THE LITERARY GENRES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPELS

Iulian Faraoanu[*]

University 'Alexandru Ioan Cuza', Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, Str. Th. Văscăuţeanu, 6, 700462 Iasi, Romania

Abstract

The notion of literary genres is fundamental for reading, understanding and interpreting the message of the Holy Scripture. This study deals with the literary genres in the Gospels and their role in the interpretation. The biblical research addresses the meanings of the Word; ultimately, the interpretation of the Holy Scripture aims at identifying the meaning of the sacred texts. After a discussion regarding the types of literary genres found in the Gospels, the analysis focuses on the meaning or relevance of the literary genres and what are they trying to convey. Particular emphasis falls on the specificity of the biblical genres: the literary form, the living environment and the meaning with regard to the reading, understanding and interpretation of the texts. Finally, it comes out the relevance of faith and the plan of salvation, in order to be able to read and become familiar with the living Word of God.

Keywords: literary genres, Gospel, meaning, interpretation, message

1. Introduction

The Bible contains many difficult passages, which often leave the reader discouraged. The difficulty is even greater if we consider the content of the sacred books: these contain the mysteries of God, which are not accessible to our mind. From the very beginning, we have to keep in mind that God communicated Himself, revealed Himself by means of a written word using different literary forms, even though, in those times, verbal culture was predominant when it came to the transmission of traditions. We start from the hypothesis that a written work comes to light using a certain literary form (poetry, story, novel, letter, drama). The very division of the Hebrew Scripture into the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, as well as of the New Testament into the Gospels, the Letters, the Acts, and the Revelation, is an implicit acknowledgement of the presence of a variety of forms used for writing the books. The Hebrew Bible itself indicates several literary genres present in it: the song ('shir'), the psalms ('tehilah'), the proverb ('mashal'), the norm, the law ('hoq'), etc.

[*]E-mail: faraoanu@yahoo.com, tel.: +40 747539486

An important aspect to be emphasized from the start is that the Bible is a collection of divine-human words. The challenge resides in discovering the forms of communication of God rendered in human language and phrases. Why was a certain literary form chosen (psalm, myth, legend)? Why was a particular language used? What did the author intend to convey by choosing a certain type of literary genre? Did the environment and the historical context have an impact on the writings?

2. The Gospels and the literary forms

2.1. The Gospel

One description of the literary genre could be the following: different types of manners of writing commonly used by the people of a specific time or region, permanently associated with certain contents. As part of a literary genre, there is a connection between the literary form, the content to be expressed (the intent), and the vital situation that determines either the form or the content [1]. There have been many presentations of genres, with specific elements and features. Going deeper, once could note a difference between literary genre (or textual type), broader category (epic, lyrical), and the literary form present in a certain genre. For example, the 'gospel' genre includes parables, miracles, controversy, etc.

The word 'gospel' comes from the Greek word *euaggélion* which means 'good news'. It appears 76 times in the New Testament, with 60 occurrences in the Pauline epistles. Mark uses this word seven times, while Matthew only four times; Luke only uses the verb *euaggelízomai* ('to bring the good news'). The Gospel is the good news of the final salvation brought by Jesus Christ and the historical establishment of the Kingdom of God. In the beginning, the Gospel was proclaimed only verbally in a culture of orality. In fact, Jesus, as Rabbi, did not write anything! The essence of the message was the proclamation of death and Resurrection, not necessarily the biographical elements. Mark is the first evangelist who called his writing 'gospel' (Mark 1.1). Starting with Mark, the Gospel became a text, a story: the story of the life of Jesus.

The gospels cannot be considered 'high literature'; they are not works comparable to the writings of the classics in the Greek world. In fact, from a literary perspective, the writings of the New Testament belong to popular literature, so called minor literature. At the same time, these can be considered 'occasional writings', the result of one's own and unrepeatable circumstances, being closely connected to the history of those times, with the authors and recipients belonging to the real actual world.

The canonical gospels are not biographies or presentations of the life of Jesus, as these are not focused on factors that determine the story of the hero's inner and outer life. For example, Mark does not present the story of Jesus' childhood. Some biographical elements about Jesus are embedded in a religious history focusing on God's salvation project [2]. Furthermore, the Gospels cannot

be compared to other genres in biblical historiography, although they may be similar to the 'midrash Haggadah', interpretations of storytelling to present the salvation consequences. In this regard, several scholars have identified similarities with the stories and speeches in Exodus (e.g. the 'Haggadah'). These are no historical narratives like the ones in Pentateuch (as in the case of the narrative cycles on the patriarchs), as they do not tell the facts of life, but rather present and update a salvation event for the community [3]. As regards the form and structure, the Gospel does not imitate any books in the Old Testament. However, the background and the base are of Semitic origin (quotes, ideas, images of the Old Testament).

