

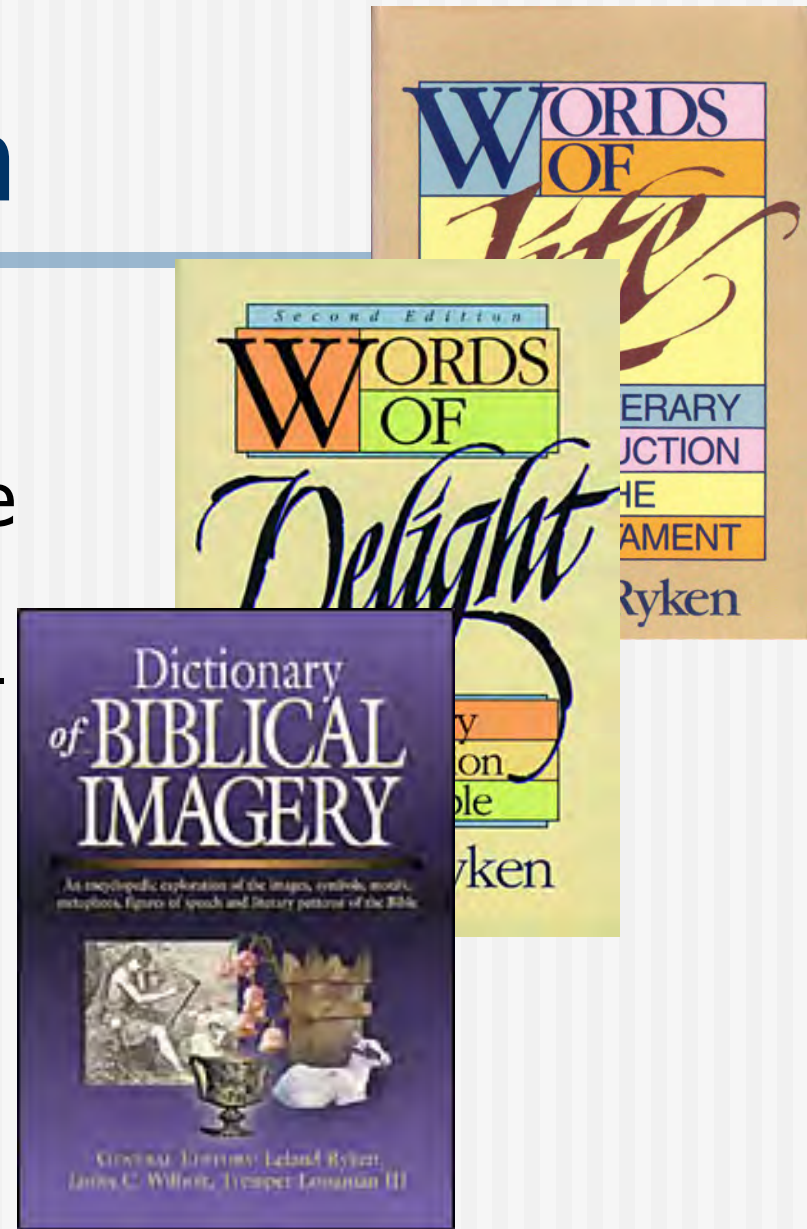
The Gospels as Literary Works

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Leland Ryken

- Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament
- Words of Delight – expanded for the whole Bible
- See also his Dictionary of Biblical Imagery



Their Literary Form

What kind of writings are the Gospels?



What is the Overall Genre of the Gospels?

Some Suggestions:

- Biography?
- Propaganda?
- Dramatic History?
- Collections of Stories?

Genre "Biography"?

- Obviously Gospels are:
 - Presenting information about Jesus
 - Jesus actually lived in history
 - So biographical in some sense
- Not biography in modern scholarly sense:
 - Not by uninvolved, detached observer
 - Not giving all important dates & facts
 - Not primarily personal reminiscences and character studies

Genre "Biography"?

- More like biography in ancient, popular sense:
 - Author has practical concerns
 - Acquainting reader w/ historical person
 - Giving an account of his deeds, words
 - Resemble ancient biographies about:
 - Socrates, Epictetus, Apollonius
 - But Gospels concentrate on Jesus' death, and on reactions to him

Genre "Propaganda"?

