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What Are We Reading and Why Does It Matter?

I sort the last couple of days' mail. Seven items. I recognize two items as marketing cards. No envelope. Bright colors. Beaming faces. A firm wants to fix the A/C, but it's not broken so I drop it into the recycling. A local church is advertising talks on Revelation that will explain how Revelation predicts and interprets today's news stories. I read a few of the details—obviously the speaker has not read my book on Revelation.[1] Also into the recycling. Then there's an envelope addressed with neat, small handwriting. I recognize the name and address on the envelope. I guess it's a birthday card. The fourth item is a long envelope with a window. I recognize the name and address of the sender in the top left corner. Printed, not attached stamp. It's a bill from my doctor's office. I don't get many bills these days, with online payment. Next is the weekly copy of *Time* magazine. Interesting cover. Then another long envelope with a window. The envelope declares, "Important: Do not discard." From the company logo in the top left corner, I guess it's a credit card offer. I discard it into the recycling.

1. Warren Carter, *What Does Revelation Reveal? Unlocking the Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011).

Finally another long envelope. The top left corner identifies the sender as a local car dealer. No window. The address is in fake personal handwriting. The name is not mine but that of a previous owner of our house. Two owners ago. Into the recycling.

I haven't opened an envelope yet. I've made these decisions, these classifications, simply by observing features of the envelopes: their size, style of print, graphics, and content.

We're scrolling through Netflix looking for a movie. What are we in the mood for?

A comedy would be light and amusing. Not demanding too much from us as viewers, but not so silly or pathetic that we lose interest. Good for a Friday night. Amusing situations in touch with daily life. Some distortions and/or surprising turns of events. Clever, witty, insightful dialogue. Engaging and interesting characters. Misunderstandings and obstacles, conflicts and competition. Maybe a love story with heartwarming outcome. Satisfying resolutions. Lighthearted, upbeat ending that ties all the pieces together.

Or we could go for the stimulation of a political thriller. We'd expect power plays and conflicts. Issues of national importance. The nation's security under threat from sophisticated, technologically smart villains who challenge fundamental values. Ambiguity about good and evil. Secrets to protect. Corruption in high places. Public order or morale to maintain. Things and people not as they seem. Conflict among the power players as to how to respond. A hero—often broken or controversial or unlikely. Perhaps a love interest. Satisfactory resolution. The good guys win; evil is under control; security prevails.

We expect each type of movie to have different features. Sometimes movies combine genres, complexifying expectations and features (comedy *and* romance). Each type of movie requires different participation from us as viewers and has a different impact on us.

Genre matters. Recognizing genres is something we do every day. Whether printed material, social media, oral media, or visual material, we have to determine what we are engaging and what sort of engagement and/or action or participation is expected or required

from us. Some genres we enthusiastically embrace, others we might happily avoid (reminder emails about dentist appointments!). Sometimes we identify genres correctly; sometimes we're not sure what to expect or get it wrong. Posting inappropriate comments on social media, as numerous sports and entertainment people have done, is often a matter of not taking the public nature of this genre seriously. What someone thinks in their head or even speaks to a trusted friend is not always appropriate for public consumption. Paying for an unsatisfying movie, not recognizing an envelope that must be opened and requires follow-up action (paying a bill), choosing a book by its cover but finding it unsatisfactory, not noticing a text or email that expresses important information or makes a request of us, signing a contract without reading it—they are all decisions that involve miscues about genre.

We can think of genre, then, as employing a number of predictable and recognizable features that are crucial for communication between ourselves and a text or movie. Recognizing a genre creates a set of expectations for us as readers and/or viewers. Genre sets up a contract that guides our appropriate engagement.

