

International Conference: Biographically Grounded Literature
in Late Hellenistic and Early Imperial Times

Bern, 24. – 26. Juni 2024

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Titel: Biographically Grounded Literature

Abstract: The conference deals with all kinds of literature that evolve from traditional knowledge about the “life” of an authoritative person without necessarily being “biographies” or even “biographical” in a narrow sense.

In his seminal monograph from 1992, Richard Burridge established “biography” as the comparative category *par excellence* for Gospels research, thus laying the foundation for the current *communis opinio* (cf. the recent works by Licona, Reiser, Bond, Keener, John).

In his introduction to the volume *Portraits*, co-edited with Mark Edwards in 1997, Simon Swain noted that “the Greek and Latin literature of the Roman Empire displays a marked biographical trend.” He argues, however, that “biography” is not an adequate term for the phenomenon because it “is visible in many other types of writing.” Therefore, looking at whatever is “biographical” in a broad sense seems the sounder way to go.

Through using the concept of “biographically grounded literature,” this conference takes the discussion one step further: “biographically grounded literature” denotes texts focused on, oriented towards, and inspired by an exemplary individual figure. These texts and traditions bear this designation because they presuppose some biographical memory, a certain “narrative” of a person. At times, the “biographical foundation” may be a *specific narrative text* (like Genesis 1–3 in the case of Adam or Plato’s *Apology* or *Phaedo* in the case of Socrates), at times it may be a *traditional image* that develops on the basis of a certain text (e.g. Adam as the bringer of death). This is even the case where the figure may be the patron of the text without necessarily being a subject within the text (e.g. *Wisdom* or *Psalms of Solomon*). Further, we may be prompted to ask: Which “Socrates,” “Solomon,” or “Moses”? Depending on the tradition, Moses is the lawgiver, the one who received and transmitted the law or, alternatively, he is portrayed against the backdrop of Egypt; Socrates can be either the champion of a contact with the divine due to his *daimonion* (cf. Apuleius, *De genio Socratis*) or the champion of a skeptic position (cf. Plato, *Apol.* 21d); Solomon can be the wise man, king, healer, or magician; Jacob/Israel is the one who had the closest encounter with God, who even “saw God.” All of these persons gave rise to – sometimes very different – bodies of literature. The prerequisite for such literature is not necessarily a specific, detailed narrative account about that life, but an emblematic memory that can be transmitted in different ways.

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The conference will cover different genres, from historiography and (auto-)biography to εὐαγγέλιον and hagiography, from drama to epos, from psalms and letters to dialogues and sayings collections.