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THE PROBLEM OF GOSPEL GENRES: UNMASKING A FLAWED
CONSENSUS AND PROVIDING A FRESH WAY FORWARD WITH
SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS GENRE THEORY

Zachary K. Dawson

McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

Abstract: A wave of research that began in the late 1970s and culminated with Richard Burridge’s *What Are the Gospels?* in 1992 effectively established the consensus that the Gospels are to be classified as ancient βίαι. In this article, I respond to Burridge’s work to demonstrate that his approach to genre is problematic in several ways, which calls the foundation of the current consensus into question. Following this ground clearing exercise, I articulate a way forward in how to understand the relationship between the Gospels’ genre and their social purpose, which is more in keeping with modern genre theory, especially as it is envisioned by systemic-functional linguists. The last section of the article then demonstrates the potential benefits of using Systemic Functional Linguistics genre theory by means of a sample genre analysis of the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:7–13, which demonstrates how to understand the social function of genres and opens an avenue for fresh research into the question of Gospel genres. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

For the last several decades genre criticism in Gospel studies has been preeminently concerned with the generic identity of the canonical Gospels: What *are* the Gospels? As the discipline currently stands, the general consensus is that the canonical Gospels classify as ancient βίαι. Charles Talbert, Philip Shuler, and Richard Burridge, among others, have contributed to

establishing this consensus, but Burridge has received the most recognition for bringing this about.¹ Whereas Talbert's work was lacking in methodology and theory,² Shuler and Burridge enlisted genre theory to answer the question of the Gospels' generic identity, and now that the answer to this question "has all but been conclusively established,"³ genre theory has become a foundation for later works to support arguments in other areas of Gospels studies, such as the Gospels' social settings and their audiences.⁴ Using genre theory as this kind of tool has been perpetuated in part by responses to these works, whether they are alternative arguments for the class of literature to which the Gospels belong or alternative arguments about the social setting and audiences of the Gospel communities.⁵

The reasoning is perfectly logical that determining what the Gospels are aids in understanding the way they communicate meaning. Consequently, in the efforts to pinpoint the class of

1. See Talbert, *What Is a Gospel*; Talbert, "Once Again"; Shuler, *Genre for the Gospels*; Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*; Burridge, "About People."

2. See David Aune's critique of Talbert, where he calls him a "blindfolded man staggering across a minefield" ("Genre of the Gospels," 17). Cf. Talbert's response to Aune in Talbert, "Reading Chance."

3. Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written," 28.

4. See Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written," 27–30; Burridge, "About People," 130–45; Smith, "About Friends"; Smith, *Why Βίος*.

5. Several scholars have used genre theory to identify the generic identity of the Gospels and have come to alternative conclusions. For example, David Aune, though not using any particular theory of genre criticism, makes use of generic features of form, content, and function to classify Luke-Acts as ancient historiography rather than biography (*New Testament and Its Literary Environment*, 77–115). Andrew Pitts, using more generic criteria than Aune, argues that the Gospel of Luke is Hellenistic historiography in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Genre of the Third Gospel." Some studies, however, do not use genre theory at all, but rely strictly on comparative observations between works of antiquity. Samuel Uytanlet's recent work *Luke-Acts and Jewish Historiography* is a case in point, and the features of content he identifies provide further counter-evidence against the general consensus that Luke is an ancient biography. Still others push back against the arguments about the Gospel audiences and social settings supported by the assumption that the Gospels are ancient biographies. For example, see Van Eck, "Sitz for the Gospel of Mark," 973–1008.

literature to which the Gospels belong, Burridge and others have exercised great influence over the way these texts are interpreted in current Gospel studies. However, as I will show, this approach places stifling limitations on modern genre theory, and it also does not provide much help for understanding the purpose of the Gospels in light of the social situations that occasioned their production. To bring the various issues of the current consensus into light, I will first contextualize this discussion with a brief historical sketch of genre criticism in Gospel studies, which will then help to evaluate the limitations, as well as other inherent problems, perpetuated by the current consensus in Gospel genre research. This will be followed by a way forward that can better explain the relationship between the Gospels' genre and their social purpose that is more in keeping with modern genre theory. Finally, I will briefly demonstrate the potential benefits of using Systemic Functional Linguistics genre theory by doing a genre analysis of the Lord's Prayer in Matt 6:7–13, which provides a small but demonstrative example of how genres can be linked to their social function.

2. A Brief Historical Sketch of Genre Criticism in Gospel Studies

Over a century has now passed since the publication of C.W. Votaw's 1915 article, "The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies," in which Votaw attempts to show that the canonical Gospels share parallel characteristics with classical and Hellenistic biography, concluding that they are popular rather than historical biographies because "the motive of the writer was practical and hortatory rather than historical."⁶ Votaw's work is representative of a time when comparative methods, such as comparative philology in linguistics, were at their height, and so evaluating stylistic characteristics through comparative analysis with contemporary literature was viewed as an appropriate method to determine the kind of writing to which the Gospels belong. Votaw's view of the Gospels, however,

6. Votaw, "Gospels and Contemporary Biographies," 49.

quickly became overshadowed by the work of Karl Ludwig Schmidt, whose differentiation between *Hochliteratur* and *Kleinliteratur* came to dominate the scene in Gospel studies with the rise of form criticism.⁷ The Gospels were assigned to the class of *Kleinliteratur*, synonymous with “folk” literature, and believed to be essentially series of pericopae incoherently joined together like pearls on a string, the forms of which were understood as corresponding entirely to their history of oral tradition. This also bore the implication that the Gospels were not shaped by individual authors, an assumption that debarred matters of authorial intent.

Schmidt’s work was supported by other major form critics such as Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann.⁸ A few years prior to Schmidt’s influential work Dibelius described the Synoptic Gospels as follows: “Without a doubt these are unliterary writings. They should not and cannot be compared with ‘literary’ works” (the German words Dibelius used for “unliterary writings” and “literary works” were also *Kleinliteratur* and *Hochliteratur*).⁹ Dibelius also held to the view that the Gospels incorporated units where their setting was in the life of the church, and the most important factor in their development of the tradition was their use for preaching: “the manner in which the doings of Jesus was [*sic*] narrated was determined by the requirements of the sermon.”¹⁰ The height of this view of the Gospels as folk literature was reached in Bultmann’s *Die*

7. Schmidt, “Die Stellung der Evangelien” (ET: *Place of the Gospels*).

8. See Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (ET: *From Tradition to Gospel*); Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (ET: *History of the Synoptic Tradition*). Dibelius acknowledges that the Gospel authors exercised some influence, but this was as “collectors, vehicles of tradition, editors,” and so their influence only went as far as “the choice, limitation, and the final shaping of the material, but not with the original moulding” (*From Tradition to Gospel*, 3). For an overview of the influence and method of Dibelius and Bultmann, see Dvorak, “Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann,” 257–77.

9. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 2.

10. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 26; see also Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 275.

Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition (published in 1921 with two revised editions following in 1931 and 1957) where he determined that there were no parallels to the Gospels in the “Greek Tradition”; the Gospels comprised individual components containing elements of Greek mythic and cultic legends, they had no “historical-biographical interest,” and they did not reflect the “cultivated techniques of composition necessary for grand literature” (*hohe Literatur* in German).¹¹ As a result of German form-critical research, the predominant view emerged that the Gospels “are a unique phenomenon in the history of literature” and are “an original creation of Christianity” (i.e., *sui generis*).¹² The aim of all of this work, however, was not to identify the genre of the Gospels. Instead, the purpose of form criticism according to Bultmann was to study the oral tradition behind the Gospels,¹³ which he believed began in the primitive Palestinian church, but he still concluded that the written Gospel form itself originated with Mark in the Hellenistic church for the purpose of proclaiming the kerygma of the Christ myth.¹⁴ The conclusion, then, that the Gospels were a kind of unique, extended folk legend was not the main answer the form critics were searching for, but it resulted from the outworking of focusing on the situation of the early church where the Gospels took their written form, and it is observable that the Gospels’ purpose and their generic identity were actually mutually informative at this stage in the history of Gospel studies.

The next few decades after Bultmann’s *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* witnessed several critiques of form criticism in the areas of oral history and oral tradition theories, literary criticism, and especially redaction criticism, which recovered the Gospel writers’ creative influence over their

11. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 371–73.

