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Beginnings

Assemblies, “Gospel,” Gospels

In most of the Christian assemblies meeting around the world today, a reading from one of the four Gospels—from Matthew or Mark or Luke or John—occupies a central moment in the worship service of every Sunday. This reading is a kind of pillar of the meeting, a reliably recurring ritual, a principal locus for meaning. In many assemblies, certain intensifying ceremonies accompany the Gospel reading and mark this moment as central. The assembly stands for the reading, facing the reader and the book. Or the reading is greeted with song. Or the Bible or Gospel book or lectionary is carried into the midst of the room, the assembly turns toward it and, perhaps, this movement is accompanied with candles and incense. Or, in the East, the book is brought out through the Holy Doors, which themselves carry images of the Gospel writers. Or all of these things occur. The preaching in the service usually follows the reading, often bearing special responsibility to articulate current meanings of the Gospel text that has been read alongside all the other texts. In a well-planned service, images from the Gospel text not infrequently fill the hymnody sung on that Sunday. If the congregation follows a lectionary—say, the Revised Common Lectionary—this very system of reading the Bible in community finds its coherence and its organization, in the first place, around the unfolding reading of Gospel texts. Indeed, the content of the feasts and seasons of the so-called “church year” is primarily brought to expression by whatever Gospel text is read. And, in some communities, the vigil of a feast or the Saturday evening vespers culminates in the reading of the Gospel text appointed for the feast or the Sunday immediately following.

Much of this practice has been going on for a long time. All of the Christian Sunday and festival lectionaries used throughout the centuries have been centered in the Gospel. The Western and Eastern liturgical ceremonies of its reading are very old, reflecting Roman and Byzantine court rituals. Already in

the mid-second century, Justin Martyr said that “the memoirs of the apostles” were read in the Sunday meetings of the Christians with whom he was associated in Rome,¹ these “memoirs” having been already explicitly identified by Justin himself as “the Gospels.”² Alongside “the writings of the prophets,” these Gospels were then read, according to Justin, not necessarily in their entirety, but for “as long as there is time.” The very Christian preference for using the codex, the bound book, rather than the widely used but unwieldy scroll, may well have been encouraged by having the Gospels in the meeting of the church, perhaps having all of them there, even if only one was being read. We know that the codex was invented in the first and second centuries, and that thereby books began to look like what we call “books” today, with pages sewn together and with the whole easily held in the hand. This primary Christian book form enabled the written Gospels to be bound in a single book and carried into the Christian house meetings or “shop-churches” to be read aloud.³ Indeed, all four Gospels, copied out by hand on papyrus, could fit in a single ancient codex and thus be available to a community’s reader.

Why this intense communal use? Was such a use envisioned by the books themselves, at their origin? And do the Gospels themselves have anything to say about the Christian meetings of the time of their origin or about the idea of a Christian meeting generally?

Mutual Coherence, Not Panliturgism

We need to be careful here. Such an attempt at biblical-liturgical thought—biblical studies aware of Christian worship, worship studies caring about the Bible—could be skating on thin ice. Good scholars have been here before, and they have quite frequently crashed though to the ruin—or, at least, to the scholarly rejection—of their project. There was a time not long ago when “it was fashionable

1. *1 Apology* 67.

2. *1 Apology* 66.

3. Cf. Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 84–85, 165–91. Stanton interestingly proposes that the Christian preference for the *codex* may well have been due not only to its portability but to its countercultural sense of newness. These were new books, with a countercultural message. On “shop-churches,” see Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church’s Conservative Icon* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 91. See further below.

to find liturgy everywhere”⁴ in the Bible, a tendency that has come to be called, disparagingly, “panliturgism.” I do not want to argue again that the organization of all four of the Gospels corresponded to the ancient synagogue calendar and its lectionary as these were reworked in primitive Christian practice⁵ or that the Fourth Gospel was thoroughly and positively sacramental.⁶ As much as I myself was at one time drawn by these proposals, I have come to see that there is very little evidence for them.⁷ Nonetheless, I do think that these proposals and others like them were reaching toward something of importance, longing to bring to expression in some way the mutual coherence of New Testament Gospels and Christian assembly.

That assertion is the first thing to say. There was a kind of mutual coherence between the four Gospels and the ancient Christian Sunday meetings. It is not that the Gospels and the meeting practice of Christians were co-extensive. The Gospels were not direct scripts for the meeting. And, of course, they could be read elsewhere. But the Gospels presume the Christian assembly and include it within their reference. They seem to have been intended for communities, for reading or orally reciting the story of Jesus in those communities. These meetings existed before the Gospels did. So did the stories and sayings of Jesus. But the Gospels gathered those stories and those sayings together into an intentional form and made that form available to those meetings. Of course, they provided only one kind of book read or recited in the meeting. At least some gatherings of early Christians, perhaps influenced by synagogue practice, seem to have especially gathered around the “scriptures,” the books of what we call the “Old Testament.”⁸ Or, since these small communities may not have owned or had access to an extensive collection of scrolls of the Torah or the Prophets, in

4. C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 7. See also Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47–52; and A. E. Harvey, “A Word from the New Testament?” in Martin Dudley, ed., *Like a Two-Edged Sword: The Word of God in Liturgy and History* (Norwich: Canterbury, 1995), 1–2.

5. Aileen Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (London: Clarendon, 1960); Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the Marcan Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952); M. D. Goulder, *The Evangelists' Calendar* (London: SPCK, 1978).

6. Oscar Cullmann, *Urchristentum und Gottesdienst*, Zweite Auflage (Zürich: Zwingli, 1950).

7. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 48.

8. Consider the implications of Luke 24:27, 32 for the practice of the communities that heard this story.

Hebrew or in Greek, they may have had someone in their gathering who could recite parts of the scriptures or could read from notebooks containing *testimonia*, passages from Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures collected together as handbooks of interpretation, especially handbooks for using the scriptures in understanding who Jesus was and what he did.⁹ Certainly, some communities also began to copy and communally read and reread the letters of Paul.¹⁰ But because of the importance of the story of Jesus to the identity of Christian communities, the Gospels grew to a preeminence, providing words for the meaning of the meetings of these communities and counsel for the practice of these communities. They demonstrated their coherence with the meetings of Christians, at least partly, by their interest in interpreting the very scriptures and *testimonia* already read there and interpreting them specifically of Jesus and his death. Indeed, they sought to join the basic books, the scriptures of the assemblies. The earliest fragments we have found of Gospel codices already often evidence a care in their creation, an “elegant literary hand” used in the copying and a universal use of the shorthand symbols for the sacred names of Jesus and God, the *nomina sacra*, all of which suggests the authoritative role of the books and the purpose, at least for these early copies, that they be reverently used and heard in assembly.¹¹

If the Gospels themselves were not meant exclusively for this communal purpose, the meetings where they were to be primarily heard were still surely in their purview. Even the two places in the Gospels where a singular “reader” is called to “understand” (Mark 13:14 and its parallel, Matt. 24:15) may well be formal, metaphoric speech, belonging to apocalyptic style, or may be a call for the actual communal reader or some other communal leader to make this mystery clear in the assembled church when the book is read. The last suggestion may be all the more likely if the “desolating sacrilege” mentioned in these passages was in fact a statue of the Roman emperor or some other imperial cult object. This imperial statue was then not named in the text—to do so would be an act of probable sedition that would imperil any community that owned such a book—but the sense of opposition between the imperial cult and the Christian community was to be interpreted when the community gathered in the “house,” where other

9. See Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 182–85; and Martin Albl, *“And Scripture Cannot Be Broken”: The Form and Function of Early Christian Testimonia Collections* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

10. See 1 Thess. 5:27; cf. Col. 4:16.

11. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 192–206.

such mysteries are also disclosed.¹² Furthermore, the singular name of the person to whom the double volume Luke-Acts is addressed (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) may intend an idealized figure, representative of all the assemblies and of any “most excellent” friend of God who participated in the assembly with interest.

