

# Historicity and the Genre of βίος: a Look at the Gospels

Fr. Scott Carl, SSL

The Holy Father recently addressed to the Pontifical Biblical Commission:  
Catholic exegetes do not nourish the individualistic illusion that biblical texts can be better understood outside the community of believers. The opposite is true, because these texts were not given to individual scholars ‘to satisfy their curiosity or to provide them with material for study and research’. The texts inspired by God were entrusted to the community of believers, to the Church of Christ, to nourish the faith and to guide the life of charity.<sup>i</sup>

He also regularly reminds us that the historical nature of the Gospel is crucial.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, as Catholics to keep the historicity of the gospels in tandem with the importance of faith is a perennial need.

The genre of the gospels being βίος gives support to the belief in the historicity of the gospels affirmed strongly by Tradition (cf. *DV* 19). To argue for this thesis I begin by presenting what *DV* 19 says about historicity and Cardinal Bea’s interpretation of it. Secondly, I discuss the genre of the gospels in light of Richard Burridge’s work. Finally, I will describe how Burridge’s work gives support to belief in the historicity of the gospels.

## ***Dei verbum* 19, Historicity, and Cardinal Bea**

Note, as I quote from paragraph 19, the great number of phrases used to emphasize the reliability of the gospels:

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character (historicatem) the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1).<sup>iii</sup>

To make this initial statement more precise the paragraph continues with two points. First, it refers to the nature of the apostolic preaching; their preaching was all the more clearly articulated since they did so after having been instructed by the events of the Risen Lord and had received the gift of the Spirit of Truth. Second, Bea mentions how *DV* 19 describes the way this apostolic preaching took place. While they selected and synthesized they followed two rules, (1) “[to preserve] the form of proclamation” and (2) “[to tell] us the honest truth about Jesus.”<sup>iv</sup> In his commentary Bea says that he was very careful to quote the whole paragraph (19) as he was commenting upon it. Such care he says emphasizes its construction and that the Council does not seek to demonstrate by argument its initial affirmation of the historical veracity of the gospels. It simply supports its assertion with a reference to the tradition “The Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and still holds . . .” and then explains the meaning of this historical veracity in more detail.<sup>v</sup>

Stressing the great care the Council took to emphasize the historical nature of the gospels, he notes that the phrase which most explicitly concerns us, “whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts . . .”, had been “added almost at the end of the final version of the text, in order to satisfy the legitimate anxiety that the historical truth of the gospels should be

unequivocally expressed and affirmed.”<sup>vi</sup> It is important to notice that while historicity is stressed,

The document adds nothing more . . . [T]he procedure it adopts here is different from its procedure with regard to almost all other questions. Here it is content to base its affirmation on tradition: (‘the Church has held and holds . . .’) when it asserts the historical truth of the gospels, and furnishes no proofs, either of the initial affirmation or of the explanations which follow.<sup>vii</sup>

The Church needs no other reason to justify its acceptance of the historicity of the gospels than tradition yet as we will see the genre of the gospels in fact supports this important teaching.

Cardinal Bea himself offers some proofs for what the Council here expounds by saying that the literary form of the gospels serves as to confirm their historical truth. The Council states that the evangelists were careful to preserve “the character of preaching.”<sup>viii</sup> The purpose of this preaching was not to communicate to us all that Jesus said and did but rather what He “really did and taught for their eternal salvation” (*DV* 19). Being the events the gospels relate concern salvation, Bea asks “whether this religious purpose of arousing faith and preparing the salvation of men is compatible with fidelity to historical fact.”<sup>ix</sup> He limits his consideration to the notion of faith which is of his immediate concern i.e. the objective nature of faith that “is intimately connected with the historical acts of the life of Jesus and in fact takes them for granted.”<sup>x</sup> Thus, the faith which concerns Bea necessitates the historical nature of the gospels. He supports this contention by defining the gospels’ historical interest more precisely by calling it a “historical-biographical interest.”<sup>xi</sup> It is not a biography that is dependent on chronology since chronology is not a primary concern of the gospels. He speaks of biography only in the sense that preaching “intends to preserve the facts concerning the life of an individual person, Jesus, the realities of his existence and activity, as well as of his doctrine.”<sup>xii</sup> The principle facts of Jesus’ existence are His death and resurrection which need the details of His life for their explanation; thus,

it follows that this historical-biographical interest must extend to the whole life and doctrine of Jesus. . . . It is therefore legitimate to conclude that faith and historical truth—in the sense which we have explained—far from being mutually opposed, pre-suppose and confirm each other. Faith presupposes and guarantees total historical veracity.<sup>xiii</sup>

In summary, in support of *DV*’s conviction of the historicity of the gospels Cardinal Bea identifies their literary form to be preaching with a historical-biographical interest that works with faith to express historical truth.<sup>xiv</sup>

### ***What are the Gospels?* Richard Burridge**

At one point in his discussion of genre Cardinal Bea says that it is obvious that the evangelists were not interested in Graeco-Roman or modern historical studies.<sup>xv</sup> While this clearly is true for the latter there is now evidence that it is not the case for the former i.e. that the gospels share a number of characteristics of Graeco-Roman historical studies. The work of Richard Burridge has made significant contributions to establish the connection between the gospels and Greco-Roman biography.<sup>xvi</sup>

Burridge’s well-reviewed work follows similar lines of thinking seen in other scholars regarding genre and the gospels. As Willem S. Vorster describes, many scholars have come to understand that the canonical gospels as broadly fitting in with ancient biography inasmuch as they are narratives which reveal features similar to ancient biographies while not maintaining the same literary standard.<sup>xvii</sup> Going beyond the hesitations of Vorster’s conclusion, Burridge has

been able to articulate how the gospels not only share features of but in fact fit in the ancient biographical genre of βίος.

