographical references with symbolic meanings. He also finds parallel episodes, such as

⁷⁴ Dennis R MacDonald, "Secrecy and Recognitions in the *Odyssey* and Mark: Where Wrede Went Wrong," in Ronald F. Hock, et al., eds., *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press., 1998), 139-153; here: 152.

the healing of a leper which recalls the healing of the leper Naaman in 2 Kings 5 and the multiplication of loaves which recalls 2 Kgs 4:42-44.⁷⁵ At first glance, this picture is complicated by Dennis MacDonald's thesis that much if not most the Gospel of Mark is an artfully crafted reformulation of characters and themes from the Homeric epics:

Mark seems to have borrowed from Homer the motifs of disguise, testing, signs, recognitions, disclosure, and silence, and, as in the Odyssey, the use of these motifs permits situational irony in which the reader, knowing the identity of the stranger, enjoys the narrative at a level inaccessible to the characters themselves.⁷⁶

MacDonald's evidence fits the criteria for mimesis remarkably well. The Homeric epics were widely available and widely copied, the density of the parallels is often striking, and Mark's purposes in reworking Homeric material are intelligible.

It is not necessary to choose between Elijah-Elisha and Homeric epic as sources for Mark; in some cases, the evangelist may have drawn on both. From the fact that the multiplication of loaves episodes resemble both 2 Kings 4 and the feast of Nestor for 4,500 men at the shore of Pylos, MacDonald concludes that, "Like many ancient narratives, the earliest gospel was eclectic in its dependence on literary models; Mark was an equal-opportunity imitator. Nonetheless, the bulk of the narrative issues from emulation of Greek epic."⁷⁷

As an "equal-opportunity imitator," Mark also had available to him another, newer, body of scripture to draw upon as his source: Paul's epistles. Here too, the evidence fits the established criteria of availability, similarity, and intelligibility.⁷⁸ Consider the density of parallels between Mark and Galatians, which I cite in this extract from a forthcoming article about Mark and the Pauline epistles:

In Mark 3:22, scribes who "came down from Jerusalem" accuse Jesus of demon possession. These "scribes who had come from Jerusalem" appear again in 7:1. They criticize Jesus' disciples for eating without washing their hands, and this leads up to Jesus' proclamation that what one eats does not matter, it's how one speaks and behaves that matters. The parallels to Galatians 2:11-14 are striking. In Mark, the scribes come "from Jerusalem"; in Galatians, the men who cause the strife come "from James," who is based in Jerusalem. In Mark, Jesus' opponents attack him for engaging in table fellowship with men who are ritually unclean; in Galatians, Paul's opponents convince Jews to stop table fellowship with Gentiles,

⁷⁵ See Brodie, *Crucial Bridge*, 88ff.; Brodie, *Birthing*, 150ff. Others have noticed individual plot elements that may have come from the Elijah-Elisha cycle, such as the "withered hand" which appears in 1 Kings 13:4 and Mark 3:1-5; see K. Hanhart, "Son, Your Sins are Forgiven," in Frans Van Segbroeck, et al., eds., *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neiryck* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 997-1016, (1003).

⁷⁶ The most complete exposition of this theory is in MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*. This summary statement is from MacDonald, "Secrecy," 153.

⁷⁷ MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 177-178, 189.

⁷⁸ On the availability of the epistles, see Thomas L. Brodie, "Towards Tracing the Gospels' Literary Indebtedness to the Epistles," in MacDonald, *Mimesis*, 104-116 (108-109, 116); Brodie, *Birthing*, 21, 75; Brodie, *Intertextuality*, 87-88. On similarity and intelligibility, see Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The New Testament Introduction: Paul and Mark* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1999), and Tom Dykstra, "From Volkmar to Tarazi and Beyond: Mark as an Allegorical Presentation of the Pauline Gospel" in a forthcoming festschrift for Paul Tarazi.