In any case, in the great range of people who made up the Christian communities of the first and second centuries, there were indeed people who were literate, people who could read aloud to the community.¹³ Indeed, in classical times, reading was often out loud, recited, perhaps even intoned, and it often at least imagined hearers.¹⁴ The image in the second-century book *The Shepherd of Hermas* of an ancient lady who is Ecclesia, the church, reading aloud to Hermas and then giving him a book to copy and to send to leaders in the churches for it to be read there¹⁵ ought probably be taken as a relatively reliable picture of the copying, sending, and reading that went on in late-first- and early-second-century communities with the production of the Gospel books.

However, even if the books, like the letters of Paul, were largely intended for communal reading, it has become common to argue in recent biblical studies that relatively little can be said about the worship of the communities that were addressed by these letters or that made use of the Gospel books.¹⁶ The texts are simply not interested in any systematic report of communal worship, and the local situations were most likely quite diverse. According to this argument, the individual elements of Christian gatherings that can be found as referenced in the New Testament—hymns, for example, or prophecy, or “speaking in tongues”—can simply not be organized into a widely valid, coherent picture called “early Christian worship.”

12. Cf. Mark 9:28; 9:33; 10:10. See further below.

13. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 29–47.

14. Cf. Richard Horsley, *Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 4: “Even where texts existed in writing, they were almost always performed orally, before a group.” See also the discussion in Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2003), 14–16.

15. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. I:2:2; I:3:3; II:1:3–4; II:4:3. Cf. Pheme Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 39–40.

16. E.g., Ferdinand Hahn, *The Worship of the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 2–3.

But the arguments of a scholar such as John Dominic Crossan have also invited us to see that at least the Gospel books that he calls “biographical”—the very four later gathered into the New Testament—have a deep, basic interest in how the story of Jesus is told in actual current communities.

In this set [the four canonical Gospels] Jesus is located back in the late 20’s of his first-century Jewish homeland, but he is also updated to speak or act directly and immediately to new situations and communities in the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s. There is an absolute lamination of Jesus-then and Jesus-now without any distinction of Jesus-said-then but Jesus-means-now. In Mark, for example, Jesus confesses and is condemned while Peter denies and is forgiven, but those specific events—dated, say, to the year 30—speak directly and were created precisely for a persecuted community in the year 70. . . . This lamination explains why the four canonical gospels could turn out so different even though they were copying from one another.¹⁷

For Crossan, what became normative about these books in the Christian community was the very Gospel form as marked by a dialectic between Jesus-then and Jesus-now: the Jesus whose concrete story was told in the Gospel book being the very risen Jesus encountering the community now; the crucified Jesus of an old and horrifying execution being the risen one whose wounds are encountered now as the wounds of history itself, of human brutality and inspired resistance, the response of the current Christian community being implied.¹⁸ Crossan finds in this normative form a justification for the work of the Gospel commentator and the Jesus researcher today. But we need to note that for this normative dialectic between Jesus-then and Jesus-now to function, one needs two things: the book and the community reading the book. While on first reading the book may seem to be only about Jesus-then, it soon becomes clear to us that it is also and especially about how the Jesus-then is also the Jesus-now and about the assembly where that is seen to be so.

A Gospel book of this sort, then, went together with the Christian meeting. While book and meeting were not co-extensive, they were mutually coherent. This is not to assert panliturgism again, nor to find some special access to ancient

17. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 32.

18. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

Christian liturgical practices. It is simply to argue that the four Gospels all presume a community, an assembly, a meeting, as part of what they are, as part of their very genre. If Crossan's "biographical gospels," the books that became "the programmatic gospels of sarcophilic Christianity,"¹⁹ include an interest in the flesh of Jesus, the actual economic circumstances of ordinary life, and narratives of life and death, they also include an interest in meetings. Indeed, three of the four books significantly conclude with accounts of gatherings of the community. In two cases (Luke and John), these are clearly Sunday meetings.

The idea of mutual coherence might be illustrated by thinking first of all and especially about the Gospel according to Mark, the very book that does not at first seem to contain an account of a postresurrection meeting. I join the scholarly consensus that regards Mark as the earliest of the Gospels and, therefore, as the actual creation of what became the genre "Gospel."²⁰ Already when one begins to read the book, one catches the sense of the presence of an understood community of readers. So, the very first verse announces who Jesus is to the present readers (1:1). Thus, when, in the book's first miracle narrative, the possessed man in the synagogue says, to the surprise of everyone in the story, "I know who you are!" (1:24), the present reading community is already in on the secret. In fact, "being in on the secret" is one of the continuing characteristics of the entire book.²¹ In Mark, only Jesus sees the heavens torn open at his baptism and hears the voice speak ("he saw," 1:10)—that is, only Jesus and the readers and hearers of the book. Then, time and again, when the "messianic secret" is urged upon unclean spirits or beneficiaries of Jesus' healings or the disciples themselves at the

19. *Ibid.*, 38. See also my *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 129–31.

20. It will be clear, in what follows, that I subscribe to several of the most basic matters of consensus in contemporary critical biblical studies: e.g., some sayings of Jesus and some Jesus stories circulated orally in early Christian communities; some of these sayings may have been gathered together in a now lost written source that scholars call Q or *Quelle*; the earliest written Christian books we have are the genuine letters of Paul, the Thessalonian letters, Galatians, the Corinthian letters, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans; the first written Gospel was the one we call "According to Mark," and it was written at about the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, 70 c.e.; "According to Matthew" and "According to Luke" were both composed by authors who knew "According to Mark" and, perhaps, also Q; these books were written between 80 and 100 c.e.; the author of Luke may also have known Matthew; the writer of the Fourth Gospel, composed around the turn of the century, knew "According to Mark," and very likely the other two Gospel books, as well.

21. See further below, chap. 3.

confession of Peter or at the transfiguration—when they are all urged to keep silent concerning him—the reading or hearing community knows the secret and begins to see that this secret pushes toward the cross, only to leak out in the passion predictions, to become paradoxically plain in the assembly of the anointing woman (Mark 14:3-9) and at the supper before Jesus’ death (14:17-25), as also at his trial (14:62) and death itself (15:39), and then, finally, to be revealed and proclaimed here, wherever the book itself is being read, in the word about the crucified risen one in the present assembly.

