In my last post I indicated that among the different ways to study the Gospels, one is what I call the “literary-historical” approach. This approach determines the literary genre of a writing, and then sees how that genre “worked” in its own historical context (as opposed to how a similar genre make work today). The Gospels of the NT are widely seen as examples of ancient biography. So it would help to know how biographies worked in Greek and Roman antiquity.

There are numerous examples of biographies from the Greco-Roman world, many of them by some of the most famous authors of the Roman literary scene, such as Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus. As I indicated in my previous post, and need to stress here, these biographies, understood in their own historical context, are different from the biographies we read today. Understanding the differences can be key to recognizing the way any particular ancient biography “worked,” including the Christian examples such as Mark (and the other Gospels). As I contrast ancient with modern biographies here, it is important always to bear in mind that literary genres by their very nature are very flexible. A novel by John Irving is very different indeed from a novel by Charles Dickens. But they have enough formal characteristics in common that we can easily speak of them both as novels.

Most modern biographies are full of data – names, dates, places, and events – all of which show a concern for factual accuracy. A modern biography, of course, can deal with the whole of a person’s life or with only a portion of it. Typically it is concerned with both public and private life and with how the subject both reacts to what happens and is changed by it. In other words, the inner life of the person, his or her psychological development based on events and experiences, is quite often a central component and is used to explain why the character behaves and reacts in certain ways. Thus modern biographies tend not only to inform but also to explain. They also are meant to entertain, of course, and often propagandize as well, especially when they concern political or religious figures.

FOR THE REST OF THIS POST, log in as a Member. If you don’t belong yet, DON’T BLOW YOUR CHANCE!!!