12. Bultmann, “Gospels,” 89; Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 373–74.

13. Bultmann, “Study of the Synoptic Gospels,” 11.

14. Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 285; Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 368.

writing.¹⁵ Surprisingly, with the locus of meaning having shifted from the early Christian communities back to the author, some redaction critics continued to accept the view that the Gospels were a unique genre.¹⁶ However, this was not the case for all redaction critics, and with renewed interest in the author's intention the question of the Gospels' genre was naturally reopened. It is not necessary here to discuss in detail the many works that have taken different views of the Gospel genres. These are covered in the available surveys that tend to begin around 1965 with Moses Hadas and Morton Smith's argument that the Gospels exemplified a genre of aretology (a spiritual biography of which no example has been found in antiquity) and work through the various other proposals that the Gospels are analogous to the "divine man" (θεῖος ἀνὴρ) genre, Old Testament literature, midrash, Rabbinic biography, lectionaries, or the many other genres belonging to the Greco-Roman milieu; these have been sufficiently surveyed and re-surveyed.¹⁷ Other studies still take a "derivational"¹⁸ approach to the Gospels, investigating the process of how they developed; these studies tend to hold onto the idea that the Gospels are a unique genre.¹⁹ However, the derivational approaches are usually rejected out of hand by those employing literary genre theory because genres are defined as a kind of "contract" between author and reader whereby certain patterns and conventions are followed by an author to provide the reader with a framework for interpreting the meaning of a

15. For a brief review of these critiques, see Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 12–15.

16. See, for example, Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism*, 74, who refers to the Gospels as a "unique literary product of early Christianity."

17. See Shuler, *Genre for the Gospels*, 15–23; Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 16–23; Diehl, "What Is a 'Gospel,'" 176–79.

18. I am using the term "derivational" here in the same sense as Robert Guelich ("Gospel Genre," 183–208), who divides the theories of the Gospels' genre between analogical and derivational approaches, where derivational connotes the idea that the Gospels derive their genre from the unique way they came into being through history, thus arguing that they are *sui generis*.

19. See Diehl, "What Is a 'Gospel,'" 180–83.

text.²⁰ This makes the idea that the Gospels are *sui generis* both impossible and nonsensical; a genre cannot be created *ex nihilo* because, as the argument goes, they are dependent on established patterns and conventions, and if a new genre were to be created, then it would not make sense to a reader because it would not follow any known framework for interpretation.

The scholarship on which I focus in this article is that on which the current consensus regarding the Gospels' genre stands. In an article published in 2015, Steven Walton claimed that "A quiet revolution has taken place in the scholarly understanding of the Gospel genre since the publication of Richard Burridge's *What Are the Gospels?* in 1992, reversing the earlier consensus that the canonical Gospels should not be considered biographies."²¹ Walton then goes on to attribute the establishing of the consensus wholly to Burridge: "Burridge's work was rapidly seen as highly significant, not to say game-changing, in understanding the genre of the Gospels, and his conclusions were widely accepted. This sea change in scholarship is Burridge's major contribution to the scholarly world."²²

As for the accuracy of Walton's claim, he does not seem to fully appreciate the influence of previous monographs written in the years leading up to Burridge's book that argued for the Gospels as belonging to the genre of ancient biography or *βίος*. This is surprising because Burridge himself does not claim to be making a novel argument or reviving a long-lost hypothesis. He in fact represents his own work as building on the previous arguments made by Charles Talbert, Philip Shuler, and others who had been arguing for the generic identity of the Gospels as biography since the mid-1970s.²³ It may be that Walton's

20. Dubrow, *Genre*, 31; Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 147.

21. Walton, "What Are the Gospels," 81.

22. Walton, "What Are the Gospels," 86–87.

23. See Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 78–101; Talbert, *What Is a Gospel*; Talbert, *Literary Patterns*, 125–40; Talbert, "Once Again"; Shuler, *Genre for the Gospels*. See also the earlier work of Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, esp. 117–36, who at this point does not argue that the Gospels are *βίοι* but takes the stance that it is helpful to compare the Gospels with Greco-Roman biography as a means of appreciating how they sought to preserve the

language of “revolution,” “new consensus,” and “wide acceptance” is motivated by the desire to attract readers’ attention—it is a bit sensationalized—but this appears to have come at the cost of fairly representing the field of study, which came about through a wave of works over the course of about two decades and only culminated with Burridge’s work. Nevertheless, despite some overstatement, Walton sufficiently demonstrates that scholarship since Burridge has generally held to Burridge’s conclusions, and Burridge’s work is still considered by most to be the most thorough study applying genre criticism to the Gospels. There is now a distinct way that Gospel scholars are led to think about the category of genre and what modern genre theory can address—namely, the question concerning the Gospels’ generic identity.

An important observation can be made of the current state of Gospel research based on this brief historical sketch. As discussed above, the form critics considered the setting of the Gospels in their contemporary literary environment as a central focus in their research. They also considered the purpose of the Gospels in their social contexts. This is subtly but distinctly different than only investigating the Gospels’ contemporary literary environment, which is where scholars such as Burridge begin their work. In other words, the ways in which the social setting, oral tradition, and social purpose influenced the generic identity of the Gospels have been relegated to the background or even lost since the decline of form criticism.²⁴ This view was replaced by means of comparative analyses of how the Gospels display various similar formal features and content with the genres used in the Hellenistic literary environment. Despite

memories of Jesus.

24. This decline, however, was very gradual and probably experienced its lowest point with the work of Burridge. For instance, in Larry Hurtado’s 1992 article in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, he represented the state of the question of the Gospels’ genre as follows: “The impetus for the Gospels derives from the religious complexion and needs of early Christianity; and their contents, presuppositions, major themes and literary texture are all heavily influenced by their immediate religious setting as well” (“Gospel (Genre),” 282).

German form criticism's shortcomings, such as presupposing that the Gospels have no historical interest and ignoring the influence of eyewitness testimony on oral tradition, the shift from considering the situation of the early church in their wider cultural milieu to only considering ancient literary media makes a substantial impact on the contextual constraints informing how scholars make interpretive decisions about the Gospels' genre. They are indeed much looser, and this misses many of the main concerns of modern genre theory, which defines genre according to the kinds of situations that occasion particular kinds of texts and what these texts accomplish in those situations, rather than according to a set of formal features. To apply genre criticism in a more reliable way, then, the form-critical sensibility of considering contextual factors, such as the social setting of the Gospel tradition, needs to be brought back into focus. More could be said here, but these observations are enough to warrant an evaluation of current genre criticism in Gospel studies as it has been influenced by Burridge's work. In the discussion that follows I will demonstrate that Burridge's use of genre criticism was both muddled and outdated with regards to modern genre theory even at the time of the publication of the first edition of his work, and that, with the progress in genre research accomplished over the last couple of decades, there is much to be questioned in Burridge's methodology, which also bears implications for his widely accepted thesis.

3. An Evaluation of Current Genre Criticism in Gospel Studies

Genre is a term used across many disciplines, including literary studies, cultural studies, art studies, and the like. When Burridge and others in Gospel research address the question of the generic identity of the Gospels, they conceptualize genre according to its literary sense (this is not to imply that the term has only one sense within literary studies). Thus, when the question is posed, "What are the Gospels?" this is asking about the class of literature to which the Gospels belong. In reviewing the second chapter of Burridge's monograph where he describes his theory

of genre criticism, one notices that he draws from many literary theorists. Burridge even states, “Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this study, there will be copious quotation and reference to literary theorists for the benefit of those unfamiliar with this area.”²⁵ There are at least five main figures that stand out as prominent in this chapter: Heather Dubrow, Alastair Fowler, E.D. Hirsch, and the co-authors René Wellek and Austin Warren, though other theorists are referred to as well, such as Jonathan Culler, Tzvetán Todorov, and more.²⁶ I will consider each of these literary theorists below, but it should not go unnoticed here that the only major literary work referred to in Burridge’s chapter that was written in the decade preceding the publication of his book is Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature* (Burridge does not update this section in his 2004 second edition). This is significant, because problems have been shown to characterize these theorists’ work since 1992 and genre theory has moved on from them. I will discuss Burridge’s use of Fowler, Hirsch, Wellek and Warren, and Culler in turn to tease out the problems that arise from using these theorists, and especially the issues that arise by pairing them together for methodological purposes.