who are considered ritually unclean. In Mark, Jesus calls the scribes “hypocrites” (ὑποκριτῶν, the only use of that word in Mark); in Galatians, Paul accuses Peter and the Jews who quit eating with Gentiles of acting hypocritically (συνυπεκρίθησαν . . . ὑποκρίσει). In Mark, “the commandment of God” or “the word of God” is counterposed to something variously called “the tradition of the elders,” “the precepts of men,” “the traditions of men,” and “your tradition”; in Galatians, the gospel that is “not man’s gospel” is counterposed to “the traditions of my fathers” that Paul was zealous for before he began preaching the gospel. In Mark, Jesus criticizes the scribes for “nullifying” (ἀθετεῖτε) and “annulling” (ἀκυροῦντες) God’s commandment; in Galatians, Paul warns that the Law cannot nullify (ἀθετεῖ, 3:15) or “annul” (ἀκυροῖ, 3:17) God’s promises to Abraham. In Mark, the story leads to the conclusion that what matters is how one speaks and acts, and ends with a catalog of evils; in Galatians the epistle leads to the conclusion that the Law boils down to “love for the neighbor,” followed by a catalog of evils.⁷⁹

All of the evidence that points to Mark’s use of other texts to provide ideas for the creation of details in his own text makes sense when one sees Mark as an instance of scriptural historiography. Mark’s approach to crafting an ostensibly historical story is similar to the approach taken by the author of the Court History of King David. In other words, judging from Mark’s use of several sources including the Elijah-Elisha cycle, Homer, and Paul’s epistles, Mark may have been in a similar situation where he had little actual historical data to go on for creating a historical narrative. He may have had little more actual historical information than the names of some of the primary characters in the story. He used scriptural sources to come up with motifs and a framework for the story that would accomplish his literary purpose. In doing so, he borrowed from what we now call Old Testament scripture, from what we now call New Testament scripture (the epistles), and from what we might call secular Gentile scripture. Homeric epic was used in Mark’s day as a kind of secular scripture, forming the educational framework of his day. Borrowing motifs from Homeric epic was a way to make what Mark was writing more relevant as scripture to his Gentile audience who grew up with Homeric epic as the normative standard of Greek literature. In other words, all three examples of mimesis in Mark substantiate the conclusion that Mark’s genre is best labeled “scriptural historiography” and follows the standards and conventions of that genre as found in the Old Testament.

As for Luke-Acts, Brodie notes that this two-volume work can be seen as an imitation of the entire Old Testament but finds that it too is more particularly based upon the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. In Luke-Acts this extends to the literary structure: two balancing parts centered on the assumption into heaven of the central character of the first part, a structure unique in all of ancient literature.⁸⁰ Brodie also cites a number of specific parallels in Luke-Acts to literary techniques and episodes in the Elijah-Elisha stories, and concludes that “Luke’s use of the Elijah-Elisha text is systematic, complete.”⁸¹ He goes on to say that the evangelist also used the entire book of Judges, and “As with the Elijah-Elisha narrative, Luke’s transformation of Judges is systematic, complete, essentially non-

⁷⁹ Dykstra, “From Volkmar to Tarazi,” n.p.

⁸⁰ Brodie, *Crucial Bridge*, 83; see also Brodie, *Birthing*, 83-86.

⁸¹ Brodie, *Birthing*, 86.

repetitive, and maintaining aspects of the original order.”⁸² Somewhat less extensive use of other sources, such as the books of Chronicles, is also detailed.⁸³

One of the best commentaries on Luke to have been written in modern scholarship is the two-volume *Luke: A New Paradigm* by Michael Goulder. One of Goulder’s primary goals in the book was to substantiate the theory that Luke employed extensive authorial creativity in his crafting of the story about Jesus. Goulder concludes, for example, that Luke made up virtually all of the narrative in Lk 1:5-2:40, inspired by stories he found in the Torah and the Prior Prophets.⁸⁴ Some seven years after the book was created, Mark Goodacre published his own critical examination of Goulder’s arguments,⁸⁵ finding some of them convincing and some less so. What is interesting about this scholarly debate is the starting point that both begin from: the assumption is that Luke is “innocent unless proven guilty” of inventing stories for his narrative. However, if one takes seriously the conclusions reached in this article about Luke’s genre as scriptural historiography, the assumption should be the opposite: Luke is “innocent unless proven guilty” of believing that his primary duty was to present historically reliable information or stick to facts presented in reliable sources. In other words, the burden of proof should fall on those who would argue against extensive authorial creativity. If one were to approach the subject from this standpoint, that is, from a realistic assessment of literary standards of the generic models for Luke, much of Goulder’s evidence might have been evaluated more positively.