Therefore, beyond the rejection of the idea of copying literary genres, the Gospels could be considered to borrow some elements of Hellenistic biographies, together with elements of biblical historiography. This is also due to the fact that evangelical writings are at the crossroads between the Jewish and the Greek culture. In addition, we must consider that they classify the biblical message into the cultural and religious categories of the time. At the same time, one should not disregard the influence of the community of faith in which the evangelical works appeared.

Nevertheless, the Gospels stand apart due to their novelty and originality. As literary genre, the Gospels could be defined as a work of Theology. The Gospels present God's life, teaching and activity, but the perspective used by the evangelists is a theological one. The Gospels are nothing more than testimonies of faith that call the people of all times in order to awaken or strengthen their faith (see John 20.31). The Gospels are intended to serve faith as regards the message and mission of Jesus, and, thus, faith in God. This is done by presenting Jesus as the Revelator par Excellence and the Saviour of the world. Thus, as type of writing, the Gospels become a summary of the Christian faith about Jesus Christ [4].

The Gospels are closely connected to the mystery of salvation, as they present the most important stage in the salvation plan, inserted in the eschatological context [5]. This writings preserve the memory and the proclamation of what Jesus taught and did; they are the perennial and divine testimony of the mystery of salvation, revealed and becoming act in the incarnate Word [6]. The Gospels could be defined as religious writings that preserve the historical memory of Jesus and interpret the person and his message in the light of the Resurrection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, considering the situation of the community and the proclamation of the faith in Jesus Christ.

2.2. Literary forms in the Gospels

H. Gunkel (1862-1934), pioneer of the studies on literary genres in the life context studied the literary forms and so called *Sitz im Leben* of the texts from Genesis and Psalms. In the case of the New Testament, the research on the genres started with the *Formgeschichte* movement after the Second World War.

This movement was focused on the identification of the origin of the textual traditions, as well as the environment where they were created as regards both form and content. The aim of his research was to know the intention and the message of the author. The scholars focused on the research on the literary forms (static phase) used for the text of the Gospels in the early stage of the tradition: the identification of the literary units and their classification. They also focused on the evolution of forms (dynamic phase) until their final stage in the context of the primary community (sociological analysis). The Gospels are documents that nourish the faith and the life of the community.

Following the study of the literary forms, the Gospels can be divided into texts having narrative form (the presentation of the passion, the miracles, see Mark 1.21-27), and texts using the form of the speech. Among the 'forms' (words and acts) identified by the scholars of *Formgeschichte* as regards the texts of the Gospels, we can mention. First, *apoftegma:* narratives developed around sayings (Mark 2.15-22, 3.1-6, 3.31-35, 10.13-16). E.g.: „Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2.7). Secondly, *words (logia),* often inserted in disputes or dialogues; may be didactic (Mark 7.15), judgmental (Mark 4.24), lawful, sapiential („A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home", Matthew 13.57); prophetical („For whoever wants to save their life will lose it", Matthew 16.25). The blessings can also be included in the category of words. Thirdly, *disputes* (Law, Sabbath, the authority of Jesus, etc.): a) questions raised by opponents; b) Jesus' counter-question; c) opponents' answer; d) Jesus' refusal to answer based on the preceding answer; concluding assertion (see Mark 11.27-33). Forthly, *stories on miracles (healing, resurrection, etc.)*: a) the encounter between the patient with the thaumaturge; b) request to be healed; c) the healing (thaumaturge's gesture and/or word); d) the acknowledgment or consequence of the healing; reactions of those present (see Mark 1.40-45). Finally, *parables and allegories.* The parable (around 30 parables in the synoptic gospels) is a literary genre known in the Jewish world [7]. The parable is a metaphor or a comparison presented as a story. Usually, the focus is on a single element applicable to the listeners' life; the comparison between the eternal realities and the facts familiar to human experience. As for the characteristics of the parables used by Jesus, one can note: a) direct speech as manner of addressing to the interlocutors („who among you ...", Luke 11.5); b) the parable contains in itself the message of Jesus; c) absence of justification and the elements of concrete life; d) familiar manners for describing God – the shepherd, the king, the master, etc.; e) sapiential and eschatological elements [8]. The *allegories,* just like the parables, present a story; yet, unlike the former, the latter contain a sequence of elements of comparison (for example, the allegory of the vine, see John 15). The early Christians tended to allegorize parables, as is the case of the interpretation of the parable of the sower in Mark 4.13-20.