But there is more: when Jesus goes to sea, “other boats were with him” (4:36), an open narrative device that allows room for the hearing community to go along on the trip. The private explanations of the enigmatic parables (4:33-34; 7:17), of a difficult healing (9:28-29), of the implications of the second “passion prediction” (9:33-37), and of the saying about marriage (10:10) all open toward—indeed, *require*—continuing explanations and discussion in the current house churches. And the recurrent image of the *house* itself—another powerful Markan theme—as the place where Jesus is, as the place of teaching and healing and forgiveness, as the place of shared meals,²² would have inevitably evoked in the minds of the readers or hearers the current houses of the church or shop locations of the assembly in the late-first-century communities that would have been reading this book. The very title, “the *kyrios* of the house,” used for the eschatologically returning figure at the end of Mark’s little apocalypse (13:35), may have carried a similar recognition: the one who is returning, the one for whom we are to watch, is the one to whom we sing as *kyrios* in our house churches.

These examples can be multiplied in the other Gospels. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” promises the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel (18:20). The risen one is known “in the breaking of the bread,” asserts Luke (24:35), explicitly echoing an important practice that marks the gatherings of the church, according to the second volume of this Third Gospel (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11). And the Fourth Gospel itself is written so that “you” *plural*—one imagines an assembly—“may come to believe” (John 20:31). The four Gospels of the New Testament assume and refer to the meetings of Christian communities. And, when these books became available, the late-first- and early-second-century meetings of Christians came increasingly to find the books themselves attractive, challenging, important, and, finally, indispensable. The

22. Cf. Mark 1:29; 1:32; 2:1-12; 2:15; 3:20; 5:19; 5:38; 6:10; 7:17; 7:24; 9:28; 9:33; 10:10; 14:3; 14:14.

four Gospels and the Christian assembly have a mutual coherence. We can learn from that mutuality both something about the Gospels and something about what the Gospels were proposing for the meetings of Christians.

But if this coherence is indeed written into the books, if the Christian meeting is in some way envisioned in the books, we are brought to the question of genre. What, then, is a Gospel?

What Is the Gospel?

To answer that question, we must first ask what is meant by the word *gospel* at all. In order to begin to respond, we need to think a little more about the state of Christianity in the mid-to-late first and very early second centuries C.E., the time just before and during which the Gospels were composed. We will find the Christian use of the word *gospel* to originate in this period, and we will find it useful to investigate the origin of the Gospel books against the background of that word use.

In a highly regarded work, the sociologist Rodney Stark has argued that there were probably slightly more than 2,500 Christians in the world in the year 70, the likely year of the composition of Mark. By the turn of the century, shortly after the time of the composition of Matthew and Luke and about the time of the writing of John, there may have been more like 7,500 Christians.²³ The Christian movement was quite small. And it largely consisted of small groups, increasingly spread throughout the Mediterranean world and especially found in cities, groups that gathered in houses or tenement apartments or workshops or other small places. The letter of Paul to the Romans, probably written in the mid-to-late 50s of the first century,²⁴ clearly implies that the Christians in Rome at that time were a quite diverse lot, gathered in at least five different meetings and perhaps many more.²⁵ In Paul's word use, these gatherings are "churches,"

23. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 6–7. The numbers given in Acts 2:41, 4:4, and 21:20 should probably be viewed as evidence of Luke's intention to present an ideal picture of the growth and spread of Christianity, not as reliable historical information.

24. Stark proposes that, in the year 50, there were a total of about 1,400 Christians. Some scholars have considered Romans 16, discussed here, to be a later addition to the letter, perhaps originally addressed to another city. For a clear refutation of that position, see already W. G. Kümmel, ed., *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 225–26. In any case, the demonstration of diverse assemblies found in Romans 16 is important for us, regardless of the original location of those assemblies.

25. So, the "church" in the house of Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:5); those with (or

ἐκκλησίαι, assemblies, like the assemblies before the Lord in the Hebrew scriptures,²⁶ and they are frequently characterized by the familial language—“relatives,” “brothers and sisters,” “a mother to me”²⁷—that had come to express the communal character of the Christian movement. Indeed, Paul takes it upon himself to greet these gatherings in the name of all the other such assemblies throughout the world (Rom. 16:16), inviting them to exchange with each other the Christian ritual version of an ancient familial greeting, the “holy kiss.”²⁸

For the rest of the argument of this book it is important to note here that such assemblies were not a new or specifically Christian invention. In gathering as associations or clubs, in regarding each other as a kind of family, in meeting in households, in sharing meals, Christians were making use of a widespread pattern in Greco-Roman society. Such household-based associations were one important way in which people of the time were religious, one important way in which they sought to participate in the benefits of the gods, one significant basis for social organization in Hellenistic cities. Before the Christian movement and as one model for it, Jewish “synagogues” in the greater Mediterranean world also were organized much like these widespread “Gentile” associations.²⁹

“from”) Aristobulus (“the family of Aristobulus,” 16:10); those with Narcissus (“the family of Narcissus,” 16:11); the “brothers and sisters” who were with Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, and Hermas (16:14); and the “saints” who were with Philologus, Julia, Nereus, his sister, and Olympas (16:15). For a contrary view, that the Christians of Rome at the time of Paul’s letter may have constituted a single gathering of a few dozen people, see Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 31–33.

26. See my *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 26–43. It must be noted that there is some evidence for the term ἐκκλησία being used not simply for the ancient Greek civic voters assembly but also for clubs and associations besides Christian ones. See Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 182, 283n1; and Richard S. Ascough, “Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Christian Communities: Overcoming the Objections,” in Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Ver-eine, Synagogen und Gemeinden in keizerlichen Kleinasien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 159. However, I think that Paul has biblical eschatology in mind in his use of the term.

27. One ought to compare the saying of Jesus in Mark 10:30: you will receive a hundredfold “houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions.” The community in Rome seems to have had such multiple houses and alternative families, as well as the persecutions.

28. L. Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Grove, 1996).

29. See Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*. See also Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and Household Churches*

It may be that Paul would call all of the Christian assemblies in Rome, together, by the singular word *church*—“the assembly of God that is in Rome”—as he did in his address to the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 2 Cor. 1:2). He certainly regarded all the Christians of the world together as “the whole church” (Rom. 16:23; cf. 1 Cor. 15:9), as a kind of great assembly before God. In any case, in the letter to the Romans, he addressed these various people and assemblies, bidding them “greet one another with a holy kiss” and bidding them avoid “dissensions and offenses” (Rom. 16:16-17).

But that intention is the point. The letters of Paul are addressed to assemblies and are both unifying and reforming in intent. All of Paul’s letters seem to have been sent to gatherings like these in Rome, small groups spread throughout the Roman Empire. So, for example, Phoebe, a deacon of an assembly in Greece, near Corinth, seems to have been charged to carry the letter from Paul to Rome and make it available to the diverse gatherings he names (16:1-2). The first letter to the Thessalonians proposes a similar scenario of communal reading and hearing, also conjoined with the holy kiss (1 Thess. 5:27).³⁰ Even Philemon, seemingly addressed to an individual, also is sent to Apphia, Archippus, “and to the church in your house” (Philemon 2), thus dealing with its content, about the equality and freedom of a slave, as a public and communal, though also personal, matter.³¹ Furthermore, all of the letters were critically reforming in intent. They invited the communities that read them to remember or to hear afresh what Paul regarded as the basic grounds for these assemblies, the source of their trust in God and of their unity, and they encouraged the participants in these assemblies to live out the implications of those grounds. In Galatians and 1 Corinthians, this reforming purpose is quite directly stated (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Cor. 1:10-11). In the case of the Roman Christians, Paul says that he feels rather confident about them—about their knowledge and their goodness and their ability to instruct each other (15:14)—but he also says he writes to them all together (to “you” as a plural, to all these Roman assemblies) “on some points . . . rather boldly by way of reminder” (15:15).