Goulder’s arguments for Lukan creativity are largely based on distinctive features of the author’s style, and he draws similar conclusions from distinctive features in the other gospels as well. In his memoir *Five Stones and a Sling*, Goulder recalls coming to the realization that each of the synoptic gospels had its own character of parables:

Mark’s parables were mostly agricultural: the Sower, the Seed Growing Secretly, and Mustard Seed. This was rather in line with Old Testament parables, which are said often to be about trees, “from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.” Matthew’s parables are about people, mostly kings or wealthy merchants. Luke’s parables, on the other hand, are about more down-to-earth characters: a prodigal son, an unjust steward, a widow, a beggar, a Samaritan. [...] I therefore had a theme ready made for my Oxford seminar: the parables in the Gospels were not the parables of Jesus, as was assumed by almost everyone [...] rather they were the creation of the evangelists, each of whom has produced instances in his own style. So I went well armed to Oxford, and as I hoped the paper was a great success. [...] I had noticed a whole row of things, which other scholars had missed, because they had assumed that the parables were Jesus’ own handiwork, and had not thought of attributing them to secondary figures.⁸⁶

⁸² Ibid., 86.

⁸³ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁴ See Goulder, *Luke*, 289.

⁸⁵ Mark S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁸⁶ Goulder, *Five Stones*, 58-59.

Goulder continued to follow up on this discovery and noticed that these unique characteristics were not limited to parables:

For instance, the Gospels contain a number of double animal images: “Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves”; “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel”; “Give not that which is holy to the dogs and cast not your pearls before swine.” There are ten of these double animal images in the Gospels, and all of them are in Matthew; this seems cogent evidence that they were created, not by Jesus, but by Matthew himself.⁸⁷

This sort of authorial freedom is precisely what one would expect of the scriptural historiography genre, and it is surprising and difficult to accept only when one imposes on the text presuppositions borrowed from the modern genres of nonfiction, history, or biography. The evidence of intertextual relationships in Matthew lead in the same direction as what we find in Mark and Luke. Aside from Mark as a source, Brodie finds that the epistle to the Romans was the source for much of the material in Matthew 1–17, and sections of Deuteronomy are behind much of the material in Matthew 17:22-28.⁸⁸

As for the fourth gospel, in *The Quest for the Origin of John’s Gospel: A Source-Oriented Approach*, Brodie proposed that John’s sources were the synoptic gospels and Ephesians.⁸⁹ Here too, part of the reason why this view has not won over the majority of biblical scholars has to do with assumptions about genre – particularly the assumption that an evangelist would feel constrained to keep as close to his sources as possible. A more realistic understanding of scriptural historiography would lead to a realization that John would not have felt bound to slavishly copy any sources he had at hand but could freely manipulate them to suit his purposes. In that case, John can readily be seen as having been inspired by and modeled loosely after the synoptics. Goulder observes of Matthew and John that “Their methods are in each case the same: to follow the thread from the Torah where it leads, weaving in threads from the prophets and writings as they suggest themselves, and filling in the remaining gaps from their imagination.”⁹⁰

Conclusion

⁸⁷ Ibid., 62. For an extended analysis of Goulder’s arguments for the evangelists’ creativity especially in the case of Luke, see Goulder, *Luke*; and for an analysis of those arguments, see Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels*. In general, Goodacre expresses some agreement with Goulder: “Goulder has successfully isolated several Lukan features, the pervasiveness of which suggests that in L material Luke is particularly creative. This is Lukan creativity on the kind of scale, which would necessitate the abandonment of any theory on which the evangelist draws conservatively on a written L text. Goulder has not, however, given adequate attention to the possibility that Luke has creatively written up stories which he received from oral traditions; much of the data he presents makes best sense on such a view.” (Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels*, 291)

⁸⁸ Brodie, *Birthing*, 204-253. More specifically, he believes that John used Matthew, Mark, and Proto-Luke (see pp. 254-257).