1.1 More Than Four

Throughout this chapter, I refer only to the four Gospels in the New Testament canon. By one count, some thirty-four gospels were produced in early Christianity:

Four canonical Gospels: Gospel of Mark; Gospel of Matthew; Gospel of Luke; Gospel of John
Four complete noncanonical Gospels: Infancy Gospel of James; Secret Book of James; Gospel of Thomas; Infancy Gospel of Thomas
Eight fragmentary noncanonical Gospels: Egerton Gospel; Gospel of Mary; Gospel Oxyrhynchus 840; Gospel Oxyrhynchus 1224; Gospel of Peter; Dialogue of the Savior; Gospel of the Savior; Gospel of Judas
Four Gospels known only from early quotations: Secret Gospel of Mark; Gospel of the Ebionites; Gospel of the Hebrews; Gospel of the Nazoreans
Two hypothetical Gospels: Q; Signs Gospel
Twelve known by name alone: Gospel of the Four Heavenly Regions; Gospel of Perfection; Gospel of Eve; Gospel of the Twelve; Gospel of Matthias; Gospel of Bartholomew; Gospel of Cerinthus; Gospel of Basilides; Gospel of Marcion; Gospel of Apelles, Gospel of Bartimaeus; Matthew's logia collection[2]

What, then, is the genre or genres of the four Gospels in the New Testament? What are we reading? How do we read? What do we expect from a Gospel? And in reading them, what might they require of us?

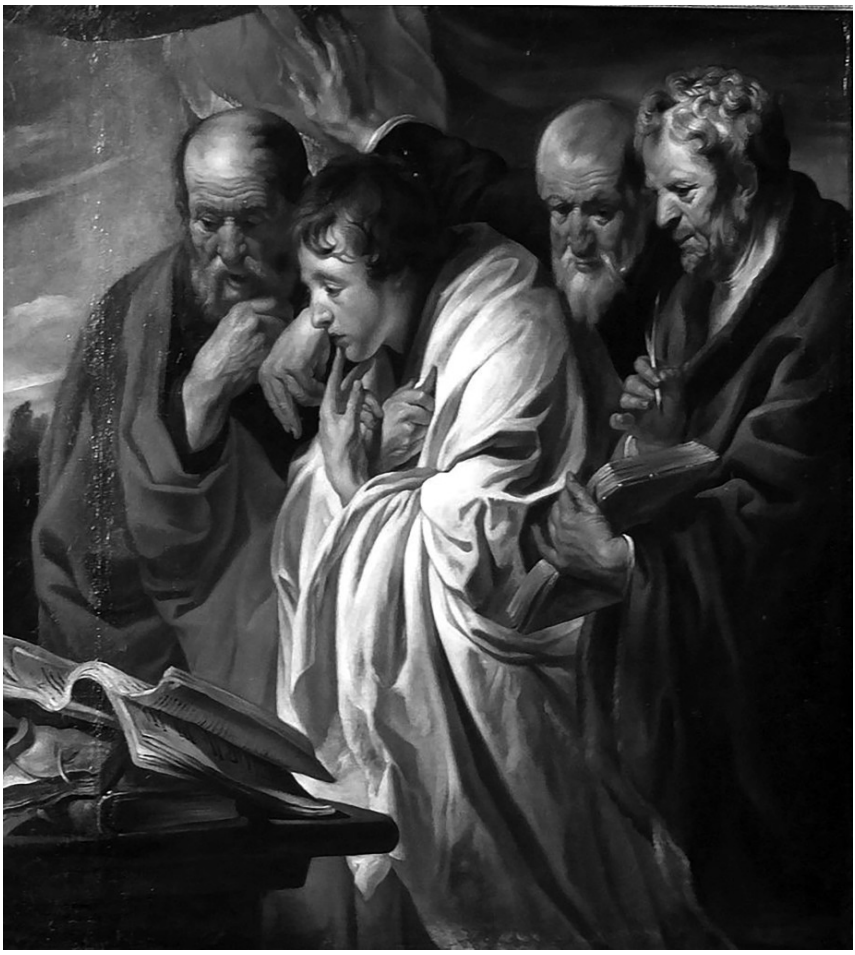
Some might think such questions are inappropriate. After all, the Gospels are Scripture; they are holy writings. Some have argued that gospels are a unique genre, that they are one of a kind (*sui generis*, "of its own kind," is the Latin term). But if we think about it, claims of the uniqueness of a genre make no sense. As we have seen, genre is about communication by means of recognizable features that create expectations for readers or hearers or viewers. A unique genre, even if it existed, would be incomprehensible. A writer or artist might create a strange or unusual genre using features from an unusual mix of media in an exciting and creative way. I have, for example, read some mystery novels that feature a crime-solving chef—the novels include recipes! But in order to communicate, such a work must rely on readers or viewers recognizing some of the features and using them as points of engagement with the work. Without some familiar and recognizable features, whatever the mix, there is no communication. The unusual genre is going to look like something else in some form.