Burridge begins his treatment of genre criticism by explaining that “much modern literary theory sees literature and literary works as operating within frameworks of conventions and expectations. Chief among these is the notion of genre: ‘Every work of literature belongs to at least one genre. Indeed, it is sure to have a significant generic element.’”²⁷ Accepting this statement made by Fowler, Burridge explains that literary theorists usually take a nominalistic approach to genre by creating a taxonomy to account for different kinds of literary works; this is helpful because one has a name (i.e., a genre) to associate with an object (i.e., a set of patterns and conventions).

25. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 26.

26. For the major works of these literary scholars from which Burridge draws, see Dubrow, *Genre*; Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*; Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 68–126; Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 226–37.

27. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 26, quoting Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 20.

However, the simple act of giving something a name does not actually help in understanding the properties of that object; naming or classifying is simply a device to aid communication. Acknowledging this, Burridge emphasizes the importance of accounting for what genres do for texts. Here, Burridge follows Wellek and Warren's explanation that genres are "institutions" that are regulative; "we must conceive of genre as a 'regulative' concept, some underlying pattern, a convention which is real, i.e. effective because it actually moulds the writing of concrete works."²⁸ The methods of nominalizing and prescribing regulating strictures to the real patterns of writing are seen as complementary in Burridge's approach. Further, still following Fowler, Burridge makes use of the Wittgensteinian concept of "family resemblances," which is used to help in classifying genres when the conventions and patterns of a particular genre become blurred in particular instances. Burridge construes "family resemblances" as complementing the nominalizing (or classifying) practice because it considers the shared features that a certain number of instances have in common and can thus cope with the "fuzziness" of genres, which do not display identical conventions but have enough likeness to be grouped together under the same name.²⁹ Quoting Fowler, Burridge goes as far as to claim that "Family resemblance theory seems to hold out the best hope to the genre critic."³⁰ Burridge's conception of literary theory is thus summed up in the statement, "The term 'genre' includes ideas of pattern, class, type and family resemblance."³¹

Burridge moves on to discuss the element of "expectations" attributed to genres by other literary theorists. Here, Burridge leaves Fowler and begins drawing more heavily from Hirsch, and there is a distinct shift from discussing how genres are described or classified to what genres do for the relationship

28. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 32, quoting Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 261–62.

29. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 38.

30. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 39, quoting Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 42.

31. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 43.

between writer and reader based on their conventions—they are thus defined as “sets of expectations.”³² According to Hirsch, genre is a system of expectations; genre is constituted by the elements that a reader will use to understand a text.³³ Thus, the understanding of genre shifts from what it is in an objective sense to how it is interpreted from the subjective perspective of a reader/interpreter. Unfortunately, a significant contradiction in logic takes place in Burridge’s thought here on account of the mutually exclusive definitions of genre as a class (following the view of Fowler) and as a classifying statement (following the logical outcome of Hirsch’s work). In the next two sections I will explore these two views of genre and will point out some of the problems that Burridge creates by bringing them together. I will then show how the other theorists mentioned by Burridge complexify these problems even further.

3.1 *The Problem of Classification*

Classifying objects is a common practice of everyday life. We classify clothing, food, tools, and all kinds of things. John Frow explains that these “accounts of taxonomy tend to take as their prototype the powerful and rigorous models that have been developed in the sciences: the periodic table of the chemical elements, the Linnaean schema for organizing the orders of the natural world, the Darwinian model of the evolution of species.”³⁴ Frow goes on to explain that it “has been above all the model of the biological species, building on the organic connotations of the concepts of ‘kind’ and ‘genre’, that has been used to bring the authority of a scientific discourse to genre theory.”³⁵ Due to the nature of organizing in this manner, we tend to assume that all objects belong to a workable system of classification for which there are three primary properties: (1)

32. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 33.

33. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 75.

34. Frow, *Genre*, 56.

35. Frow, *Genre*, 57. Frow identifies Ferdinand Brunetière’s *Evolution of Genres in Literary History* (*L’Évolution des genres*) as a key text that exemplifies this way of thinking about genres.

“there are consistent, unique classificatory principles in operation,” (2) “the categories are mutually exclusive,” and (3) “the system is complete.”³⁶ This way of thinking has permeated the whole field of genre theory as explained by Rick Altman:

Reinvented by virtually every student of genre since Brunetière, scientific justification of genre study serves to convince theorists that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically, that their internal functioning can be observed and scientifically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory.³⁷

When confronted with reality, however, there are no systems in the world that rigidly conform to these properties; “in every system principles are mixed, and there are anomalies and ambiguities which the system sorts out as best it can,” and this scheme is particularly unhelpful for thinking about genre because genres are facts of culture, not facts of nature.³⁸ As a result, several objections have been levied against using this biological model of species and evolution in genre theory. First, the development of genres is not based on genetic continuity, and therefore is not determined by the same kinds of determining forces of evolution as befits biological organisms. Second, genres can be “cross-pollinated” (to use an ironic metaphor from biology), which is a genetic impossibility for two different genera; dogs, for example, cannot be cross-bred with dolphins or with dinosaurs, but genres can be mixed with or subsumed in other genres at any time from any time period. Third, in biology an organism can only exemplify the species to which it belongs, whereas individual texts “to some extent modif[y] or change the group,”³⁹ and so the properties of a text cannot be completely derived from the genre to which it belongs.⁴⁰

Some literary theorists, such as Fowler, have attempted to mitigate the problems created by adhering too much to the

36. Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 10–11.

37. Altman, *Film/Genre*, 6.

38. Frow, *Genre*, 56–58, the quotation is from p. 56.

39. Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*, 21.

40. Frow, *Genre*, 58.

biological metaphor of species by using another biological metaphor of family resemblance, a concept developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, which apparently helps to cope with blurred boundaries. Fowler explains the logic of family resemblance in the following way: “[R]epresentatives of a genre may . . . be regarded as making up a possible class whose septs [i.e. classes] and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all.”⁴¹ It is apparent that this idea is very important to Burridge when he states, “The genre of βίος is flexible and diverse, with variation in the pattern of features from one βίος to another. . . . [The Gospels] have at least as much in common with Graeco-Roman βίοι as the βίοι with each other.”⁴² Frow, however, explains that using “likeness” as the criterion for classification creates the issue of determining where the line of dissimilarity is to be drawn; what are the criteria that determine when a family resemblance does not exist?⁴³ This objection to family resemblance theory has been voiced since at least Earl Miner’s 1986 article “Some Issues of Literary ‘Species, or Distinct Kind,’” but Burridge shows no recognition of it in his work and also fails to indicate where the line of dissimilarity should be drawn for the Gospels.⁴⁴ Further, Andrew W. Pitts, who critiques Burridge’s method in his doctoral dissertation, demonstrates that Burridge’s argument, based on likeness (or “detection criteria”), fails to account for any disambiguation criteria between βίοι and history.⁴⁵ Pitts himself then develops several disambiguation criteria to be able to distinguish between history and βίος, which addresses the problem of adopting the heuristic metaphor of “family resemblance.”⁴⁶ However, in focusing his critique on finding ways to evaluate how two genres are different (i.e., history and βίος), Pitts continues in the practice

41. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 41.

42. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 250.

43. Frow, *Genre*, 59.

44. See Miner, “Some Issues of Literary ‘Species,’” 24.

45. Pitts, “Genre of the Third Gospel,” 14.

46. See Pitts, “Genre of the Third Gospel,” esp. chs. 3 and 4.

of conceptualizing genre according to the biological model of classification, which is the larger problem that has still gone unaddressed in Gospel studies.

That the biological model still influences how we think about genres today is attested by the refinement of the theory of family resemblances in cognitive psychology that has been developed into the concept of prototype for classification, where “prototype” refers to “the postulate that we understand categories . . . through a very concrete logic of typicality.”⁴⁷ In other words, when we classify an object, we do so according to a prototypical image we have in our minds of what it is that the object in question represents.⁴⁸ For instance, for a concept such as *bird*, a sparrow or bluebird would be more central to the category, while a penguin or an ostrich would be situated at the edge of the concept where the category becomes fuzzy. Therefore, categories do not have clear, fixed boundaries, but, rather, a common core, and this makes the notion of “fuzziness” or “blurred edges” central to prototype theory.⁴⁹ Frow offers an example of classifying according to prototypes that bears implications for the genre of the Gospels:

The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Paradise Lost* are all texts that we class as epics, but the *Iliad* is the prototype we use to determine the category into which the others fall; and, using another prototype, we might well class the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Paradise Lost* with religious narratives such as the biblical *Genesis*. The judgment we make (“is it like this, or is it more like that?”) is as much pragmatic as it is conceptual, a matter of how we wish to contextualize these texts and the uses we wish to make of them.⁵⁰

If a work then can be classified as belonging to two different genres (or three, or four) depending on the features one chooses to isolate for comparison, then this indicates that the practice of classifying in itself is based on pragmatic choices, a limited scope, and even personal preferences and motivations.