Burridge began his work by doing a generic comparison of ten ancient works e.g. Isocrates' *Evagoras* and Xenophon's *Agesilaus* to Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* and Lucian's *Demonax*. The diverse group was "deliberately chosen to include the origins of biography in fourth century B.C. rhetorical encomia through to third-century A.D. forerunners of the novel and hagiography." Thus, Burridge established that these βίοι are "from a diverse and flexible genre, yet still one with a recognizable family resemblance in both form and content."<sup>xviii</sup> The comparison between the gospels and ancient biographies produced both formal and content-related aspects as well as comparable communities or audiences.

First, the formal and content-related aspects include being written in continuous prose<sup>xix</sup> between 10,000 and 20,000 words in length.<sup>xx</sup> Moreover, Graeco-Roman biographies do not usually cover the subject's entire life in a strict chronological manner as we would expect in a modern biography. Often they will contain just the bare minimum of an outline that begins with the subject's birth or arrival on the scene and ends with his death. In between are select anecdotes, stories, speeches, and sayings which display something about the subject. The gospels do not sound all that different.<sup>xxi</sup> In this regard it is also noteworthy to mention that lives of generals, politicians, and statesmen usually follow a more chronological order while those of philosophers, writers, and thinkers "tend to be more anecdotal, arranged around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings."<sup>xxii</sup> In particular, for the Synoptic Gospels it is not difficult to maintain that the chronological sequence is more of a narrative convention rather than a strict means of ordering the material.<sup>xxiii</sup> We need only mention Luke's journey narrative as an example.

While the author may claim to provide information on his subject he often has an underlying purpose such as apology, polemic, or didactic (teaching the subject's followers about him). What happens in the gospels is very much similar in that they present Jesus' teaching and great deeds in order to explain the faith of the early Christians. Moreover, the gospels finish by dedicating about 15-20 percent of the work to the last week of Jesus' life. A similar amount is given to the subject's death in biographies by Plutarch and Tacitus among others. In the crisis related to his death the hero in fact "reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching, or does his greatest deed."<sup>xxiv</sup>

A further content related connection results from a detailed analysis of the verbal structure of the gospels and ancient biographies. A unique characteristic of biography is that attention stays focused on one person in particular. Burridge has for instance shown that in ancient biography around ¼ to ⅓ of the verbs has the main person as the subject; moreover, another 15% to 30% of the verbs occur in sayings, speeches, or quotations of the main figure. A similar reality is found in the gospels:

Grammatical Subject <sup>xxv</sup>	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus	17.2%	24.4%	17.9%	20.2%
Jesus' teaching	42.5%	20.2%	36.8%	34.0%

So Burridge concludes, "Thus, we can see clearly that, just like other ancient biographies, Jesus' deeds and words are of vital importance for the four evangelists as they paint their different portraits of Jesus."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Resulting from his study that the gospels are a form of ancient biography, he suggests that

we must study [the gospels] with the same biographical concentration upon their subject to see the particular way each author portrays his understanding of Jesus. . . . The historical, literary, and biographical methods combine to show us that the Gospels are nothing less than Christology in narrative form, the story of Jesus.<sup>xxvii</sup>

An implication of such a biographical hypothesis is that the gospels rather than being about theological ideas or even about hypothetical communities and their problems are in fact about a person; the evangelists relate their Christology.

One common characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels in particular is that there are at points blocks of material which lack a geographical reference yet, given the nature of the genre, there is not one required.<sup>xxviii</sup> For instance, in Mark 4:1ff. as Jesus addresses the crowds from a boat it is more likely that He said more than the three parables related by Mark or even the larger collection related by Matthew. Mark 4:2 even says that Jesus taught at length when what is related is very brief. Surely what we have here is a way that the sacred author represents Jesus' teaching in a narrative context.<sup>xxix</sup> As we ponder the portrait that the gospels paint of Jesus we get insight as to what it means for them to relate "the honest truth about Jesus" (*DV* 19). The freedom the evangelists took to shape their narratives was not only them acting as full human authors (*DV* 11) but them following what fell within the customary bounds of ancient biography. Given the flexibility of the ancient genre, the gospels have in fact as much to do with the βίοι as the βίοι have to do with each other.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **Supporting Historicity: Faith, Tradition, and Genre**

The simple contention of this paper is to further Cardinal Bea's fine commentary on *Dei verbum* in light of what more recent research has had success in articulating. The genre of the gospels as βίος fits well with the Catholic understanding of historicity. Historicity is not a stale historicism; it, rather, includes the unique "portraits" we have of Jesus in each of the gospels which are themselves better interpreted in light of the genre the evangelists utilized to communicate their image of Jesus. Moreover, seeing the gospels as βίοι reaffirms the conviction of the early Church that all four have a crucial place to play in relating who Jesus Christ is; we will never be Marcionites nor can we fall back into the desire for a harmony first seen in the *Diatessaron*.