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 138.

30. The later pseudonymous, “deutero-Pauline” or Pauline-school letter, Colossians, shows assemblies exchanging these letters for communal reading (Col. 4:16).

31. That Philemon is concerned with the necessary *freedom* of a slave is strongly and convincingly argued by Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul*, 31–45.

For Paul, both the authority he has for this “reminder” and its very content are what he calls “the *gospel*” (15:16). In this passage at the end of the letter to the Romans (15:14-21), Paul uses an extended metaphor: he is like a sacred public minister, a λειτουργός, a “liturgist,” commissioned by the grace of God, doing the priestly service—as if in a new, worldwide temple—of turning the offering brought by the nations into an acceptable offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit. The image is most likely drawn from a passage of the prophecy of Malachi that was beloved of many first- and second-century Christians:³² “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11).³³

It is that purifying work, bringing about that “pure offering,” Paul means to be doing with the Romans, with his letter as with his planned presence. It is that work he believes he has been doing in all of his travels (15:19). But what is the meaning of this metaphor? For Paul, the content of his “sacred public ministry,” his λειτουργία, is “Christ Jesus for the nations,” and the content of his “priestly service,” his ἱερουργεῖν, is the “gospel of God.” In his metaphor, these are words for the same thing: the lively announcement of Jesus Christ, of his death, his resurrection, and his presence in the Spirit, as the very grounds for faith in God and the source of love turning toward a needy world. Such is the “gospel.” Paul addresses this lively announcement to the assemblies. Indeed, for Paul, the very identity of the assemblies depends upon the gospel. So does their continual, faithful reform.

It is important to remember that the culture surrounding the early Christian communities was a culture full of temple sacrifices of all kinds, to all sorts of gods and to the Roman emperor himself, used for the sake of social and political cohesion. Christians often rejected these sacrifices, but their cultural omnipresence and importance made them the ready material for metaphor. The very metaphor, when used as here for the noncultic, nonsacrificial practice of announcing the gospel as the free gift of God and discovering a faith and a life according to the

32. Cf. *Didache* 14:2; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 116–117; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.17.5.

33. Perhaps, indeed, Paul also has in mind a later passage of Malachi: “for he is like a refiner’s fire . . . and he will purify the descendants of Levi . . . until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (3:2-3). Gentiles and Jews, both, need such “purifying.”

gospel, became a kind of negation of sacrificial practice.³⁴ Thus, it is no surprise that for Paul, whenever this metaphor occurs throughout his letters, the “offering” that such an announcement of the gospel brings about is not a cultic interaction enacted in the killing of animals, not a tit-for-tat with the divine, but faith (see Phil. 2:17), trust in God, and then, flowing from faith, one’s own bodily life, turned in humility and love and mutual giving toward the other (see Rom. 12:1-13; Phil. 4:18).³⁵

Again and again, Paul uses the word *gospel*, εὐαγγέλιον, as the short name for the basic thing he is called to serve and the content of what he is saying in both oral proclamation and letters. It is this gospel that he believes will do the needed “purifying,” reminding, and unifying of the assemblies at which all of his letters aim. His letter to the Romans thus begins with his own identification as “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1) and with the characterization of that gospel as the good news promised in the scriptures, the good news concerning Jesus Christ, born, dead, and risen, who is the Son of God and our κύριος. For Paul, this gospel reveals the central matter to which the scriptures point, the very scriptures with which the Christians in Rome were familiar and which many of the Christian communities were reading. But more than mere words, this gospel is “the power of God for salvation, revealing the very righteousness of God” (1:16-17). It comes in word and deed and sign (15:18-19), like what later Christians will call “the visible word” of God.

“Gospel” also recurs in Paul’s other writings. His letter to the Galatians is a defense of the gospel he has proclaimed and a resistance to any other gospel (Gal. 1:6-9; cf. 2 Cor. 11:4), an assertion that this gospel is from God, given him “in a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). In his first letter to the Corinthians, he finds authority to address the Christian assembly in that city because he “became your father through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15; cf. 1:17). Indeed, it is obvious that he thinks of the gospel, the message about the cross of Jesus (1:18), as more than rhetoric (2:1) but as words that create, even give birth. This “word of the cross” is wisdom that looks like foolishness (1:23), strength that looks like weakness (2:3), yet the source of life and the presence of God’s Spirit (1:17, 24; 2:1-4; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5). It causes people who trust it and live by it “to stand,” in an age when

34. See my *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 143–49.

35. Paul uses the same metaphor in 1 Cor. 9:13-14, where “those who proclaim the gospel” are likened to “those who serve at the altar.”

all is falling (1 Cor. 15:1; cf. Phil. 1:27; Rom. 16:25). Indeed, this “standing” or the “salvation” which the gospel brings about (Rom. 1:16), is a characteristic way that Paul speaks about his expectation that the world as we know it is ending and the gospel—the very revelation of the mystery of God which had been hidden until these last times—is the God-given means for life and survival. In this urgent time, this gospel brings or ought to bring Jew and Greek together, setting aside religious ways of distinguishing insiders and outsiders (Gal. 2:14). In this urgent time, it brings people to care for and give to the poor (2 Cor. 9:13).³⁶

Perhaps the clearest delineation in all of Paul’s writings of what he regards as the content of the gospel is given in the formal confession found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. There Paul, once again intent upon “reminding” the Corinthian assembly of the gospel in which they “stand” and are being saved, seems to pass on, in a traditional formula and in a catalog of witnesses, the central assertion: Jesus Christ died for us, was buried, was raised, and has appeared to the church and its leaders. This death and resurrection was “in accordance with the scriptures.” Paul himself is among those to whom the risen one has appeared. Perhaps, indeed, given the numbers proposed by Stark, the assertion that the risen Christ “appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,” an assertion otherwise unknown in ancient Christian testimony, may be an early way of saying that a few years after Jesus’ death, the whole Jesus movement, in all of its meetings—and not only Peter and the Twelve and James—came to know that they were encountering Jesus Christ risen. In any case, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the content of Paul’s gospel. What it means for faith and life that this death and resurrection are “in accordance with the scriptures,” that they are “for our sins,” and that they are good news is what then occupies much of Paul’s writing and teaching.

Cultural Context for “the Gospel”

While the word *gospel* is found elsewhere and less centrally in other early Christian literature, its overwhelming use is in Paul.³⁷ So much is this so, that it has come to be widely regarded by scholars as likely that Paul himself was the originator of the Christian usage, at least of the word as a noun, in its singular,

36. See also the way 1 Corinthians 16, about the weekly collection for the poor, follows upon 1 Corinthians 15, about the content of the gospel.