47. Frow, *Genre*, 59.

48. Paltridge, *Genre*, 53.

49. Paltridge, *Genre*, 54.

50. Frow, *Genre*, 59.

Based on this discussion alone, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that when we are considering questions about the genre of the Gospels, we should not be primarily concerned with asking questions such as “What class of genre do the Gospels belong to?” or simply “What are the Gospels?” because the biological model assumed in these questions, if pressed, entails that our answers will not be entirely objective and hence no single answer can be deemed to be correct.

3.2 *The Problem of Property vs. Projection*

There is another problem that arises when we consider the interpretation of genres with regard to generic identity. Burridge considers the debate that has ensued in the fields of literary studies and philosophical hermeneutics concerning valid and invalid interpretation.⁵¹ He acknowledges the concept of the “intentionalist fallacy” and views put forward by post-structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes who espoused the “death of the author,” as well as the reader-response critical view that understands meaning as belonging solely to the interaction between reader and text.⁵² Cutting through what is an extremely complicated conversation that continues to move towards the emergence of more diverse views rather than consensus, Burridge uses Hirsch’s work *Validity in Interpretation* to position himself as one supporting the view that authorial intention is a necessary component for understanding genre:

Hirsch’s “Defence of the author” (the title of chapter 1 of *Validity in Interpretation*) reasserts the importance of genre: “Understanding can occur only if the interpreter proceeds under the same system of expectations [as the speaker/author used], and this shared generic conception, constitutive both of meaning and of understanding, is the intrinsic genre of the utterance.”⁵³

51. See Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 49–50.

52. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 49. Cf. Barthes, “Death of the Author.”

53. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 49, quoting Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 80–81.

According to Hirsch, then, a genre is neither a group of texts that share similar features nor a list of central structural features that define a class, but an interpretive process instigated by the fact that “all understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound.”⁵⁴ Therefore, by genre, Hirsch means the guess that readers make about the kind of thing a text is—that is, its intrinsic determinate logic, which allows readers to make accurate inferences about meaning.⁵⁵ The initial impression a reader has, or their “preliminary generic conception,” is then constitutive of everything that is understood thereafter, and this remains the same unless some cue in the text prompts the reader to change his or her conception.⁵⁶ Frow explains that Hirsch’s explanation is flawed here, however, due to his concept of the “intrinsic genre” of a text located in the author’s intention, “which [Hirsch] understands as a norm yielding the possibility of ‘correct’ interpretation.”⁵⁷ But because the intrinsic genre is always guessed, or *projected* onto a text, by a reader, and since the genre is never explicitly given by the author, a point Hirsch concedes,⁵⁸ Hirsch’s case against the validity of multiple interpretations is correctly judged by Frow as wishful thinking.⁵⁹

The next logical step we have to take, if we go along with Hirsch’s view that a genre is a projection onto a text by a reader about the kind of thing it is, is that we must conclude that a genre does not belong to a text in any objective sense; a genre is not a property of the text, but rather is a decision made about a text, or a projection, thus making genre an imputed category.⁶⁰ There are literary theorists who are willing to embrace this outcome, such as Adena Rosmarin, who plainly claims that “genre is not, as is commonly thought, a class but, rather, a classifying statement,” which is made by the reader/listener.⁶¹ Therefore, by integrating

54. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 76.

55. Frow, *Genre*, 110.

56. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 74.

57. Frow, *Genre*, 111.

58. See Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 88.

59. Frow, *Genre*, 111.

60. Frow, *Genre*, 111.

61. Rosmarin, *Power of Genre*, 25.

Fowler's and Hirsch's notions of genre together, Burridge has mixed mutually exclusive understandings of genre. The problems do not end here, however, but continue to compound as structuralist literary critics are brought into his discussion.

3.3 *The Problem with Institutional Language*

If one employs analogical language to talk about genre, then perhaps the most productive metaphor would be the metaphor used by Wellek and Warren that genres are like institutions, because here literary theory interfaces with semiotics, and in dealing with genres we are dealing with language in use. They state:

The literary kind is an 'institution'—as Church, University, or State is an institution. It exists not as an animal exists or even as a building, chapel, or capital, but as an institution exists. One can work through, express oneself through, existing institutions, create new ones, or get on, so far as possible, without sharing in politics or rituals; one can also join, but then reshape, institutions.⁶²

Jonathan Culler, a structuralist from whom Burridge draws, explains that "actions are meaningful only with respect to a set of institutional conventions," and "a genre, one might say, is a conventional function of language."⁶³ Fredric Jameson adds a sociocultural dimension to this view: "Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact."⁶⁴ Burridge draws on the idea of "contract" from both Dubrow and Culler,⁶⁵ but he does not perceive how using this metaphor mixes like oil and water with the biological models explained above. Wellek and Warren's explanation that language users can choose to create new literary institutions (i.e., genres) by reshaping them does not square with

62. Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 226.

63. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 5, 136. Cf. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 33.

64. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 106.

65. See Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 34. Cf. Dubrow, *Genre*, 31; Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 147.

the biological reality that organisms cannot choose to reshape their species but are completely determined by the species to which they belong according to the forces of Darwinian evolution. Accordingly, the problem I wish to raise here is not with the analogical language of institutions and contracts itself, which supplies certain helpful insights for genre theory, but with how Burridge uses this metaphor with other incompatible metaphors for genre.

3.4 *Synthesizing the Problem*

As a result of considering the literary theories of Fowler, Hirsch, Wellek and Warren, Dubrow, Culler, and others, there are several issues that I have identified in Burridge's work that have previously gone unnoticed by biblical scholars, especially with regards to problems that arise from his bringing incompatible ideas together. Burridge depends on three mutually incompatible metaphors for genres (biological species, family resemblances, and social institutions). He also holds two mutually exclusive understandings of genre in tension with one another. On the one hand, he asserts that genre can be a class, where the notion of genre refers to a *property* of a text; on the other hand, he asserts that genre can be a classifying statement, where genre is conceived as an *imputed category of the function of reading*. Not only are these views mutually exclusive (i.e. genre cannot be both at the same time), but there are problems with each of them. Genres do not in reality reflect the biological model that is traditionally imposed on them, and it is difficult for most to accept that an author plays no part in determining the genre of a text. To overcome these problems, Burridge wants to be able to hold all of the work of a wide variety of literary theorists together to ultimately explain genre as a fuzzy class that functions as a "contract" between writer and reader, but the field of literary criticism as he uses it consists of so much heterogeneity that there remains no secure theoretical foundation on which to say anything authoritative about the question of genre for the Gospels.

According to Burridge, then, a genre is the name that a work of literature is assigned, the class in a taxonomy to which a work

of literature belongs, a conventional function of language, a set of expectations, and a guess about what kind of thing a text is. These elements can also be blurred, shifted, developed, mixed, and brought into different kinds of relationships with each other. With no surprise, then, Burridge offers no clear or simply-stated definition of genre in his explanation of genre criticism. Instead, he follows the diachronic development of genre theory from Plato to the “present” (around 1970 according to his bibliography) allowing the concept of genre to take on features from each stage of its development and from multiple (often mutually opposed) literary theorists, which results in an ever-complexifying and self-contradictory understanding of genre. What results from this explanation is a mixed bag of definitions, the definitions themselves relying on different metaphors for genre, and so Burridge moves on to classify the Gospels based on a mixed bag of mixed metaphors as it were—a procedure that is undermined from the start due to a confused misappropriation of genre theory.

Therefore, we need a new way forward that avoids the problems created by the genre criticism as biblical scholars have thus far conceived of it. It is my contention that genre theory as developed in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a productive way forward because it does not use analogical models as the primary entry point for theorizing about and describing the features of genres. Instead, SFL genre theory is developed principally from a social semiotic understanding of language and so is constrained by a linguistic model that accounts for meaning at every stratum as meaning is mediated through patterns of realization. Moreover, because SFL genre theory understands language as context-bound, it can reconnect questions concerning the genre of the Gospels with the social situations that gave rise to the Gospels, and so pick up the conversation, in one sense, where form criticism left off.