So in reading the Gospels, what are we reading?

An Eyewitness Historical Account of Jesus' Life?

In popular imaginations and piety, the Gospels are often understood as eyewitness, historical accounts of Jesus' activities and teachings written by four of his male followers. The scenario posits that these men accompanied Jesus, recorded what they saw, and passed it along in writing. This has been a common, though not universally accepted, view throughout the church's history. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, to this day preachers often reinforce this scenario when they talk about Gospel scenes.

2. I follow Charles Hedrick, "The Thirty-Four Gospels: Diversity and Division among the Earliest Christians," *Bible Review* 18 (June 2002): 20–31, 46–47, with one exception, the Gospel of Judas.



1.1 The Four Gospel Writers, from the studio of Jacob Jordaens. It has been customary to imagine the four Gospel writers as eyewitnesses who even cooperated in composing their different narratives, but this is hardly likely. Sint Janeskirk, Mechelen, Belgium; Commons.wikimedia.org.

But just a little investigation shows this view not to be convincing. I mention five factors.

1. First, two of the names associated with the Gospels were not "disciples" of Jesus. Neither the name "Mark" nor the name "Luke" appears in any of the lists of Jesus' twelve chosen male

disciples (see Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; John's Gospel does not have a list).

2. Second, if being an eyewitness is a key qualification for writing a Gospel, then both Matthew's Gospel and John's Gospel fail the test. A disciple, Matthew, is named in the three lists of disciples just mentioned, but outside those lists he is referred to in only one other place, namely Matt. 9:9. In Matt. 9:9 Jesus calls a tax collector called Matthew to follow him, but Matthew then disappears from the story. He is not mentioned again except in the list of Matt. 10:2–4. The Gospels of Mark and Luke include a call scene involving a tax collector, but the tax collector has a different name. He is called Levi, not Matthew (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). How did he get the name Matthew in Matthew's Gospel when two Gospels call him Levi? That seems like a suspicious piece of editing! If being an eyewitness is the basis for the historical credibility of the Gospels, why does Matthew not have a pervasive presence throughout the Gospels? And why is there no claim in the Gospel somewhere that this Matthew is writing the Gospel?

   The Gospel of John raises the same issue. This Gospel, strangely, does not include a disciple named John. The Gospel refers nineteen times to John the Baptist and four times to Peter's father by that name ("son of John": John 1:42; 21:15-17), but there is no disciple called John. At 21:2 it mentions "the sons of Zebedee" but does not name them. At 13:23, it mentions a disciple "whom Jesus loved" but does not name him either. Later, this disciple was identified by some as John. If we are to understand the author "John" as an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, why is he not present in the Gospel and not presented as a constant companion of Jesus?
3. This last question raises a third problem. Among the disciples who are identified as Jesus' associates, several seem to form an inner circle as special companions of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, for example, Peter, James, and John are exclusively associated with several narratives like the transfiguration and Gethsemane (Mark 1:16-20; 9:2; 10:35; 13:3; 14:33). But none of the four Gospels claims

authorship by either Peter or James, and, as we have seen, John does not appear in John! It is surprising that these links are not made if eyewitness authority was paramount for authorship.

