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Plutarch on the Purpose of Writing a Biography

The great Roman author Plutarch (45–125 CE) wrote some fifty biographies of prominent Greek and Roman men. These books were produced at a time concurrent with the New Testament Gospels (or only a few years later) and were written for a similar audience (gentiles living in cities of the Roman empire).

Plutarch's biographies differ from the Gospels in key aspects (owing, in part, to the strong influence of Jewish religion and literature on the latter). Still, most scholars think that the Gospels are sufficiently similar to Plutarch's biographies for them to have been regarded as "biographies of Jesus" in the world in which they were produced.

In the opening chapter of his biography *Alexander* (on Alexander the Great), Plutarch offers these comments regarding his intent:

It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who overthrew Pompey, that I am writing in this book, and the multitude of the deeds to be treated is so great that I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles when thousands fall,

or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests. (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 2.1–3)¹

In a similar fashion, the author of John's Gospel admits that there is an overabundance of material that could be reported about Jesus and, rather than trying to be comprehensive, he has limited himself to writing that which will serve his purpose: to bring the reader to believe in Jesus (John 20:30–31). Also, like Plutarch, the author of Luke's Gospel leaves it to others to tell some of the accounts of Jesus, focusing on those things that will allow his readers to know the truth about those things in which he or she has been instructed.

Plutarch, John, and Luke explicitly eschew any goal of comprehensive historical reporting; the goal of a biography is to tell those things that will serve a specific purpose: to reveal the essential character of a person. The New Testament authors simply took this a step further, believing that revealing the essential character of Jesus Christ would inspire or confirm faith.

1. Plutarch, *Lives: Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 99, vol. 7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).