4. *SFL Genre Theory*

In approaching genre from a SFL perspective, there are some key differences from what genre usually means in literary studies, where genres commonly refer to types of literary productions, such as poems, novels, stories, etc., or the typical subclasses of these categories, such as epics, lyrics, ballads, etc.⁶⁶ The first difference is that genre is given a distinctive linguistic definition that is drawn from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who identifies speech genres (both oral and written) as “relatively stable types” of interpersonal utterances, which include both everyday (e.g., transactional) and literary genres.⁶⁷ The second difference is that genres are defined by their function with regard to their social purpose.⁶⁸ J.R. Martin, the systemic-functional linguist who has done the most work to advance genre theory in SFL, has developed two definitions of genre. First, “a genre is a staged, goal-oriented, social process. Social because we participate in genres with other people; goal-oriented because we use genres to get things done; staged because it usually takes us a few steps to reach our goals.”⁶⁹ His second, more general definition is: “Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them.”⁷⁰ In what follows I will briefly

66. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 235.

67. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236, quoting from Bakhtin, “Problem of Speech Genres,” 60.

68. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236.

69. Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*, 8. This is revised from Martin’s earlier definition: “A genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (“Language,” 25).

70. Martin, “Process and Text,” 248. SFL genre theory is not the only player in the game that seeks to understand genre in this way. The two main alternatives are the New Rhetoric and frame semantics. For instance, with the New Rhetoric, regulating social and situational variables constitutes the conditions in which genres are used, and the relationship between textual structures and the situations that occasion them has been the focus of much recent work on the rhetorical aspect of genre, where genre is understood “as a structured complex which has a strategic character and interacts with the demands of an environment” (Frow, *Genre*, 14). Going even further in connecting genre to situational variables, Kathleen Jamieson and Karlyn

describe the SFL model of text and context for the purpose of situating genre within it. I will then sketch the necessary criteria for doing genre analysis and consider how a (preliminary) genre analysis conducted within this framework can yield more productive results for understanding the Gospels as genres.

4.1 *Modeling Text and Context in SFL*

In interpreting genre, Martin and Rose were highly influenced by M.A.K. Halliday's model of language as text in context, whereby Halliday describes social context as "the total environment in which a text unfolds."⁷¹ Halliday's work built on the insights of Bronislaw Malinowski, whose understanding of "the meaning of any significant word, sentence or phrase is the effective change brought about by the utterance within the context of the situation to which it is wedded."⁷² From Malinowski, Halliday described context on two levels—context of situation and context of culture, and a text can only be understood when both of these are adequately taken into account.⁷³ "Conversely," Martin and Rose explain, "we could say that speakers' cultures are instantiated in

Campbell state, "a genre is composed of a constellation of recognisable forms bound together by an internal dynamic," where this dynamic is a "fusion of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements" that operate as potential "strategic responses to the demands of the situation" ("Rhetorical Hybrids," 146). Thus, genres should not be defined in terms of their internal structure, "but by the actions they are used to accomplish" (Frow, *Genre*, 14). This represents a striking similarity to the orientation of SFL genre theory, though SFL still emphasizes the importance of structure as well. Frame semantics as exemplified by Brian Paltridge's work and others' also shares similar aspects in orientation to genre with SFL as well. See Paltridge, *Genre*. For a more extensive list of works on genre theory from the perspectives of the New Rhetoric and frame semantics, see Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 18. However, SFL genre theory still has its own distinguishing features; these are, among others: it is "social rather than cognitive," "social semiotic rather than ethnographic," "integrated with a functional theory of language rather than interdisciplinary" (Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 18).

71. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 5, quoted in Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 8.

72. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, 213.

73. See Halliday, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, 5–8.

each situation in which they interact, and that each interactional situation is manifested verbally as unfolding text, i.e. as text in context.”⁷⁴ This theory of stratified levels of text and context is visualized in Figure 1.

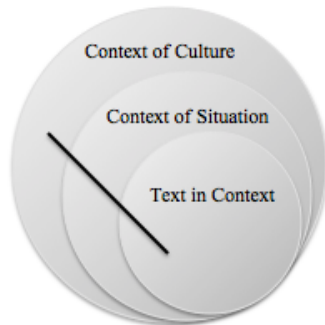


Figure 1: Strata of Language and Context

The line across the strata represents the concept of realization, which Martin and Rose describe as follows:

Realisation is a kind of re-coding—like the mapping of hardware through software to the images and words we see on the screen on our computers. Another way of thinking about this is symbolisation Symbolising is an important aspect of realisation, since grammar both symbolises and encodes discourse, just as discourse both symbolises and encodes social activity. The concept of realisation embodies the meanings of ‘symbolising’, ‘encoding’, ‘expressing’, ‘manifesting’ and so on.⁷⁵

A concrete example of this (somewhat ambiguous) explanation can be made by considering a traffic light. Traffic lights are put up in intersections, which we can conceive as a system that sets up a finite number of possible behaviors—namely, the behaviors of stopping, going, and slowing down. In terms of a sign system, these options make up the content plane, or the meanings that can be realized through some form of representation on the expression plane.⁷⁶ The meanings are realized through the traffic

74. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 8.

75. Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*, 4–6.

76. Martin uses the terms “content plane” and “expression plane”

light, which has three forms of expression—red, green, and yellow. These colors, comprising the expression plane, encode, symbolize, express—they realize—the different possible meanings of the content plane.⁷⁷ SFL models the relationship between social context, discourse, and grammar in this way: “The relation between these strata is described in SFL as realization: social contexts are realized as texts which are realized as sequences of clauses.”⁷⁸

Realization, for Martin, also entails Jay Lemke’s concept of meta-redundancy,⁷⁹ which explains that patterns at one stratum redound with the patterns at other levels, “so patterns of social organisation in a culture are realised as patterns of social interaction in each context of situation, which in turn are realised as patterns of discourse in each text.”⁸⁰ This bears importance for the level of genre because “if each text realises patterns in a social situation, and each situation realises patterns in a culture,” then we need to consider at which stratum genre should be situated.⁸¹ Since the same genres can be written or spoken in various situations, it is necessary, according to Martin, to place genre at the level of context of culture. This can be clarified by further explanation of SFL’s model of context and text.

In Halliday’s work on context he links three kinds of social functions of language to context of situation: field, tenor, and mode. Field refers to what is going on; it concerns the sequences of activities, the participants involved in them, as well as the

according to the Hjelmslevian division between connotative and denotative semiotics. Cf. Hjelmselv, *Prolegomena*, esp. 114–25. A connotative semiotic has another semiotic system as its expression plane, whereas a denotative semiotic has its own expression plane. Accordingly, “register is a connotative semiotic realised through language” (Martin and White, *Language of Evaluation*, 27). On the other hand, “language is a denotative semiotic realising social context” (Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 15).

77. This example is taken from Eggins, *Introduction*, 14.

78. Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*, 4.

79. See Lemke, *Semiotics and Education*, 35–39; Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 104–5.

80. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 9.

81. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 9.

other things, places, and qualities at work in the social action taking place.⁸² Tenor refers to the social relations of who is taking part; this variable does not simply consider who is involved (an aspect of field), but how those involved relate to one another in their roles according to the two tenor variables of status (power) and solidarity.⁸³ Mode refers to how communication is channeled and the role participants expect language to play; it involves “the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context.”⁸⁴ When viewed from the perspective of language, field, tenor, and mode constitute the context of situation for a text, and Martin refers to this configuration of a text as its register.⁸⁵ Because registers can vary, field, tenor, and mode are referred to as register variables, and as these variables change, so do the patterned meanings of a text.⁸⁶

The three register variables also help to organize the SFL model for the purpose of describing how language redounds with social context. Language consists of three metafunctions according to Halliday; these are the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The ideational metafunction refers to how language construes experiences, and so relates to the field of discourse. The interpersonal metafunction enacts social relationships, and so relates to the tenor of discourse. The textual metafunction organizes discourse, and so relates to the mode of discourse. In Martin’s model, which differs here somewhat from Halliday’s,⁸⁷ the metafunctions are realized at the level of

82. Halliday, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, 12.

83. See Halliday, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, 12. But for additional clarification on the roles of status and solidarity, see Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 11. Cf. Dvorak, “Prodding with Prosody,” 88–90.

84. Halliday, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, 12.

85. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 10.

86. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 10.