4. There is a fourth problem. As I will show later, the Gospels are probably written in a time period between the years 70 CE and 100 CE or so. Jesus is crucified around the year 30 CE. The prospect of an eyewitness account of Jesus' activity appearing some forty to seventy years after Jesus' ministry is not high, though not impossible. The issue is life span. For example, at a minimum, a reliable eyewitness would need to have been, perhaps, twenty years old during Jesus' ministry. That would make him between sixty and ninety when the Gospels were written. But average life spans in the first-century Roman world, affected by unhealthy living conditions and poor nutrition for much of the population, don't support such odds. Bruce Frier points to the table of the third-century-CE Roman jurist Ulpian, to census returns from Egypt, and to gravestone studies that suggest the average life expectancy at birth was twenty-one to twenty-two years, and at age ten, about thirty-five further years.[3] Ann Hanson suggests that "about half the babies born died before reaching their fifth birthday." Of those who reached age ten, nearly half reached age fifty and about a third reached sixty. In overall terms, "less than 20 percent" reached sixty.[4] So while it is not impossible, it is unlikely that adult eyewitnesses of Jesus' activity would have still been alive to write Gospels in the period of the 70s–100 CE. But there is a further question: why would eyewitnesses, if they existed, wait that long to write?
5. Fifth, none of the New Testament Gospels identifies its author. This might seem like a strange statement when we know them as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Yet it is true. The earliest evidence we have for these names being associated with the Gospels comes from around 180 CE, some hundred years

3. Bruce Frier, "Roman Demography," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 85–109, esp. 87–88.
4. Ann E. Hanson, "The Roman Family," in Potter and Mattingly, *Life, Death*, 19–66, esp. 27.

after the Gospels were written. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, provides the earliest evidence for these links. Irenaeus wrote a work called *Against Heresies* in a time of ecclesial controversy and diversity. Irenaeus sought to defend and define an expression of Christianity that was distinct from groups whose practices and thinking he considered outside acceptable limits. Part of his attack is to discredit their writings and interpretations of Scriptures. He upholds the reliability and authority of the four canonical Gospels by seeking to guarantee their origin with the apostles.

1.2 Irenaeus's Claims regarding the Gospels (ca. 180 CE)

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also did hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. (Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3.1.1)

There is much to debate in this passage from Irenaeus. But it is sufficient to note that this text, written around 180 CE, is the earliest identification we have linking the four Gospels with these four authors. We can also note how vague are the connections Irenaeus makes to establish apostolic origins for the Gospels. Matthew's link with Peter and Paul consists of nothing other than Matthew writes "while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome." Irenaeus does not say Matthew was in Rome, or that he heard Peter and Paul's preaching, or, if he did, that he represented it in the Gospel! Irenaeus says that Mark writes what Peter had preached, but he does so after Peter has departed from Rome and he writes as an interpreter of Peter. What sort of interpreter? How much liberty did he take? Luke writes, according to Irenaeus, the Gospel preached not by Jesus but by Paul! For these three Gospels, it seems that Irenaeus is more interested in suggesting (not establishing) links with Peter and Paul, not Jesus.

With John, however, Irenaeus creates several links with Jesus. First,

Irenaeus identifies John as "the disciple" of the Lord, even though, as we have seen, John's Gospel does not include any references to a disciple John! And second, Irenaeus identifies John as "the one who "leaned upon [Jesus'] breast," a reference to the "disciple whom Jesus loved." This disciple, though, is not named in the Gospel—it is Irenaeus, a century later, who identifies him with John. Irenaeus also links the Gospel to Ephesus.

Irenaeus's material, then, indicates the first link between the Gospels and the four figures we know as their authors. Yet it is very clear that his information is not historically reliable. It originates some hundred or so years after the Gospels were written. His claims are vague in their attempt to link authors and apostles. It seems he is more interested in suggesting apostolic links to Peter and Paul than in establishing reliable historical information and connections to Jesus. His purpose is not to establish accurate eyewitness accounts but to assert Gospels that bear apostolic authority.