Yet it is important to realize that no matter how much research is done into the nature of the gospels and how they communicate Christology there will always be something lacking without faith. Historical, literary, and biographical methods have revealed a lot about the great craft of the sacred authors and the power of the image of Jesus they convey. Yet we are left thereafter with still a grainy portrait of Jesus; if you will, we only have a one mega-pixel image of Jesus whose depth is limited by the nature of the device. Our understanding of Jesus would in a similar way be limited if we only had the word on the page to study. We may want to go more deeply into the text to get a ten mega-pixel mega-portrait which we could examine in great detail zooming in further and further. Yet unlike the rapid improvements of technology the word of the page remains the same century after century except by faith. Beyond where generic studies can take us the tradition has already steadfastly held—the gospels have a historical character; they communicate the honest truth about Jesus. Without the faith of the Church, without being in communion with that faith which brings Life to the word on the page, we would have only a

limited image of Jesus. Yet with that faith, being in communion with the same Spirit who inspired the sacred text, is how we get not only a more complete portrait of who Jesus is but we can be in communion with Him. This Word is not a dead letter on a page only to be examined by ever increasing means of technology but it is a Word that is alive that communicates to us the honest truth about Jesus.

In conclusion, Cardinal Bea recognized the importance of literary form in supporting tradition's long held conviction about the historicity of the gospels; they are preaching concerned about the salvation of their hearers. The more recent work of Richard Burridge furthers this conviction in specifying in greater detail the gospels as βίοι of Jesus. Combining insights we see that while some βίοι can be lives of generals with polemical implications so the gospels are βίοι of Jesus with not only simple didactic implications but ones with salvific force.<sup>xxxii</sup> Thus, we see the irreplaceable need of faith to be integrated with historical pursuits in the study of the gospels. To use anything less leaves one with a grainy, incomplete image of Jesus.

---

<sup>i</sup> Apr. 23, 2009, Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission, VIS 090423

<sup>ii</sup> e.g. Preface of *Jesus of Nazareth* and his "Ubi et Orbi" Message on the Resurrection, Easter 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> English citations of DV are from: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html); The Latin is from: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_lt.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_lt.html)

<sup>iv</sup> DV 19; Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Word of God and Mankind* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), 253.

<sup>v</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 254.

<sup>vi</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 254 and note 11.

<sup>vii</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 255-256.

<sup>viii</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 256; "formam denique praeconii retinentes" or in the Vatican translation as quoted above, "preserving the form of proclamation"; or in A. Flannery 1992, "while sustaining the form of preaching"

<sup>ix</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 256.

<sup>x</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 257.

<sup>xi</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 259.

<sup>xii</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 259.

<sup>xiii</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 259.

<sup>xiv</sup> Before moving on to the next section perhaps one note about history ought to be made; exegesis cannot be limited to only historical methods or establishment of "what happened." In the words of the now Cardinal Vanhoye: "Exegesis . . . seeks to illumine the total content of the text, not just which details are historical or nonhistorical [sic]. Exegesis emphasizes the content of faith, divine revelation, and the invitation to a renewed existence that is at the heart of the biblical text. The larger picture that the biblical text seeks to communicate concerns a religious message and not historical facticity. . . . The important thing is the overall picture and the message it communicates." Peter Williamson, "Catholicism and the Bible: an Interview with Albert Vanhoye", *First Things* 74 (1997): 38.

<sup>xv</sup> A. Bea, *The Word*, 257.

<sup>xvi</sup> Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); a summary version appears as: "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences," in *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113-146; a more textbook form is: *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>xvii</sup> W. S. Vorster, "Gospel Genre," in vol. 2 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1079.

<sup>xviii</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 121.

<sup>xix</sup> Such a fact disqualifies the so-called non-canonical "gospels" from fitting within this genre. See W. S. Vorster, "Gospel," 1079.

<sup>xx</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 122.

---

<sup>xxi</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 122.

<sup>xxii</sup> R. Burridge, *Four Gospels*, 7.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics of the Gospel of John," *New Testament Studies* 53 (2007): 25.

<sup>xxiv</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 122.

<sup>xxv</sup> Statistics are from R. Burridge, *What are*, 318-321.

<sup>xxvi</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 123.

<sup>xxvii</sup> R. Burridge, "About People," 123-124.

<sup>xxviii</sup> R. Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics," 24.

<sup>xxix</sup> R. Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics," 32.

<sup>xxx</sup> R. Burridge, *What are*, 250.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Cf. Dean Bechard, "The Lukan Journey Narrative (Lk 9:51-19:44)," course taught at the Pontifical Biblical Institute first semester 2006.