87. For a comparison of the different ways register is theorized by Halliday and Martin, see Martin, *English Text*, 497–502. Cf. Dvorak, “Interpersonal Metafunction,” 25–26. Halliday and Martin also use different names for the stratum above lexicogrammar; Halliday’s semantics stratum corresponds with Martin’s discourse semantic stratum, but they are not

discourse semantics, which pertains to the meanings made “beyond the clause.”⁸⁸ However, the metafunctions should be understood as operative at every linguistic stratum, including lexicogrammar and graphology, which are the more concrete cycles of coding through which the metafunctions are realized—hence the prefix “meta.”⁸⁹ This model, therefore, in good Hjelmslevian fashion, sets up field, tenor, and mode, conceptualized as register for Martin, as the content plane of discourse, which is realized through the expression plane of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions of language.

For work in SFL that was done in the late 1970s and 1980s, field, tenor, and mode operated as the framework for studying the social context of text types, where text types refer to collected texts that have been grouped and generalized according to their similar instantiated register variables.⁹⁰ This left open the question of how to deal with genre.⁹¹ In Halliday’s earlier work, genre was handled with the mode of discourse.⁹² Also, Martin

synonymous. This is not the place to go into an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of these models. Rather, from here on, I will adopt Martin’s model and terminology because his model easily incorporates later insights from SFL’s extensive research into genre, whereas Halliday’s does not.

88. See Martin and White, *Language of Evaluation*, 9. Martin and Rose model six systems that function on the level of discourse semantics. The systems of ideation and conjunction pertain to the ideational metafunction (though conjunction has overlap with the textual and interpersonal metafunctions as well), the systems of appraisal and negotiation pertain to the interpersonal metafunction, and the systems of periodicity and identification pertain to the textual metafunction (*Working with Discourse*).

89. Commenting on the use of the term “metafunction” Halliday and Matthiessen write, “[S]ystemic analysis shows that functionality is intrinsic to language: that is to say, the entire architecture of language is arranged along functional lines. Language is as it is because of the functions in which it has evolved in the human species. The term ‘metafunction’ was adopted to suggest that function was an integral component within the overall theory” (*Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 31).

90. See Hasan, “Place of Context,” 169; Martin and White, *Language of Evaluation*, 24–25.

91. Around 1980 is where Martin and Rose pick up the topic of genre in the development of SFL (*Genre Relations*, 15).

92. See Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 62–63.

and Rose are under the impression that Ruqaiya Hasan, another prominent figure in SFL, located genre in the field of discourse according to her notion of “obligatory elements” that texts must have to be considered a particular genre.⁹³ However, with her notion of generic structure potential there are unmistakable mode determinants for genre in Hasan’s thought as well.⁹⁴ Martin, however, being influenced especially by Bakhtin, saw that tenor was also an important (if not the most important)⁹⁵ variable for genre (Bakhtin, as mentioned earlier, described genres generally as culturally stable, interpersonal utterances). Genre, then, in SFL has been rethought and remodeled as particular configurations of field, tenor, and mode, but differing from text types because genres can vary independently from registers—“they c[an] be spoken or written [varying in mode], and their producers and audience c[an] be close or distant, equal or unequal [varying in tenor].”⁹⁶ As a result, Martin places genre at the level of context of culture where it can be configured as a pattern of register patterns, and this means that genre is a multi-functional category determined by field, tenor, and mode but culturally constrained and enacted for particular purposes.

Moreover, in their research Martin and Rose found that field, tenor, and mode choices in context were much more constrained than ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in grammar. They concluded that this was because cultures use a limited, albeit large, set of genres that are recognizable to those in the culture rather than allowing an “unpredictable jungle of social situations.”⁹⁷ The benefit of this finding for modeling genre at

93. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 15. Cf. Hasan, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, esp. 108.

94. See Hasan, in Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context and Text*, 108.

95. That Martin seemingly places tenor as the predominant variable for genre can be observed in the way he uses similar language to describe what genres do compared with the way he describes what the interpersonal metafunction does. Martin explains that cultures *enact* genres for specific purposes, much like the interpersonal metafunction *enacts* social relations. See, for example, Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 16.

96. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 15.

97. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 16. This conclusion coheres with

the level of context of culture is that cultures can now be mapped “from a semiotic perspective as systems of genres”—that is, according to the definable ways that people use language to accomplish social acts.⁹⁸ Variations occur in cultures, however, depending on levels of access and the varying experience that individuals have with genres. As a result, Martin situates ideology as the highest level of abstraction in his model. The purpose of this is to explain that all language is inextricably connected to power, and power pervades every level of semiosis: genres manage discourse by determining how meaning can be made, tenor establishes social hierarchies through status, and this status is enacted through the interpersonal metafunction of language.⁹⁹ Moreover, other relevant components of power are demonstrated through expertise, which are realized through the ideational and textual metafunctions. Genre, therefore, plays a role in differentiating social subjects, negotiating or exercising power relations, and this is worked out in culture in part by the availability individuals have to certain genres—whether they are aware of them at all or whether they are in a social position to enact them successfully.

4.2 *SFL Genre Analysis*

This explanation of how genre is situated within social context reorients how we think about genre compared to traditional literary descriptions. When we identify the genre of a text, what we are really doing is stating its purpose—that is, the job the text is doing in the culture—and this is what signals to readers/listeners how to interpret the text. Determining the generic identity therefore remains an appropriate task of genre criticism, but generic identity is now defined as what a text achieves (or

and was perhaps influenced by Bakhtin’s reasoning that “if speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible” (“Problem with Speech Genres,” 79).

98. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 16.

99. See Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 18.

attempts to achieve) rather than what a text is. In other words, rather than simply labeling the formal features of a genre and classifying texts accordingly, which says nothing about purpose, SFL genre analysis attempts to identify the functional features of a genre so that the constituent parts of texts can be analyzed according to the functional roles they play. This presupposes that genres are functionally motivated; it is the existence of a cultural goal that initiates the textual production of a particular genre.¹⁰⁰ Suzanne Eggins explains that genres either have pragmatic or interpersonal motivations: pragmatic motivations pertain to more tangible goals such as those of recipes, instruction manuals, check-out procedures at the supermarket, etc.; interpersonal motivations have less tangible goals that pertain mainly to the establishing of social relations.¹⁰¹ I do not think, however, that it is out of the question for both kinds of motivations to be cooperative in texts, especially when one considers that longer genres can have other genres subsumed in them. Further, Eggins and Martin explain that “the major linguistic reflex of differences in purpose is the staging structure by which a text unfolds.”¹⁰² Thus, texts that unfold in different ways have different jobs, and the general purpose of a genre can be modulated according to a complex of motivational factors that initiated it.¹⁰³

SFL genre theory, therefore, accounts for functional variation—that is, how texts are different and the motivations for those differences.¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, genre theory allows for textual

100. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236.

101. Eggins, *Introduction*, 74.

102. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236.

103. One significant drawback for this analysis for the Gospels is that there has not been work done on the staging structures and realization features of different genres of ancient Greek texts from a SFL perspective. This means that, to attempt a genre analysis of the Gospels at this point, a significant number of subjective judgments must be made. However, no genre analysis is entirely devoid of subjectivity, and the principle of metaredundancy allows for analyses to be tested both from the top down and from the bottom up as more advances in research are made. This considered, a genre analysis from a SFL perspective is as good as, if not superior to, any of the other approaches seeking to understand the genre of the Gospels.

104. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236.

prediction because genres are relatively stable utterances, and genre theory allows for contextual deduction because the purpose of a text reveals its context. Eggins and Martin reiterate the latter point as follows: “Given a text, it should be possible to deduce the context in which it was produced, as the linguistic features selected in a text will encode contextual dimensions, both of its immediate context of production and of its generic identity, what task the text is achieving in the culture.”¹⁰⁵ There is no doubt that this task is more complex for narrative discourse where there are dual planes of meaning at play, or what we might call the plane of the story (the meanings made within the narrative itself) and the plane of discourse (the meaning of the text as it applies to the audience). Another complexifying reality, which I mentioned earlier, is that genres can actually have other genres subsumed in them, such as a joke in a lecture. Bakhtin’s observations of this phenomenon are very important for the genre analysis below:

The extreme heterogeneity of speech genres and the attendant difficulty of determining the general nature of the utterance should in no way be underestimated. It is especially important here to draw attention to the very significant difference between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres (understood not as a functional difference). Secondary (complex) speech genres . . . arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others.¹⁰⁶

As an example of this “absorption,” the analysis below considers a prayer, which I will for the moment call a simple genre, recognizing that this prayer only retains its form and significance (what it means for a prayer to be a prayer) in the complex genre of the Gospel of Matthew, and even more immediately in the

105. Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers,” 236–37.