37. See Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 20.

absolute sense (“the gospel,” without further modifier). But then the question of the background for Paul’s use becomes fascinating. It certainly may be true that Isaiah 61:1-2 and other Old Testament passages about announcing “good news” had some effect on the idea in early Christianity that the preaching of Jesus Christ, his death and his resurrection, and the nearness of God’s “kingdom” in him were “good news to the oppressed.” But the evidence for this usage may not be as old as Paul (e.g., Luke 4:18 and Luke 7:22/Matt. 11:5, perhaps a Q text). Or, if the usage does recall a word of Jesus himself, it is important to note that the actual words used in Isaiah and in these Christian uses of Isaiah are verbs, not nouns. The source of Paul’s unique use of “the gospel,” a singular noun, remains a question.

But recently a startling answer to that question has been proposed. Linguists such as F. W. Danker and G. H. R. Horsley have carefully researched the Hellenistic use of the related word group. Of the noun in plural form, τὰ εὐαγγέλια, Horsley says, “The usage of the neuter plural noun is clear: it refers to good news (often emanating from a monarch), such as news of their victories or benefactions; and in particular, the word is employed of the sacrifices celebrated on such an occasion.”³⁸ And now Graham Stanton demonstrates that in the time of the writings of Paul and the origins of the Gospels, the “monarch” concerned was overwhelmingly the Roman emperor.³⁹ Stanton has convincingly argued that the cultural home of this Greek word, the referential world which its use frequently called up, was the widespread and immensely important cult of the Roman emperor. So, Josephus (in the mid-70s) wrote of Vespasian becoming emperor in 69 C.E., that “every city kept festivals and celebrated sacrifices and oblations for such good news.”⁴⁰ The cities, indeed, “celebrated gospels,” ἑόρταζεν εὐαγγέλια, according to the literal Greek text. Here were those “sacrifices” called “gospels,” of which Horsley spoke. The imperial “good-news announcements” were both invitations to festival and the festival sacrifices themselves.

Even more significantly, an inscription about the adoption of the Roman calendar (usually called the “Priene inscription” from its first discovery on the

38. G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, vol. 3 (Sydney: Macquarrie University, 1983), 13.

39. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 25–33. Cf. Helmut Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3–4, 207, 217. Pace Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 87.

40. *Wars of the Jews* 4:10, in William Whiston, trans., *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 545. Cf. Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 1–2.

west coast of Turkey in a ruined town not far from ancient Ephesus, but in fact found very widely in many Greek cities of Asia Minor) read in part:

It is subject to question whether the birthday of our most divine Caesar spells more of joy or blessing, this being a date that we could probably without fear of contradiction equate with the beginning of all things [τῆ τῶν πάντων ἀρχῆ], if not in terms of nature, certainly in terms of utility, seeing that he restored stability, when everything was collapsing and falling into disarray, and gave a new look to the entire world that would have been most happy to accept its own ruin had not the good and common fortune of all been born: CAESAR. Therefore people might justly assume that his birthday spells the beginning of life and real living [ἀρχὴν τοῦ βίου καὶ τῆς ζωῆς] and marks the end and boundary of any regret that they had themselves been born. . . . and Caesar . . . transcended the expectations . . . not only by surpassing the benefits conferred by his predecessors but by leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who would come after him, with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of good news for the world because of him [ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐανγελίων].⁴¹

The inscription, placed in temples erected to the emperor, then went on to establish the calendar as beginning with the birthday of Augustus and as observed by festivals and games, by sacrifices and the installation of local magistrates: the beginning of the year and the beginning of legal terms was, according to the decree of the provincial Greek council of Asia, to coincide with the birthday of Augustus and thus with the “beginning of all things” and the beginning of good news.

While this calendar inscription probably originated very early in the first century C.E., it was still standing in many places in Asia Minor and still playing a role in the determination of social, political, and religious life in the time of Paul’s ministry. Indeed, we may take it as evidence of the values involved in the imperial cult as that cult was known throughout the Roman Empire. Although Asia Minor may have had its own religious culture in such matters,⁴² the giving

41. F. W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1983), 216–17. Greek text from Robert K. Sherk, *Roman Documents from the Greek East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 329–33.

42. S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

of divine honors to the emperor and the accompanying games, processions, and sacrifices were a kind of social glue in the whole ancient world, one that was experienced as very attractive and as involving all classes, one with which it would have been very difficult to dissent.⁴³

It appears that Paul did so dissent. Very likely Paul himself was the source of the singular use of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον for the announcement of the death and resurrection of Jesus. When seen next to the plural use of the word in imperial announcements, it seems that this singular use had a polemic intent. For Paul, there is only one reliable, life-giving, world-founding gospel as there is only one κύριος (1 Cor. 8:6). With this insight, we come to see the dangerous, existentially powerful implications of all that Paul says about “the gospel.” He is resisting the religious ideology of the powerful and oppressive state that wishes everyone to praise the “stability” that state brings. And he is doing so by announcing the paradoxical good news of one who was killed by that very state. Far from participating in the sacrifices, festivals, and games that belonged to the imperial cult, those imperial public liturgies, Paul sees his nonsacrificial, noncultic announcement of the gospel of Jesus Christ as his “priestly service” and the responding faith in God, awakened throughout the world, as the only “pure offering” of the nations. Paul is constantly recalling the crisis of the death of Jesus as the very crisis and turning point of the world, the beginning of the radical healing of all things. He is proclaiming the resurrection of this Jesus and interpreting both his death and resurrection in continuity with and using images from the Hebrew scriptures. In so doing, he is engaging in a profoundly critical religion, one that inverts and reinterprets what the available religious gestures—sacrifice and festival, for example—and thus what life and the world, power and stability, freedom and hope all actually are.

It is to this dangerous gospel that Paul was calling the small assemblies of Christians to whom he writes. These communities probably had come to exist in ways that were quite socially recognized and acceptable: licit *collega*; supper clubs; gatherings for the like-minded. There were many such clubs in any Hellenistic city.⁴⁴ But Paul, because of the one Lord of the gospel, may have been calling the Galatians to avoid the religious observance of the imperial year and the imperial

43. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 26–28. On the world-stabilizing force of Greco-Roman religion, see also Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, 93ff.

44. See Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*.

festivals (Gal. 4:8-10).⁴⁵ Because of the eschatology of the gospel, he may have been warning those who propagandize about and rely on the “peace and security,” the stability, of the Roman emperor (1 Thess. 5:3).⁴⁶ Because of the content of the gospel, a content even made known to “the whole imperial guard,” he may have been inviting the Philippians to a humility and mutual service like what they sing about in Jesus Christ and radically unlike that of the emperor (Phil. 1:12-13; 2:1-11).⁴⁷ But in all of his writings, he was calling those little assemblies—hardly noticeable assemblies, at first—to a faith and a way of life radically out of step with the social compact, the distribution of power and wealth, and the very description of the world supported by the worship of the emperor as “savior,” “lord,” “son of god,” and source of the “beginning (or foundation) of all things,” the “beginning of real living,” and the “beginning of good news for the world.” He was inviting them to a complex process of sorting, accepting, and rejecting elements of their own culture.⁴⁸ He was urging that they characterize their own versions of the Hellenistic local assemblies in a uniquely Christian way.

