

For all I know, this may well be 'an expression of absolute value' in the sense required by Wittgensteinians like Father Barrett. Unlike 'Eating people is wrong' (etc.), it does at any rate seem nonsensical. This raises the rather exciting prospect that the Wittgensteinians' analysis of all expressions of absolute value might actually apply to some of those expressions, namely at least the ones uttered by Heideggerians. We eagerly await further developments in this line.

These are reflections on some loose ends in a book which makes a virtue out of generating intriguingly new lines of thought, and so, inevitably, generates a fair number of such loose ends in the process. Important and interesting debates have been initiated or interestingly continued, by these ten essays, and I recommend them to the reader's further scrutiny.

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WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS? A COMPARISON WITH GRAECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY by Richard A. Burrige. *CUP* 1992, pp. xiii, 292, + 35, \$54.95.

This study is presented in two parts. The first part contains an historical survey, a discussion of what genre is, a description of ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman biographies, and an evaluation of recent debate. Burrige concludes that ancient biography is a type of writing which occurred naturally among groups of people who had formed around a certain charismatic teacher or leader, seeking to follow after him, that its major purpose and function was didactic or philosophical polemic and conflict, and that ancient biography was a genre capable of flexibility, adaptation and growth.

Part Two argues that the gospels are to be understood as belonging to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. Generic features of examples of Graeco-Roman biographies from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE are analysed in chapters 5 and 7. Burrige concludes that the major determining feature of the genre is concentration on one individual. Some concentrate on the subject's deeds and the chronology of his life, others focus on certain topics, teachings or virtues in a non-chronological manner. The Graeco-Roman biographical genre is signalled at the outset by using the subject's name in the title or the opening features.

Chapter 8 examines the synoptic gospels. They are shown to share the following general features with Graeco-Roman biographies: the introduction of the subject at the beginning; a large proportion of the verbs with Jesus as the subject; the mode of presentation: prose narrative of a fairly continuous nature; the size of each work; the chronological character of the accounts, with insertions of topical material; the focus on one individual; the combination of stories, anecdotes, sayings and speeches; the freedom to select and edit sources to produce the desired portrait of the subject; the display of character through deeds and words; the subject as the focus of the settings; shared topics: ancestry, birth, boyhood and education, great deeds, virtues displayed in action, death and consequences; a serious

and respectful atmosphere; the tension between the stereotype and the real in the portrait of Jesus. Chapter 9 shows that the Fourth Gospel shares these features too. Burrige concludes that the gospel genre is the same as that of Graeco-Roman biography, and that the gospels belong to the sub-genre of ancient religious or philosophical biography.

Burrige has performed a useful service in drawing out these general similarities between the gospels and Graeco-Roman biographies. Since, however, these general features are shared with the narratives about prophets in the Jewish scriptures, it would have been helpful had Burrige shown whether anything distinguished Graeco-Roman biographies from those older Jewish narratives, and if so, whether the gospels are closer to one or the other.

Burrige has certainly shown that there are biographical elements in the gospels, but has he shown that their genre is Graeco-Roman biography? From reading Burrige's list of features, no one would guess that the gospels are theological narratives, and that they set the life of Jesus in the context of what God, the Creator and Sustainer of the world, is achieving through him. Is not this the organising principle which makes sense of the parts, parts which include not only a theological interpretation of Jesus' birth, life and death, but also, for example, God's dealings with Israel in the past and present, Jesus' resurrection, and the expectation of an imminent end of history?

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF MYSTICISM. ORIGINS TO THE FIFTH CENTURY by Bernard McGinn *SCM Press*, 1992. Pp. xxii + 494. £25.00

This is the first volume of a projected 4-volume work to cover the history of Western Christian mysticism. In it McGinn lays his foundations. There is a series of introductory chapters on the Jewish background (largely apocalyptic), the Greek contemplative tradition (Plato *et al.*), the New Testament and some other early Christian literature, 'Mystical elements in early Greek Christianity' (mainly devoted to Origen), and the influence of monasticism (mainly Evagrius and Denys the Areopagite). Part Two, 'The Birth of Western Mysticism', has two chapters: one mainly on Ambrose and Cassian, and one devoted to Augustine. In addition there is a general introduction and an appendix entitled 'Theoretical Foundations: The Modern Study of Mysticism'. Professor McGinn presents himself as an historian, and if one ignores the scaffolding and goes to the book for its discussion of historical movements and figures, there is much here to enjoy and profit from. In particular, his discussions of Denys the Areopagite, Ambrose and Cassian are brilliant and full of insights. But one can't ignore the scaffolding. For one thing, there is an awful lot of it: the general introduction and the appendix alone run to 90 pages (out of 353 pages of text), and the questions they raise keep on cropping up in the historical sections (often in a rather tiresomely self-conscious way). Anyway, as McGinn fully recognizes, even an historical approach to mysticism has to face questions of a philosophical and theological order, and even if, as McGinn maintains (surely with