106. Bakhtin, “Problem of Speech Genres,” 61–62.

Sermon on the Mount as a more complex utterance than the Lord's prayer that it subsumes.¹⁰⁷ Bakhtin explains that the difference between primary and secondary genres is both great and fundamental, "but this is precisely why the nature of the utterance should be revealed and defined through analysis of both types. Only then can the definition be adequate to the complex and profound nature of the utterance . . . The very interrelations between primary and secondary genres and the process of the historical formation of the latter shed light on the nature of the utterance."¹⁰⁸ Concerning the genre analysis of the Gospels, then, it may well be appropriate to identify the lengthy texts of the Gospels as a single, complex (i.e., secondary) genre, but for the purpose of genre analysis, the smaller, primary genres that are recognizable in the Gospels need to be considered first because the way they are used will inform our understanding of the Gospels as complex utterances, which will in turn give us a firmer basis for identifying the generic identity of the Gospels and determining their social purposes.

We are in need, then, of a methodology equipped to deal with genre at the level of textual analysis. To determine what kind of staged, goal-oriented, social process a text is (i.e., its genre), SFL provides three criteria for analysis: (1) the text's register configuration, (2) the text's staging structure, and (3) the realization pattern in the text.¹⁰⁹ For the sake of space, I will explain each of these criteria and then immediately demonstrate their application to the Lord's Prayer in Matt 6:7–15. This selection for application will exemplify the value of modern genre theory because the investigation into the social purpose of the prayer genre and its role within the Sermon on the Mount¹¹⁰ reveal something (albeit small and imprecise at this stage) of the

107. See Bakhtin, "Problem of Speech Genres," 62.

108. Bakhtin, "Problem of Speech Genres," 62.

109. These criteria are found in Eggins, *Introduction*, 56.

110. I am not assuming that the so-called Sermon on the Mount belongs to the genre of "sermon" in any self-apparent way or according to modern sensibilities of what constitutes a sermon, which itself can vary quite widely. I am simply referring to the well-known title that designates the section of Matthew 5–7, which constitutes its own unit within the Gospel of Matthew.

social situation that occasioned the production of the Gospel of Matthew, and this is a completely different goal than attempting to identify the generic class to which the Lord's Prayer belongs.

5. A Genre Analysis of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9–15

5.1 Register Configuration

The criterion of register configuration for genre analysis is predicated on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's notion that "all human activity is subject to habitualization"—that is, tasks are done according to routine patterns so that people can more easily accomplish them rather than deal incessantly with the burden of all the choices that exist for how to get something done.¹¹¹ Habitualization is especially useful for human social activity because it creates a way to efficiently accomplish interpersonal tasks with other people. Bakhtin captured this well: "We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length . . . and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end; that is, from the beginning we have a sense of the speech whole, which is only later differentiated during the speech process."¹¹² Moving forward, I will presuppose the notion of habitualization for mapping the register configuration of the Lord's Prayer because I am assuming for the sake of discussion that the Lord's Prayer as it is recorded in Matthew contains the obligatory elements that signal that the genre is indeed a prayer.

With regard to textual features (redounding with mode) I will consider the cohesion and information flow of the prayer, as is typical of SFL textual analyses. The prayer in Matthew 6 begins in 6:9. This is signaled by three textual features: the cataphoric use of the adverbial particle *οὕτως* (v. 9), the use of the vocative to address God as father, and the switch from second person plural pronoun *ὑμεῖς* to the first-person plural pronoun *ἡμῶν*. These textual features function to organize the text and to set the boundaries of the pericope—they establish cohesion for the

111. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 70–71.

112. Bakhtin, "Problem with Speech Genres," 79.

prayer. The flow of information, which can be described according to many different elements, is maintained at least in one way within 6:9–13 by the repeated use of the imperative mood-forms in each of the seven primary clauses that make up the prayer. Moreover, God is either associated with the explicit subject of the clause (realized through the pronoun σου) in the clauses that employ third-person imperative verbs (vv. 9–10), or is the implicit subject realized in the semantics of the verb in the clauses that employ the second-person imperative verbs (vv. 11–13).

To analyze the field of discourse (what a text is about), register analyses usually make use of the transitivity system, because “syntactical structures within the lexicogrammar can be components of the instantiation of the ideational metafunction.”¹¹³ First, however, I will make some observations about the subject matter of the text more generally. Put simply, Jesus’s prayer is about requesting wants and needs. The subject matter concerns God’s edification, realized through the ideational processes of hallowing his name, his kingdom coming, and his will being done. Further, the subject matter also concerns the neediness of those praying, which is ideationally realized through asking for daily sustenance, forgiveness of wrongdoing, and protection from evil. With regard to transitivity—that is, who does what to whom—from the perspective of the clause the subject of the predicator in each primary clause is either God (implied in the verb) in vv. 11–13 or something of God’s (e.g., his kingdom, his will) in vv. 9–10. The prayer itself is made up of eight clauses, seven of them being primary clauses ranging from two to four word-groups each (excluding conjunctions). Each primary clause conveys a distinctive material process. The first three clauses construe something that belongs to God either doing the process (God’s kingdom coming [ἐλθέτω]) or being acted upon (God’s name being hallowed [ἀγιασθήτω] or his will being done [γενηθήτω]). The latter four primary clauses construe the processes as God acting towards those praying to him. Moreover, the field of the prayer develops as the processes shift

113. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 230.

from God being edified to God meeting the particular needs of those praying to him.

With regard to tenor, the participant roles of Jesus's prayer are surprisingly complex given its brevity. Since Jesus is projecting the prayer as a model prayer for anyone who wishes to pray to God, the pronoun ἡμῶν should be interpreted generally as any plurality of believers. The relationship between those praying to God is portrayed in seemingly paradoxical terms. First, the vocative πᾶτερ invokes a close yet unequal relationship, the closeness deriving from the familial term and the inequality deriving in the same respect from the authority (power) difference between a father and children. However, the rest of the address ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ("who [is] in heaven") realizes a kind of theologically defined distance, which readjusts how solidarity is construed, and this can also be interpreted on the status axis where God's relationship to those praying to him is one of supreme authority. The primary role of those praying to God is to wish for God's edification and to ask for their own needs to be met, including physical, social, and "spiritual" needs as regards God's mercy. God's role is to fulfill the requests of those who pray to him.

The interpersonal semantics of the prayer is characterized primarily by imperative verbs in every main clause. Those praying to God thus demand goods and services from God, whether they are for God's sake or for their own sake. The directive attitude should not be interpreted here as inappropriate, as could be the case in a situation where a person of a lower status demanded something directly from a person of a higher status (e.g., an employee commanding a manager) in such a way as to disregard the social hierarchy. Instead, those praying are depicted as being in a position of needing certain goods and services, and they are in a position (on the solidarity axis) from which they can request them. Thus, the imperatives of the Lord's Prayer should be interpreted in light of solidarity as much as they are interpreted in light of power relations.

5.2 *Staging*

The functional stages of a genre, also referred to as a schematic structure, are described by Martin as follows: “Schematic structure represents the positive contribution genre makes to a text: a way of getting from A to B in the way a given culture accomplishes whatever the genre in question is functioning to do in that culture.”¹¹⁴ The positive contribution Martin refers to is directly connected to Bakhtin’s notion (quoted above) that we guess a text’s genre based on its compositional structure. However, instead of identifying the formal criteria of a genre, it is better to describe the functional criteria of a genre, because all the meanings genres make cannot be made at once, and we are not describing genres in terms of what they are but instead in terms of what they do.¹¹⁵

For present matters, assuming that the Lord’s Prayer is indeed a prayer, I will describe the staging elements of Matt 6:9–13 to make a general statement about the elements of the prayer genre.¹¹⁶ I will use a variety of symbols to organize the staging

114. Martin, “Process and Text,” 251.

115. This orientation is different from Burridge’s approach, which is entirely about identifying formal criteria in the Gospels so as to place them in a “class.” His four formal criteria, which actually have significant logical overlap, are opening features, subject, external features, and internal features. For definitions of these criteria, see Burridge, *What Are the Gospels*, 107.