As regards *Sitz im Leben*, the New Testament tradition emerged in the primary Christian community, starting from the preaching of Jesus and reaching the ecclesial proclamation of Jesus as 'the Christ'. The Gospels are 'books of the

Church' (not necessarily biographies), expressing the faith of the Church, and convey the desire to transmit living and up-to-date traditions.

3. The notion of the literary genres in the Gospel texts

3.1. Genealogies - Matthew 1

3.1.1. 'Genealogies' as literary form

The genealogies are lists of names that appear in many books of the Old Testament. Genealogies are aimed, first of all, at certifying membership, being a type of identity card allowing us to determine the origin of a person. The genealogy served at validating the public role of a king or priest; this defined the identity of a king or priest by inserting him into the ties of the history of the community.

Apart from the identification of the family roots, genealogy also has a historical dimension. In fact, history is presented through the sequence of genealogies as, behind each person, there are events, actions and people who lived in the given historical period. Furthermore, genealogy also has the role of perpetuating the divine blessing transmitted at the beginnings of creation (see Genesis 1.27-28). In our text, genealogy is part of the gospel of childhood, being part of a series of biographical texts.

3.1.2. Sitz im Leben of the genealogy in Matthew 1

The genealogies of the Old Testament were preferred by priests and then by scribes. The author of the Gospel of Matthew, who was very familiar with the law and a scribe himself, wanted to insert Jesus into the sequence of biblical history: Jesus is the fulfilment of the history of Israel and of the biblical prophecy.

Matthew's community was interested in the relationship between the two covenants, in the relationship between Israel and the Church. Within the community, there were also questions on the Christian identity.

3.1.3. The meaning of the genealogy in Matthew 1

First, the genealogy starts with the following words: "this is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1.1). If we were to set the title of the book considering the first words of such book, the Gospel of Matthew is a work on the genealogy of Jesus and his family tree. However, Matthew's intention was to indicate the origin of Jesus and his relationship with the people of Israel. Jesus is the son of David, the Messiah of the royal family of David. Yet, Christ is also the son of Abraham, either as a result of His Hebrew origin or from a global perspective, as Abraham is the father of many nations [9].

Secondly, the genealogy is not a simple monotonous sequence of names, as it has a structure of three series of 14 generations explained in verse 17: from Abraham, the ancestor of Israel, to David, 14 generations; from David to the deportation from Babylon another 14 generations, and from the exile to Christ another 14 generations. It is, in fact, Biblical history with its characters and events - a human history with concrete people, influenced by the divine plan. Number 3 is associated with God. Number 14 is also symbolic, being a multiple of 7. Some scholars have suggested an explanation by means of ghematry: the sum of the digits of David's name is 14: D-4, W-6, D-4. Thus, we have the presentation of the divine plan on history organized according to the will and the rhythm of God.

The third consideration: the genealogy also contains the name of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, wife of Uriah. The women are not connected to the people of Israel and have committed sins. However, the four women were rehabilitated by the Jewish tradition; their initiatives were developed by the Lord in view of the continuity of their descendants. What does this mean? God also includes strangers in his plan of salvation, not just Jews. Then, an important note: God enters the real, specific history, which also implies sin, weakness. God accompanies human beings along the history with all its positive and negative aspects, and guides history to fulfilment with his powerful arm.

The text contains a teaching of grace and universality. The evangelist intends to present God's free choice and sovereignty that guides the course of history, and His plan of salvation considering that He chooses mothers differently from what was usually expected: foreign mothers for Jewish sons!
Finally, we need to mention two findings. First, the presentation made by the evangelist. The genealogy of Matthew is downward; it starts with Abraham and – going through 41 names – it reaches Jesus (fulfilment). It is the meaning of Christ's image in history: it was not necessarily a validation, but rather to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the history of Israel and of the promises. Reading keys at verses 1 and 17: Jacob gave birth to Joseph, the husband of Mary who gave birth to Jesus, called Christ. The second finding is the intention to provide an answer to the question: who is Jesus Christ people believe in?