The words are made to crack, turn around, invert. The symbolic force of the words is broken. So, “assembly,” ἐκκλησία, is an ordinary Greek word with a usual reference to a gathering of free citizens, perhaps in Paul’s day to many a gathered “club.” But in Paul it becomes a word transformed by its reforming, biblical content: the assembly called before God for the sake of the world, like the assembly found in the scriptures and expected at the end of time. For Paul, the gospel is making these gatherings into ἐκκλησία, church, God’s assembly, and doing so in accord with the promises of the Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, as we have seen, in Paul “offering” and “priestly service” are no cultic interactions at all, but the announcing of the new gospel and the awakening of faith. These “priestly services” can include the assemblies where the gospel is announced for the sake of awakening faith. But they can also include Paul’s travels throughout the world, especially as he is gathering a collection for the needs of the poor. So also for him “gospel” itself is a word brought under new tension. It trails the

45. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 41–43; cf. Thomas Witulski, *Die Adressaten des Galaterbriefes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 158–68.

46. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 47–48; cf. J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25 (2002): 71–96.

47. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 48–49; cf. Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul*, 212; and Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 147–74.

48. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 198f.

smell of the imperial cult along with it, but then surprises and breaks those connotations. Perhaps a memory of Isaiah 61 assisted in this linguistic change: in Jesus Christ good news is indeed announced to the wretched and the poor, not only, as in the imperial “gospels,” to the collaborating rich and powerful. In any case, for Paul there is only one Son of God, only one Lord, only one “through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). This is not Augustus nor any of his successors. It is Jesus Christ, the low and despised one, the crucified. The proclamation of this one, of his life and death, of his “accession” as Lord, and of the forgiveness that is through him—the proclamation of the gospel—is a word full of paradoxical power. It is both an invitation to festival and the festival observance itself, but not in triumphalism nor in the sacrificial manipulation of power. Rather, by its word of the crucified, the Christian gospel gives life, brings to birth, makes faith in God possible, and turns one toward the needs of the neighbor. For Paul, such a word can repeatedly turn a dinner club or a gathering of the like-minded into a church.

The Death of Paul and the Origin of a First Gospel

As far as we know, Paul was executed by the Roman imperial authorities. It is no wonder, given the nature of his gospel. But, for our purposes, there is more to say. An important argument can be made that this death had something to do with the appearance of the kind of book we call a Gospel.

We do not know precisely when Paul was killed. At first, he and the tiny groups to which he related would not have been particularly noticed publicly, except as a minor religious irritation. But then, apparently, he was noticed. Or he and many other Christians were noticed—and cruelly killed. The writer of Acts reports that Paul came to Rome but gives no further end to the story: coming to Rome fulfills the outline of the book (Acts 1:8), and any further account of an official Roman execution would be counterproductive to the book’s irenic purposes, its desire to show that faith in Jesus Christ does not have to undermine a just government. The presentation of Paul in Acts as a Roman citizen (22:25-29; 23:27), a presentation that has no support in any of Paul’s own writings, probably stems from the same intention and probably is not a historical fact. The late-second-century tradition that Paul was beheaded in Rome was probably created out of this earlier Lukan idea, beheading being the “humane” form of capital punishment given to citizens.

But the late-first-century letter from the Roman church to the church in Corinth, called the *First Letter of Clement*, does make it clear that Paul was killed in Rome. His death most likely took place at more or less the same time that Peter was killed there, and most likely with a great many other Christians: “To these men [Peter and Paul] with their holy lives was gathered a great multitude of the chosen, who were the victims of jealousy and offered among us the fairest example in their endurance under many indignities and tortures” (*1 Clem.* 6:1).⁴⁹ The great probability is that the event to which this letter refers, the deaths of Peter and Paul and a “great multitude” of others, is the Neronian persecution of Christians. In 64 C.E., the emperor Nero made the Christians of the city into scapegoats for the great Roman fire, and he proceeded to kill a large portion of them in horrible ways. Peter and Paul were probably among this number, not executed with singular dignity, but tortured and massacred in Nero’s garden and at his “games,” along with many other Christians.⁵⁰ It is not so much that the faith of these Christians was understood and fearfully rejected by those whose power it threatened. It is, rather, that their faith and their way of life, at least as Paul urged and interpreted it, made of them a people radically out of step with ordinary social norms and so made them vulnerable to a weak and monstrous emperor’s need to blame a subgroup, redirect the public anger (which suspected him of the fire), and cruelly entertain the masses with public tortures and killings.

If this is so, then Paul died, to use the words that the Gospel according to Mark places in the mouth of Jesus at the “first passion prediction,” among “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel” (8:35). Indeed, he was among those who left family and house for the sake of Jesus and the gospel (10:29), and received manifold new family members and welcoming houses, but received them along with persecutions. He himself was among those who brought the gospel in proclamation to the nations (13:10), and so was betrayed and handed over and hated and put to death.

That these three occurrences of the singular noun “the gospel” in Mark, out of the total of seven such occurrences in the book, seem so close to Paul’s own usage of the word and, furthermore, that these three occurrences could be used to recall and describe Paul’s own death, raises the question as to whether the

49. Translation in Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 19.

50. See the convincing argument in Garry Wills, *What Paul Meant* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 157–70.

author of Mark knew the work of Paul. The question is intensified by the sense that the term “the gospel” is overwhelmingly a Pauline term and by the fact that the other four uses in Mark (1:1; 1:14-15; 14:9) are also strikingly like Paul. Mark uses the singular noun, never the verb, and uses it either absolutely or modified as the “gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1) or the “gospel of God” (1:14), both reflecting Pauline usage. As in Paul, the gospel is juxtaposed with Jesus Christ, as essentially the same thing (the gospel is Jesus Christ, who is both its first preacher and its content for the world), in the manner of biblical parallel speech.⁵¹ Furthermore, the question about the author of Mark knowing the work of Paul is intensified if both the proposal about Paul’s death under Nero in 64 c.e. and the current consensus regarding the date of Mark at about 70 c.e. are correct. Then Mark’s interest in “the gospel,” the very interest with which the book begins, could in some sense be in succession to Paul, carrying on his work in a new way. Did the author of Mark know the writings of Paul?

I propose that the answer is yes. Perhaps, in the small company that made up mid-first-century Christianity, this author knew Paul himself and lamented his awful death. In any case, several scholars have pointed out the considerable correspondence that exists between the vocabulary of Mark’s Gospel and Paul’s word use,⁵² a correspondence that is not limited to but certainly comes to expression in the immensely important word *gospel*. Even more decisively, Joel Marcus has demonstrated the series of overlapping themes and interests between the Gospel according to Mark and the letters of Paul:⁵³ the crucifixion of Jesus as the apocalyptic turning point of the world; Jesus’ victory over demonic powers; the gospel as prophesied in the scriptures; Christ as a second Adam;⁵⁴ both a dualism in faith and a tendency to a certain universalism (Mark 10:45; Rom. 11:32); a negative sense about Peter and about Jesus’ family; the gospel as good news for sinners; the gospel as for the Jews first but also for the Gentiles; a common attitude toward the

51. Mark 8:35; 10:29; cf. Rom. 1:1 and 15:16. “My sake” and “the sake of the gospel” are not two different things, but one thing spoken of in two juxtaposed and mutually reinterpreting ways. So also, “servant of Jesus Christ” and “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1) are not two different things. Neither are being a “minister of Christ Jesus” and doing “the priestly service of the gospel of God” (Rom. 15:16).

52. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 18–25; M.-J. LaGrange, *Évangile selon St. Marc* (Paris: Gabalda, 1929), clvii and 17–18; P. Rolland, “Marc. lecteur de Pierre et de Paul,” in E. van Segbroek, et al., eds., *The Four Gospels*, 2 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 775–78.

53. Joel Marcus, “Mark—Interpreter of Paul,” *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 473–87.

54. Especially in Mark 1:13 and 9:2-8; cf. Rom. 5:12-21 and 1 Cor. 15:21-22.

food laws (Rom. 14:14; Mark 7:19); and, most especially, a Christology centered on the cross, a thoroughgoing *theologia crucis*. Both Paul and Mark use the perfect passive participle “the one who was crucified,” ἐσταυωμένος, to describe the risen one whom their books proclaim (1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2; Gal. 3:1; Mark 16:6).⁵⁵ One might add yet more themes, especially the understanding of the followers of Jesus as an alternative “family,” as brothers and sisters and mothers (Mark 3:33-35; 10:28-31; cf., e.g., Romans 16); the sense that the gospel calls for and creates faith (Mark 1:15; cf., e.g., Rom. 1:1-5); the idea that church leaders should be servants and stewards (Mark 9:35; cf. 1 Cor. 4:1); and the common interest in the “mystery” or the secret being revealed (Mark 4:11, 22; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1).

The author of Mark knew and was at work interpreting Paul. But the author of Mark did not write letters to the churches as Paul did. He or she wrote a new kind of book. One might imagine something like this: with the deaths of Paul and Peter and the many other Christians who were killed under Nero, the Christian communities knew they were facing serious persecution. That persecution had also been breaking out in other places. One person, a person who understood what Paul was trying to do, also understood that these deaths meant a huge loss in the way the communities had access to the traditions and meanings of Jesus. Stories and saying of Jesus—and sayings of prophets who were speaking in the name of the risen Jesus⁵⁶—circulated orally, perhaps even in notebooks, but these stories and sayings had to be brought together in a book, authoritatively. Paul himself had made use of and passed on a few sayings of Jesus or prophetic sayings in the name of the risen Jesus,⁵⁷ but Paul was now dead. The book to be written would include a few more sayings than Paul—though still relatively few—but it would report them with the same sense of power and authority they had held for Paul. The “gospel” might continue to be talked about in Christian communities, but that gospel needed to have a reliable content. The tradition quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 would need to become a narrative, since such a narrative could give cohesion to fragmented communities and carry the scriptural authority of a world-founding epic. The assemblies and clubs that consid-

55. Marcus, “Mark—Interpreter of Paul,” 480.

56. It is important to realize that some of the sayings of Jesus had such a postresurrection origin.

57. See, for example, 1 Cor. 7:10, 40; 9:14; 11:23-25; 14:37; 1 Thess. 4:15. Especially 1 Cor. 7:40 and 14:37 makes clear that some of these sayings may well have come from Christian prophets or from Paul’s own act of prophecy.

ered themselves part of the Jesus movement were under pressure to conform or simply to follow their own ways. They still needed to be addressed, as Paul had addressed them, “reminding” them, calling them again and again to the heart of this gospel, making the “houses” of their gatherings places of the mystery of God revealed.

Perhaps the author of Mark had one such community in mind. It might have been the remaining Christians of Rome, as the later tradition imagined the origin of the book,⁵⁸ or it might have been some group in Galilee or Syria, nearer to the destroyed Temple and the “desolating sacrilege” set up at Jerusalem (Mark 13:2, 14), as some modern scholars theorize.⁵⁹ Or perhaps the author really did imagine that the book was for all the communities of Christians,⁶⁰ to be spread among that small number throughout the world of the time, just as Paul’s letters had begun to spread. We do not need to choose. In any case, the author knew that the communities saw themselves as under potentially murderous pressure, and meant to set out again the story of the death of the Lord as the most reliable help, a story that could gather into itself the current suffering and hold it under the resurrection promise. The book she or he wrote was a book for the persecuted.

Very likely, the many deaths in Rome and the growing number of deaths elsewhere had also brought about a subtle shift in the eschatological expectations of this successor of Paul. What he or she would write would still speak with apocalyptic language, but hidden in the text would be clear clues that with the death of Jesus the promised judgment of the nations had already begun, the promised day of God had dawned.⁶¹ The nations are already being judged now, in those who suffer and die, just as in their crucified Lord. In this regard, the author would slightly differ with Paul. The book’s word for the persecuted would

58. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2:15:2; 6:14:6. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:1:1: after the “departure” of Peter and Paul, Mark wrote. For recent arguments for Rome as the location of the writer, see Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

59. For example, Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959).

60. See Richard A. Burrige, “Who Writes, Why, and for Whom?” in Marcus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110–11.

61. Note, for example, that the phrase “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn” (13:35)—the times for the coming of “the κύριος of the house”—is replicated in the times given throughout the following passion story. Note also that the drinking that is to take place “new in the kingdom of God” (14:25) does take place in the story, with sour wine on the cross (15:36). See further below, in chap. 3.

not simply be comfort. It would also lay down a way to go on, a way to be the community of Jesus in the way of the cross, even as the eschatology shifted away from the expectation of an immediate, open *parousia* of the Lord and an observable victory of the community. In the present moment was already the dawning dominion of God, in every encounter with the hidden but risen Lord. Indeed, the assemblies of Christians needed to know who was the risen one they were encountering in their meetings and at their meals and how he was still, precisely, the crucified, the ἔσταυωμένος. For all of these reasons, in succession to Paul and in nuanced change, the author would write a book that recounted the beginning and the root content—the ἀρχή—of the gospel.

Or perhaps it was not like this. Perhaps there were many authors of the work. Perhaps parts of it—say, the account of Jesus’ death or the collection of parables that would make up the current chapter 4—were already largely composed and circulating. And of course, the resultant book, however composed, would have been influenced by available models or inevitably read as like them: it would be seen as a Christian version of a Hellenistic *bios*, a recognizable form for the biography of great figures.⁶² In creating a narrative, it might have been influenced by the manner of ancient novels.⁶³ It might carry some of the traits of the great Greek epics, especially in its circular composition and its sense of the weight and importance of the story.⁶⁴ All these things are possible.