⁸⁹ In *Birthing* (254ff.), he suggests the Lukan source was his proposed Proto-Luke rather than the canonical Luke-Acts.

⁹⁰ Cited in Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels*, 19.

When computer systems encrypt communications, they do so with a key. If one uses the same key to decrypt a message that was used to encrypt it, he or she will recover the original message. One can decrypt the message using a different key, but the result is gibberish. Genres are to literary texts what keys are to encrypted messages, except that instead of gibberish one simply gets a very different message when one imposes upon a text generic assumptions foreign to the ones shared by its original author and audience. By imposing upon the Gospel texts modern assumptions about the genres of nonfiction, history, or biography, many modern biblical scholars have created interpretive frameworks that simply don't fit literature that was originally written, presented, and received as scriptural historiography.

An example of the consequences of generic misidentification is the creation of oral tradition theory and form criticism methodology. Oral tradition theory depends on the assumption that the evangelists assembled their narratives out of data that came to them from isolated stories that had been memorized and often publicly recited within a community. Just as seventeenth-century biblical scholars anachronistically imagined the Davidic Court History to have come from royal archives, this approach anachronistically views the evangelists as akin to modern biographers, whose primary goal is to find and report reliable historical sources. Seeing the evangelists as scripture-writing authors following in the established tradition of earlier scripture-writing authors ascribes to them different literary goals and eliminates the need to postulate sources for which there is no evidence, such as oral tradition. That in turn undermines form criticism, which is in essence a methodology for identifying the originally independent units of oral tradition embedded in the gospel texts. To the extent oral tradition theory is undermined, its associated methodology is also undermined.⁹¹

If what the evangelists were actually doing was writing "scriptural historiography," following the example of the writers of the Old Testament scripture before them, they will have had relatively little need for, or interest in "biographical reminiscences."⁹² In that case, their primary aim was to influence a religious community by telling a story. The story had to tie in to the community's perception of its own history; but once the tie was established, the structure and details of the story depended more on its rhetorical purpose than on a perceived need for what we today would call historical accuracy. They were authors writing stories, and as long as they had a core of data recognizable as relevant to their audience they were free to craft the story in whatever manner would best meet their purpose.

Recognizing the evangelists' intent is important not only for scholars. Those who revere these texts as scripture are even more profoundly influenced by interpretations applied to them, interpretations that are apt to be incorrect if incorrect literary assumptions are

⁹¹ See my article, "New, Unfounded, Unworkable, and Unnecessary': Thomas Brodie's Critique of Oral Tradition" in *JOCABS* 3(2010):1. <<http://www.ocabs.org/journal/index.php/jocabs/article/view/57/28>>. Some of the detailed arguments constructed by those who support the two-source theory are also based on a questionable assumption about authorial method, for they assume that an evangelist composing a new gospel text from written sources would try to stay as faithful to his sources as possible.

⁹² Contra Burridge; see fn 7.

applied to the text.⁹³ Therefore, let us cease calling the gospels biography, history, nonfiction, or myth, but rather call them “scriptural historiography,” which has a venerable tradition.⁹⁴

⁹³ By “incorrect” I mean that such interpretations will not accurately reflect the message that the evangelist intended to convey; the intended meaning is what I take to be the appropriate focus for the reader who wishes to read and understand these texts as scripture. In other contexts, or for readers who view the gospels strictly as literature, the question of authorial intent and what is “correct” or “incorrect” may be seen as inapplicable or irrelevant.

⁹⁴ This sentence is of course itself an instance of mimesis based on Joyce Appleby’s exhortation about Edmund Morris’s *Dutch*; see fn 1.