116. This exercise is meant to be exploratory, not conclusive; in no way am I making an inductive argument that the Lord’s Prayer contains all the general features of the genre of prayer. In fact, Matt 5:44 refers to prayer for others, and the Lord’s Prayer makes no mention of this. John Nolland, however, has posited the suggestion that “perhaps in the Matthean context the first half of the prayer in vv. 9–10 sets out the framework for and central thrust of all Christian prayer, while vv. 11–13 offer an appropriate articulation of prayer for our needs” (*Gospel of Matthew*, 285). Moreover, many scholars are of the opinion that Matt 6:7–15 is an interpolation into an older unit because it does not follow the repeated structure found in vv. 2–4, 5–6, and 16–18 (see Betz, *Essays*, 62; Gerhardsson, *Shema*, 84–87; Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 109). This would suggest that the prayer itself has not lost its schematic structure, since it differs in structure from the repetitious structure that comes before and after it. In addition to this, Davies and Allison survey several possible sources for the Lord’s Prayer, and these paint a similar picture. The possibilities are that: (1) the prayer originated with Q; (2) the similar prayers in

elements of the prayer. First, no symbol is used if an element is completely obligatory. Parentheses () around a stage indicate that the stage is optional. Angle brackets < > will indicate recursive elements. Curved brackets { } will indicate a sequence of elements that can recur as a whole, and a caret ^ will mark the completion of an element.

There are four staging elements identifiable in Matt 6:9–13. The first is the Initiation of Prayer, the second is the Wish of Edification, the third is the Request, and the fourth is the Manner of Fulfillment. After the Initiation, the prayer has three clauses that use third-person imperatives to direct something belonging to God to be acted upon, all of which correspond to God’s edification. Then, there is a shift from second-person singular personal pronouns in the first three clauses of the prayer to first-person plural personal pronouns in the latter five clauses of the prayer (four primary and one secondary). This shift signals a change from God to those speaking to him, and these clauses, still formulated by imperatives, pertain now to the needs they want God to address. Amidst these primary clauses, there is one secondary (subordinate) clause, which indicates the manner in which the speakers want to receive their request (“as we have forgiven those who trespass against us”). Therefore, one possible schematic structure of the prayer genre is as follows: Initiation of Prayer^ <(Wish of Edification)>^ <{Request^ Manner of Fulfillment^}

Matthew and Luke (cf. Luke’s rendition of the Lord’s prayer in 11:2–4) come from M and L material, respectively; or (3), according to the Griesbach Hypothesis, Luke redacts Matthew (*Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 1:590–92). The arguments from sources, then, also appear to support the assumption that the Lord’s Prayer replicates a general structure for a prayer, because the structure I have proposed below is represented in both Matthew’s and Luke’s incorporation of the same source material. Further, Charles Talbert explains that there was a Jewish and pagan tradition about short prayers. He uses R. Eleazar’s example to define a “short prayer”: “Perform your will in heaven and bestow satisfaction on earth upon those who revere you, and do that which is good in your sight. Blessed are you who hears prayer” (Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 109, quoting t. Ber. 3:2).

5.3 *The Pattern of Realization*

According to Eggins, “Taking the step of relating stages of schematic structure to their linguistic realizations is the central analytic procedure in generic analysis.”¹¹⁷ For this study, however, this would be more or less a simple reversal of the analysis of staging, because the realizations of the Lord’s Prayer were the data that motivated the preliminary schematic structure of the prayer genre that was given above. There is little else that can be said here that has not already been accounted for above, except for a couple of observations. First, the Initiation of Prayer is realized by the vocative *πάτερ*, and this completes the first stage. Second, the shift from second person pronouns to first person pronouns suggests that prayers can potentially have multiple aspects to their purpose, because the one or ones who benefit from God’s actions change. If we were to begin with a larger collection of prayers and posit a general schematic structure from a large number of texts, then much more could be said here about the particular realization pattern of the Lord’s Prayer. Nevertheless, there are some preliminary conclusions about the prayer genre that can be made. Put simply, the linguistic data collected in the above procedure would suggest that the primary purpose of a prayer is to communicate commitment to and dependence on God, and these two meanings occur in different stages.

5.4 *The Impact of Secondary Genres on Primary Genres*

The significance of a genre analysis of the Lord’s Prayer for a genre analysis of the Gospel of Matthew is not in what the social purpose of prayers is per se, but in how this social purpose is lost in the prayer as it is contextualized in the wider discourse. Considering the two verses preceding the Lord’s Prayer, we find that the use of the prayer genre is not to enact commitment and dependence on God, but to teach how to pray (Matt 6:7–8), and the goal of teaching conforms to the purpose of the secondary, more complex genre of the so-called “Sermon on the Mount” spanning Matthew 5–7—a purpose that is stated explicitly in the

117. Eggins, *Introduction*, 76.

narrative prior to Jesus's extended discourse. If we were to repeat this procedure for the other definable primary genres in Matthew, then, we would be in a better position to address the larger question of the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew as a complex utterance. As another result, were we to repeat this procedure in each Gospel, we would also be able to reconstruct elements of the social situation type that produced the Gospels, and even elements of their distinctive social situations, because each Gospel's realizational pattern differs, which reveals how the social tasks of the Gospels were accomplished in their respective social contexts.

6. Conclusion

From a SFL perspective, when we ask "What are the Gospels?" we are actually asking "What are the social goals of the Gospels?" This is a fundamentally different way of thinking about genre than has previously been explored in Gospel studies. In follow-up work on the Gospels' genre, Burrige has considered the social function of genres, but only as an avenue of getting exegetical payoff after having already determined the genre of the Gospels. In so doing, he writes: "Genre can sometimes be a clue to both the social context and the function for which a work was composed."¹¹⁸ From the standpoint adopted in the present article, this quotation is self-contradictory. Genres *by definition* redound with their social context; they are not simply potential clues to a social context. Moreover, from a SFL perspective, another puzzling statement is Burrige's assertion that "the problem with the biographical hypothesis for the Gospels is that there were a variety of functions for ancient *bioi*, and different lives appear to have been used in different ways."¹¹⁹ SFL genre theory challenges this statement in a number of ways. First, if genre, as defined in literary theory, only focuses on formal features that organize texts in socially recognizable ways, then it does not go beyond what systemic-functional

118. Burrige, "About People," 134.

119. Burrige, "About People," 134.

linguists refer to as text-types. Second, if the ancient βίαι, as they are grouped together as representing a certain class of literature, vary so widely in their purposes, then it runs counter to logic to consider them as belonging to the same genre. Third, if the class of literature we have to work with can potentially vary in the functions it performs, how can genre be used to recover knowledge of the social environments of the Gospel communities? If the social functions of the extant βίαι vary so widely, how reliably can their range of functions be determined by the exemplars we still have today? How can we know the limits of their potential social functions? SFL genre theory is not plagued by these problems and so it provides a clear way forward in understanding the Gospels as genres—as complex utterances and as staged, goal-oriented, social processes. In this article, I have only begun to demonstrate the potential payoff of this approach, but the analysis I have provided can serve as an example for additional research on a much larger scale.

Postscript

Only a few days after this article was submitted for publication the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Burridge's *What Are the Gospels?* appeared in print. Upon reviewing the additional material in this book there are two comments that I wish to append to this article. First, the new edition leaves the original study virtually unchanged. This is disappointing given the significant amount of work that has been done to advance genre criticism over the last two and a half decades, which, contrary to Burridge's understanding, does not validate his study. Thus, the critiques made in this article apply equally to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, and no changes were necessary to make to this article. The major changes in the new edition include a rather weak attempt to dismiss Burridge's critics, followed by a lengthy discussion of the favorable reception of Burridge's study over the years.¹²⁰ There is also an addition of a study on the genre

120. As Burridge says in a somewhat ironic statement: "Thus, while we may have not undertaken a full scholarly updating of the literary theory of

of Acts. This leads to my second comment, which is that more light needs to be shed on the inadequacies of the present consensus about the genre of the Gospels. The fact that there is a celebrated twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Burridge's book only further confirms that we presently live in an age of "βίος bias," and this will assuredly continue until more scholars recognize that a truly informed study that applies modern genre theory to the Gospels has yet to be done.

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genres which undergirds all of this project on the genre of the gospels, we can now proceed with our analysis of gospel scholarship over the last couple of decades confident that both the original version of this book and all that has flowed from it over the years is resting on a secure literary and theoretical base about genre" (*What Are the Gospels* [3rd ed.], I.8).

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