Over a century later, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (d. 340 CE), makes some similar claims in an account that is vulnerable to numerous objections. Eusebius quotes a figure called Papias who was bishop of Hierapolis around 125–150, several decades before Irenaeus, and, more importantly, several centuries before Eusebius himself. Papias's testimony constitutes what he passes on from an earlier figure, an "elder" or "presbyter," called John, but whose identity is not clear. So the first problem is that Eusebius's material is thirdhand—he is quoting Papias who is quoting the elder. And the second problem is the time gap of some two hundred years! Further, we have no independent source for either Papias or the elder, so we cannot compare the accuracy of what Eusebius transmits thirdhand and secondhand. Fourth, nor is it always clear in Eusebius's account what comes from Papias and what comes from the elder. The passage has been much debated, and most scholars think it cannot be relied on for accurate testimony. According to Eusebius's account (*Hist. eccl.* 2.15.1–2; 3.39.15), Mark is Peter's "interpreter" and writes "accurately what he remembered" what he heard from Peter but "not in order." This is an

ambiguous statement that pulls in two directions—toward defending Mark's accuracy while also allowing for inexactitudes from his interpretation and memory, and concerning the order of material in Mark's Gospel. Its meaning has also been much debated. We should also note that Eusebius himself seems to discredit Papias, referring to him elsewhere as "not very intelligent." And Eusebius's own accuracy is not beyond scrutiny. He says, for example, that Matthew wrote in Hebrew, something that seems most unlikely (see the discussion in chapter 5). Eusebius's statements, then, do not support the claim that the Gospel was an eyewitness account of Jesus' ministry.

1.3 Eusebius's Testimony regarding the Gospels (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.15.1; 3.39.15)

And so greatly did the splendor of piety illumine the minds of Peter's hearers that they were not satisfied with hearing once only, and were not content with the unwritten teaching of the divine Gospel, but with all sorts of entreaties they besought Mark, a follower of Peter, and the one whose Gospel is extant, that he would leave them a written monument of the doctrine which had been orally communicated to them. Nor did they cease until they had prevailed with the man, and had thus become the occasion of the written Gospel which bears the name of Mark.

This also the presbyter (Papias) said: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely." These things are related by Papias concerning Mark.

In terms of genre, then, we cannot approach the Gospels expecting them to give us eyewitness historical accounts of the activity of Jesus. Two Gospels are not linked with disciples of Jesus (Mark, Luke), two make nothing of any eyewitness claims (Matthew, John), and none employs disciples from the inner circle (Peter, James). The dating of the Gospels largely rules out the likelihood of eyewitnesses still being alive, and the first evidence for linking the four names with the Gospels comes from Irenaeus, some one hundred or so years after the Gospel's

writing. Irenaeus's concern seems to be more with establishing apostolic authority than with historical accuracy.

Gospels as Ancient Biographies

Another option exists for identifying the genre of the Gospels, that of ancient biographies.[5] I begin by noting some important features of the Gospels, then I identify features of ancient biographies and discuss the Gospels as belonging to this genre—though with a twist or two.

What do the four canonical Gospels have in common? Here are some features:

- They are prose narratives (not poems or theoretical discourses).
- Their focus is almost exclusively on Jesus as the main character. There are very few scenes from which he is absent. Other characters (disciples, Jerusalem leaders) are positioned in relation to him and interact with him. He is the subject of around 20 percent of the verbs. When not the subject, he is usually the object of the action, especially in the accounts of his death. Events leading to and involving his death and resurrection occupy about 15 to 20 percent of the Gospels.
- The Gospels narrate Jesus' activity in chronological and geographical sequence, starting with John's baptism of Jesus (Matthew and Luke begin with a birth account). Three of them, Matthew, Mark and Luke, present his activity in Galilee involving teaching, healings, feedings, and exorcisms. Then the action moves to Jerusalem. John narrates the events differently, with Jesus going back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. All four Gospels end with Jesus' death by crucifixion and his resurrection.
- Jesus' character is displayed through his teachings and particular

5. I rely, with a slight modification of language, on the excellent discussion of Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). See also Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 30–46; Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 3–20.