3.2. The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18.1-5)

3.2.1. The literary form of the text

The first literary form is the discourse. The text is part of chapter 18 that contains the fourth discourse of the Gospel of Matthew, the so-called 'Discourse on the Church' (see 'mathetai' – apostles in 18.1). The discourse form is accounted for by the stereotype formula in 19.1. The rhetoric of antiquity presented several types of discourse with fixed schemes. There is a question that has the role of 'captatio benevolentiae'. The theme ('propositio') is presented in

18.2 "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" The ideas are developed progressively, the arguments are also mentioned, and the conclusions are drawn. But Matthew intends to present a catechesis to the community. Unlike in Mark 9.34, Matthew does not address the dispute of the twelve on the road, but rather the question on whom of them would be the greatest (18.1). Thus, the initial question is emphasized, and a historical situation is turned into a didactic question. The didactical aspect is even more obvious if we consider the solemnity of the introductory formula 'at that time' and the question: who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

3.2.2. The vital situation of the evangelical text

The main question focuses on the expectation of a community, which receives the Kingdom of Heaven and recognizes the risen Jesus among it. This is due to the attempt to understand the kind of relationship one should have with God, the hierarchical order to be expected in a community that recognizes God as the Lord. The members of the community are apostles interested in the issue of the relationships: relationship with God the Father, Jesus the Master and the members of the community [10]. Matthew put in evidence the ideas of the brotherhood and solidarity. In Matthew's community, there could also be discussions on the weak who could be lost in faith - therefore, what kind of relationship exists between the weak and strong.

3.2.3. Understanding and interpretation: catechesis by gestures and words

Jesus' answer in verses 2-5 consists, first of all, in a symbolic gesture: He places a child in the centre, as in Mark 9.36. Being great in the Kingdom means placing a child in the centre. This does not mean a return to childhood or to original innocence (Christianity does not sanction the romantic idealization of childhood!), nor does it mean to be pure or have no demands.

Verses 3-4 elaborate on what it means to be great: to become like children. Being a (little) child means to trust and to abandon oneself in the hands of God and to have unconditional faith in Jesus. The deeper meaning is explained by the verbs 'strephõ' (to return, to convert oneself) and 'tapeinoõ' (to be humble), when associated: "Unless you *convert* and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever is *humble* of this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Consequently, children become the metaphor of an attitude before God. This coincides, first of all, with 'taking the lowly position', to become poor in the meaning of the blessings and of Matthew 11.29 and 23.12. In 11.29 the humility of the heart is associated with kindness. Here, again, it is not a meek hiding, but showing an attitude of obedience to God, taking one's own place: that place 'anawîm'.

Secondly, 'becoming like little children' is equivalent of conversion, as presented by Matthew using the verb 'strephõ'. There is no use of 'metanoeõ', which is preferred by the New Testament. In this case, Matthew wants to present the stereotype of the Old Testament, that 'shub' specific to the prophetic language which expresses the orientation towards (return to) God in a more decisive manner.

'Children' become the symbol of an inner mood, the correct attitude before divinity and the community [11]. Consequently, being great in the Kingdom means trusting God and encouraging humility.

4. The meaning of the literary genres in the synoptic Gospels

4.1. Guidance on the literary forms

After the above analysis, it is necessary to point out some considerations on the literary forms. First of all, generally speaking, there is no pure literary genre, but often a dominant one, enriched with other literary forms.

Secondly, a text should not be reduced to a single literary form or forced to belong to a certain preconceived concept. Then, no gender system can exhaust the multitude of texts.

Thirdly, in order to understand a biblical book, it is necessary to take into account its stages of development: the oral tradition (many episodes were transmitted verbally in different places), the attempts to group the material, and then the writing. Moreover, it is necessary to emphasize the unity of the biblical books and the elements that lead to a single author and a single work.

As regards applicability, first of all, we need to consider the freedom of the author when borrowing a literary genre, as he is not always the servant of the literary conventions. The literary styles and forms have been taken from the lay culture and adapted to the biblical message. Then, the activities for the selection and adaptation of the literary forms depended on the perspective of the faith in the risen Jesus Christ. There was an influence coming from the demands of the (popular) community and their manners of perception (literary processes, metaphors, symbols, visions). Finally, an important role is played by the interpretation of the meaning of history from the perspective of the understanding of Christ and the people called to salvation.

4.2. The vital situation and the context

First of all, we need to consider that Biblical language and writings that belong to other times and another world. Therefore, it is necessary to create a bridge between our time and the biblical times, to better understand the manners of expression, the mentality, the style of writing literary works.

