GOSPEL GENRE, CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY
AND THE ABSENCE OF RABBINIC BIOGRAPHY:
SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE
BIOGRAPHICAL HYPOTHESIS

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Introduction

It is a privilege and a delight to contribute this essay in honour of David Catchpole. I first met him at the British New Testament Conference in September 1986, when I was delivering a paper which contained the first public airing of the substantive idea of my doctoral work on the genre of the gospels. I little expected to find myself a year later appointed as Lazenby Chaplain to the University of Exeter, whereupon David invited me to do some New Testament teaching with him in the Department of Theology. It was through this experience of teaching together both in the university and in extra-mural activities that I came to appreciate David’s passion for the traditio-historical method of studying the gospels. At the same time his support and encouragement for me to finish my doctorate and get it published was as constant as it was helpful.

Therefore I have chosen to draw on this material and develop it further in this essay to look at how my work on gospel genre might affect our chosen area of christological controversy. It will begin with a brief summary of my argument about gospel genre and biography, which leads to the concentrated christological focus on the person of Jesus. We then consider some implications of this for christological development and controversies. Finally we will discuss the question of why no biographies were written of other Jewish rabbis in the first century; this notable absence suggests that the biographical

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1 I have to admit it was David’s Somerset County Cricket Club sweatshirt which attracted my attention as a fellow supporter! Many of our subsequent debates on the New Testament, including some of the ideas in this chapter, were conducted on days out at the cricket—and I wish him many happy days at the Taunton ground in his future retirement.
genre of the gospels itself contains a christological claim about Jesus of Nazareth.

1. The Genre of the Gospels

The major focus of David Catchpole’s work has been to use the historical method to analyse the gospels, to understand the redactional interests of the evangelists and to get behind them to their sources, especially the “double tradition” of material shared by Matthew and Luke, known as “Q”.

The ultimate aim, however, is to go further into the process to discover the original teachings of the historical Jesus: thus, in a typical Catchpole phrase, he says of the sermon by Jesus in Nazareth, “while the words are the words of Luke, the voice is surely the voice of Jesus.” Many a time I have watched David take a class through a complex section of gospel material, such as the Beatitudes, on the blackboard, analysing it and reducing it to the pure, golden nugget of authentic material from Jesus. Such an approach is often described as treating the gospels as though they are “windows” through which we look to that which lies “beyond” or “behind the text”. Thus Q is to be found behind the canonical gospels—and the historical Jesus beyond that. The gospels are seen as windows onto both the early Christian communities and their debates and also to Jesus himself.

One problem with such an approach is the sheer diversity of reconstructions offered by those who look “through” the “window”—see for example the multitude of interpretations of Q itself. Equally the variety of accounts of the historical Jesus are sometimes thought to “reflect” as much of the scholar’s own views as those of Jesus. Thus the image moves from window to “mirror” in which what one may think is seen through or “behind” the text is actually one’s own concerns “before” the text, like a mirror reflecting back what is actually “in front” of it. The traditional historical method depends upon...