THE CHRONOTOPE AND ITS DISCURSIVE FUNCTION IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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ABSTRACT

Bakhtinian theory offers an alternative set of questions to those set out by the model that has been used to prove that the canonical gospels are ancient biographies or *bioi*. Demonstrating that the Gospel of Luke diverges from the *bios* model in some respects, this essay also shows that there are aspects in this text that the model does not address. Part of a larger investigation of the Gospel of Luke in the light of Bakhtinian theory, this essay focuses on the chronotope, the time-space arrangement, in Bakhtin’s terms. Not only does Bakhtin see the chronotope as discursive and indicative of genre, but he also draws attention to a cluster of features that accompanies a particular chronotope, the motif of meeting being of particular interest. Tracing the motif of meeting in the Gospel of Luke, the essay suggests that the primary discourse of this text is underpinned by its chronotope, first rooting itself in the discourse of the Hebrew Bible as practiced in the time of the text’s setting, to then diverge from it, entering into a dialogic relationship with the older canon and the religious establishment, to finally challenge the latter on its own ground in preparation of disseminating itself in the wider world.

1. Introduction

A view that has found increasing popularity in recent years amongst biblical scholars is that the canonical Gospels are ancient biographies or *bioi*. Proponents of the *bios*-hypothesis begin their argument by opposing the view that the Gospels are *Kleinkultur* and *sui generis*—a theory put forward by form and redaction criticism.¹ Rather, they

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius (Form Criticism) and Hans Conzelmann (Redaction Criticism), and others.
contend, the Gospels, as texts almost certainly produced by self-conscious authors, should not be seen as divorced from other texts in the Graeco-Roman literary environment. Richard Burridge, in his book, *What are the Gospels: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, has selected a number of ancient texts that he has identified as *bioi* on the basis of a family resemblance made up of shared features to construct a model of this genre. He came to the conclusion that all four canonical Gospels are *bioi* on the basis of this model.

Although the Gospel of Luke shares a number of the features that make up Burridge’s model for *bioi*, it does also diverge from this model in significant aspects. For instance, unlike what Burridge claims to be standard for *bioi*, the name of the protagonist does not appear at the beginning of the narrative.\(^2\) Nor does the word *bios* appear in either the title or the opening of the text. The prologue does state an intention but it is not that of writing the life of Jesus. Nor does this narrative end with Jesus’ death and consequences, as, for instance, a burial, funeral oration, or other honours.\(^3\) Instead, we see a resurrection, a time of teaching and an ascension. The third, and perhaps the most significant difference between the Gospel and a *bios*, as presented by the model, is the depiction of the heavy intervention by supernatural forces in the story. While *bioi* may show signs, omens, and even, in some instances, appearances of the departed hero to his followers, these cannot be compared to phenomena in the Gospel of Luke like the scene in the desert between Jesus and the devil, the casting out of demons (who speak), the appearances of the angels (who also speak), the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Cf. Burridge (1992, 139–141, 178–181). Burridge cites Suetonius as recording a praetor seeing Augustus ascend into heaven. The noteworthy difference between that and what happens in the Gospel of Luke is that Suetonius cites the ex-praetor (hearsay) and does not say that it happened, while the Gospel narrator states that the events leading up to and including the Ascension actually happened (Suetonius 1957, 111).
\(^4\) Another example is Plutarch’s *Alexander* (although it is not one of Burridge’s example texts, the birth of Alexander does invite a comparison with that of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke). As is the case in Suetonius’ text, the supernatural occurrences in this text are also always qualified either by happening in a dream, or by being introduced by phrases like “it is said”, “others say”, “Eratosthenes says”, and “others again say”. Never does the narrator say that these things actually happened (Plutarch 1910, 463–464). In Luke, on the other hand, the supernatural occurrences are not qualified either by the framework of a dream or by hearsay.