Secondly, the Bible is closely related to history, as biblical literary creations reflect historical moments of the relationship between the people of God and divinity. Many aspects of the Old Testament are a theological

interpretation of history [12]. The texts written in these historical situations were transmitted, revised and reinterpreted in new historical eras and new contexts, being prepared as a testimony of a history of salvation. Thus, the characteristic of the Bible as living Scripture could be preserved.

It is essential to be familiar with the context of the Gospel. From the ancient times, there have been noticed elements common to historical narratives. Mark writes for the Christians in 60s-70s in Rome. Matthew writes for Judeo-Christians. Luke writes a work for pagan-Christians. The Gospels are narrative texts rooted in history. Like other biblical narratives, the gospel also reveals a narrative scheme, a line of storytelling, characters, the evolution of facts towards an outcome. The historical narrative line can also be observed in the Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died; on the third day He rose again."

The first story was probably the passion of Jesus, to which narratives from the life of Christ were added, thus obtaining the Gospel. Apart from the narrative aspect, one should take into consideration the relationship between the evangelical writings and the past that is the history of Jesus' life. The starting point is the preaching of Christ [13]. It would be useful to know as much as possible about the environment in which Christ lived [14]; secondly, the preaching of the disciples and their understanding of Christ.

The environment in which traditions were passed on: popular environment: often simple people; religious environment: cult-related requirements; an environment where Hebrew Scriptures were studied. It is worth mentioning the culture of verbal transmission, which was dominant in those times. Most traditions about the words and actions of Jesus, as well as the sermon of the Saviour, were transmitted orally [15].

4.3. The perspective of faith and the plan of salvation

From the point of view of interpretation, Saint Augustine offers a principle for the approach of the Bible which is still valid: "(The Lord) wanted to make Christians, not scientists" [16]. "The Holy Spirit who spoke through the sacred authors did not want to teach people things that would not have served their salvation." [17] At the same time, Saint Augustine states that, in the Bible, one should not necessarily look for the original words of Jesus, but rather for the intention of the author.

According to Dei Verbum [6, n. 12], we need to search the message of God in the sacred texts. God's intention to reveal Himself to man through the sacred writers and their texts is greater, goes beyond what they were able to communicate in their words. As indicated in the aforementioned text, the document Dei Verbum separates two intentions using the conjunction 'and': 'what the hagiographers actually intended to communicate to us' and 'what God wanted to reveal through their words'. Hence, the need to identify God's intention.

In order to discover the intention of the sacred author, it is necessary to conduct a careful research of the literary genres, and the exegetical methods have their importance in identifying the meaning of the biblical texts [18]. The literary form facilitates the identification of the author's intention and message. Then, we have to keep in mind the social, historical, and cultural context of biblical writings. This is where one needs to use historical criticism: historical contextualization (who wrote, where, when, how, and why?). Thus, one can discover what God wanted to communicate through the sacred author.

After this research, it is necessary to use some principles of theological hermeneutics. Thus, the reading of the Bible must be performed 'in the Holy Spirit'. Scripture has to be read and interpreted with the help of the Holy Spirit who inspired it. Then, the Council indicates some principles. First of all, a global interpretation is needed, always seeking unity. It is necessary to respect the content and unity of the Scripture ('analogia Scripturae'). Secondly, authentic exegesis has to be performed always in the Church, the place where the Scripture is listened to, meditated on and understood. The Bible is read in the Church and with the Church. Thirdly, the analogy of faith is necessary: attention to the cohesion between the truths of the faith and as part of the total project (the global plan) of revelation. Finally, one has to keep in mind that we receive these inspired words as the word of God, the word of life and salvation.

5. Conclusions

All these findings confirm the usefulness of literary genres in the reading, understanding and interpretation of the evangelical texts. As regards the first question on the right manner of reading the Bible, we have to state that reading must be performed in the Holy Spirit, the one who inspired the Holy Scripture and illuminates human beings to enter the mystery of the Word.

As regards the understanding, it can be suggested that understanding takes into account the nature of the Gospels: narrative texts rooted in history, as well as works of Theology aimed at describing the mystery of the Saviour as person. Understanding cannot ignore the purpose of the Gospels: the question of faith and the exhortative function. The Gospels are exhortatory texts that contain the call to follow Christ.

Finally, the questions regarding the interpretation point out the divine and human nature of the sacred Word. This interpretation is then closely related to the faith and to the plan of salvation. The starting point is the literal and historical meaning, followed by the spiritual and allegorical meaning which regards the existence of the Christian called to life and salvation.

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