

# The Gospels as Literary Works

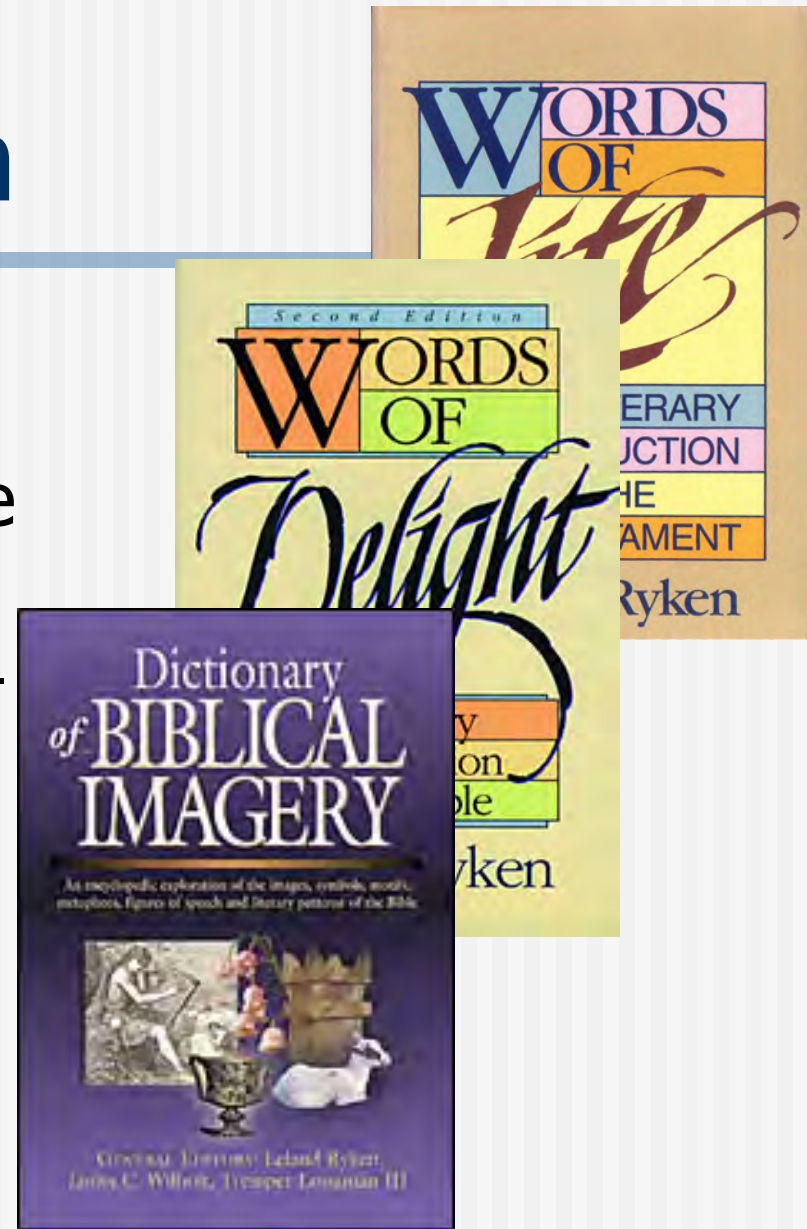
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# Leland Ryken

- 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

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What kind of writings are the Gospels?



# What is the Overall Genre of the Gospels?

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Some Suggestions:

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

# Genre "Biography"?

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- 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"?

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- 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"?

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- 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"?

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- 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"?

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- 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

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- 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?

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- 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?

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- 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?

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- 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

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## Gospels are like:

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

# Their Techniques

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How do the Gospels  
do this?



# Gospel Techniques

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



# Restraint & Objectivity

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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Typical features of  
his discourses



# Jesus' Speeches

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



# Aphoristic

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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

# Fusion of Genres

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## Sermon on Mount:

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

## Sermon as whole:

- Utopian literature
- Inaugural address
- Wisdom literature

# Structured

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- 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

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Try to be on the lookout for these features.