- Also popularly called:
 - PR, sales pitch, hype
- The Gospels **are** trying to convince readers that Jesus is vitally important & to move them to respond to him.
- But propaganda
 - Seeks to propagate ideas or attitudes
 - A dirty word today, since it usually involves:
 - Playing fast & loose with the truth;
 - Working on fears, prejudices, exciting emotions.

Genre "Propaganda"?

- Gospel writers are inviting a reader response.
 - Not mainly interest or imagination
 - But rather faith or trust in Jesus
- Gospel writers are surprising:
 - They restrain their post-Easter faith in telling the story.
 - They let the events tell their own story.

Genre "Dramatic History"?

- The Gospels are telling a dramatic story of the person, actions, and impact of Jesus, a real figure in history.
- They do in some ways look more like plays than modern narratives.
- Roland Frye thinks the Gospels should be classed as dramatic histories, like those of:
 - Shakespeare
 - George Bernard Shaw

Characteristics of Dramatic History

- Essentially fair representation of events
- Directed to a broad, general audience
- Condensed to hold attention
- Use representative (sample) people, incidents, actions to give accurate picture while keeping length down

Collections of Stories?

- In contrast to modern biographies, the Gospels are most striking in being a collection of stories:
 - Incidents, speeches, sayings
- The Gospels are action-packed
 - Numerous brief stories allow more of this than connected narrative does.

Collections of Stories?

- They center on Jesus
 - Person and work
 - Explain and celebrate Jesus
 - Use narrative to show:
 - His actions
 - His words
 - Responses of others to him

Collections of Stories?

- They contain varied materials
 - Probably used independently before compilation
 - Various categories of narratives
 - Sketched or detailed events, dialogues
 - Words of Jesus:
 - Brief sayings
 - Extended discourse
 - Parables

Summary on Genre

Gospels are like:

- Ancient, popular biography
- Seeking to propagate faith
- Dramatic history
- Collections of stories

Their Techniques

How do the Gospels
do this?



Gospel Techniques

- Restraint & objectivity
- Concise, compressed accounts
- Very concrete narration
- Selection of materials
- Variety
- Sampling

Restraint & Objectivity

- Gospels unusual here, even compared to ancient biographies
- Authors let Jesus speak & act
 - Do not try to persuade or to influence the reader by evaluative comments
 - Only technique used here is selection

Concise & Compressed

- Especially in the Synoptics, most incidents are:
 - Single scene
 - Two actors (group as unit)
 - Told w/ very economical use of words
- John works with fewer accounts, but longer and more detailed.

Concrete Narration

- To avoid danger in brief accounts of generality, blandness...
- ... Use specific incidents, with short, vivid description (like artist's sketch)
- ... Use direct discourse
- ... Characterization by actor's words or actions rather than by description

Selection of Materials

- The author selects:
 - Which event he will recount
 - How he will tell it
- Author communicates his emphasis:
 - Not by evaluation
 - But by space provided
 - By expectations aroused

Variety

- The author groups material to provide variety:
 - Alternation of actions/words
 - Alternation of miracles/controversies
 - Alternation of followers/opponents
- Helps keep attention of audience

Sampling

- Rather than give a full report, the Gospel writers give us samples of Jesus' speech and actions.
- Various kinds of samples:
 - Types of miracles
 - Various kinds of people
 - Sorts of opposition
 - Speeches on various occasions

Jesus' Speeches

Typical features of
his discourses



Jesus' Speeches

- Aphoristic
- Poetic
- Patterned
- Subversive
- Fusion of genres
- Structured

Aphoristic

- Brief (sound-bites)
- Memorable (structure, word-play)
- Proverb-like
- "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."
- "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the ditch."

Poetic

- Not rhyming or metric, but ...
- Often Hebrew parallelism
- Concrete images
- Metaphor and simile
- Paradox
- Hyperbole
- "It is easier for a camel to go thru the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven."

Patterned

- Repetition
- Balance
- "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you..."

Subversive

- Jesus attacks our everyday way of thinking
- He undermines our conventional values
- Consider the Beatitudes

Fusion of Genres

Sermon on Mount:

- Beatitude
- Character sketch
- Proverb
- Satire
- Lyric
- Parable

Sermon as whole:

- Utopian literature
- Inaugural address
- Wisdom literature

Structured

- Simple
- Highly artistic
- Single themes or three-fold examples
- "The artistry of the design is apparent. There is no reason why the sermon as it stands could not be exactly the form Jesus' longer sermons took." – WOL,120

The End

Try to be on the lookout for these features.