But, one way or another, the book was also something new, something else. So much is clear: in whatever way it came about, the Gospel according to Mark reflects the Pauline interest in “the gospel,” the Pauline interest in the crucifixion of Jesus as the turning place of the world, the Pauline interest in the resurrection of Jesus, the Pauline sense that the gospel of the crucified comes with a life-giving and faith-creating power, and the Pauline interest in saying all this to an assembly or to assemblies—to the house churches that are echoed in the frequent Markan “house”—for the sake of their ongoing reform. However, if the apostle Paul himself was an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), a kind of stand-in for the presence of the risen one in the assemblies, and if Paul’s letters were a kind of

62. See Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

63. Cf. Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 23.

64. See Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xii. See also chap. 3 below.

stand-in for his own presence, then this idea was even intensified in the Gospel according to Mark. The book, read in the assemblies, was intended as an encounter with, even a seeing of the Jesus Christ crucified and risen whom the book describes.⁶⁵ Jesus-then is indeed Jesus-now, in the assembly. The eschatological moment comes here. Such is the new intention of the book, more than the Hellenistic *bioi* intended to be, more even than Paul's letters. This was a newness needed by the times—by the eschatological shift, by the situation of persecution, by the ongoing and threatened meetings of the assemblies, by the communal fragmentation, by the need for the life-giving power of the gospel.

Still, the book shares with Paul the knowledge that this gospel is antiimperial. It is not only that the “desolating sacrilege” set up in the Temple (13:14), which seems to have been one of the occasions for the writing of the book, most likely referred to the statue of the *Sebastos*,⁶⁶ the emperor as the most “worship-worthy” one, as indeed god and son of god. It is not only that the death of the crucified is recounted in a way that makes clear the radical difference of this lowly one with all imperial pretension and power.⁶⁷ It is that the book itself is called “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1).⁶⁸ That is most likely its title, perhaps the one clear title we have in all of the original texts of the Gospel books:⁶⁹ *The ἀρχή of the gospel*. This title is almost exactly like the wording of the Priene calendar inscription,⁷⁰ only now in the Pauline singular, now about a very different “son of God,” and now directly contrary

65. See Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); my *Holy Ground*, 128–29; and chap. 3 below.

66. *Sebastos* is the Greek translation of the word “Augustus,” but it carries more religious content: “the worshiped one.”

67. See especially Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

68. “Son of God,” in the title, remains textually unsure, being supported especially by the Vaticanus, the Byzantine tradition, and the Vulgate. The parallel to the Priene inscription and the imperial cult seems to me to argue for its inclusion. So does the important Markan idea that the community of hearers is in on the “secret.”

69. Of course, it can be argued that Mark 1:1 refers only to the immediately following account of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, and especially the beginning of Jesus' preaching, *his* “evangelizing.” It is then not a title of the work but a description of the opening section. Again, I think that the parallel to the Priene inscription and the use of the Pauline singular noun, rather than the verb, supports the idea that 1:1 is the ancient title of the book.

70. See M. Eugene Boring, et al., *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 169; and Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel*, 97, 179.

to the pretense of the emperor's cult. This title, rather, draws one into the book that follows and so points to the mercy and truth, the weakness and suffering of the Jesus-then—the beginning, the ground—who is the saving and healing, risen Jesus-now, as the assembly in the power of the Spirit stands before God around him. The book is revolutionary and calls upon the assemblies that read it to be countercultural, for the sake of a wider, deeper healing and stability of all things. In a certain sense, the book has from its outset a sacred character, like the announcements and proclamations that would be the basis for festivals and sacrifices in the imperial cult. But it is also a subversion of this kind of sacrality, a holy calling to another way.

What the book is comes to expression in the title: it is the beginning and grounds of the gospel, a gospel that is needed by the assemblies, proclaimed and celebrated in the “houses,” and a gospel utterly at odds with the many, lying “gospels” of the imperium. That “beginning” points toward the assemblies where the gospel will occur on the grounds of this beginning. “Beginning” implies and coheres with assembly. And it witnesses against the imperial cult that found all beginnings of life and festival in the doings and person of the emperors.

The author of Mark, then, for the first time, creates a new genre—a kind of book that will later be called a “Gospel.” It is not exactly made new, out of whole cloth. It depends upon the circulating stories and sayings of Jesus, upon the Pauline idea of “gospel,” upon Hebrew scripture passages long used by Christians to interpret the meaning of Jesus, perhaps upon the methods of *biōi* and Homeric epics. But it is largely intended for assembly use, and it means to do a new thing, to be the grounds for proclaiming the gospel of God and thus a means for the encounter with the risen crucified one, his hidden death revealed for what it is and thus the hidden secret of all things revealed. In doing this, it is brilliant. I think that it is the astonishing creation of a fine, literate, Pauline-formed but independent theologian. It may not be the most elegant Greek. In that sense, like its subject, it is humble. But it is neither simple nor simple-minded. Its conceptions of the function of symbol, juxtaposed image and overlaid speech, its idea of word-event occurring in assembly, its balance of mystery and epiphany are complex and astonishing. Indeed, I join the Christian tradition in gladly confessing it to be the result of the inspiration of the Spirit of God, but exactly an inspiration that has a real human history, a flesh that goes with the spirit.

And Then, the Four

In the next three decades, the Gospel according to Mark seems to have been read at least some places among the Christians. In any case, it seems to have awakened the interest of a few people or a few communities to create other books like it, perhaps even in order to supersede it. It is right to argue that the authors of Matthew and Luke both made use of it. The shape of Mark became largely the shape of the other two. The three books, together, have been called “the Synoptics” for just this apparent common shape. Furthermore, the very wording of Mark often survived in the other two, albeit with an intentional editing and smoothing out of the Markan text and a leveling of some of the Markan paradoxes and complexities. What both of the other two Synoptics did, however, was seek to expand the collection of the sayings of Jesus, both of them perhaps relying upon the oral or notebook tradition of Q, while also each turning to unique material that we otherwise do not have.⁷¹ For them, a faithful representation of Jesus in the assemblies needed to include more of his teaching. What they also both did was turn back slightly from the eschatological adjustment of Mark, reintroducing a somewhat stronger sense of a future event, a day of the Lord to come. They did this, apparently, in the years between 70 C.E. and the end of the century, Matthew probably between 80 and 90 C.E., Luke later, most likely between 90 and 100.⁷² Perhaps they did it for specific communities, though we know from extensive quotation in second-century writers that these two books came to be widely read, probably more widely read than Mark. The greater number of second-century manuscript fragments of the Gospels are fragments of Matthew. And, while the two-volume work of Luke-Acts is addressed to a single, perhaps idealized reader named Theophilus, the work seems to present itself as a kind

71. A significant and compelling argument can be made, however, that Matthew used and expanded Mark, that Luke used both Matthew and Mark as its only written sources, that the author of John knew all three of the earlier books, and that alongside all of this an oral tradition about Jesus and his teaching still continued, evolved, and expanded. In such an argument, a strong accent is placed on the intentional creativity of each of the authors and the hypothesis of there being a “Q” at all is eliminated. This case was made cogently by Austin Farrer in his “On Dispensing with Q,” in D. E. Nineham, *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55–88, esp. 85. See also Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989/1994), 22–23; and Mark S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

72. See, recently, L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 312 and 335.

of new epic of Christianity,⁷³ intended for widespread reading among Greco-Roman Christians. Indeed, perhaps the books were originally intended for all of the Christian assemblies then known in the world.

Then, at about 110 C.E. or so,⁷⁴ came the fourth book, the one we call “According to John.” If one reads carefully, it, too, evidences a knowledge of Mark, following something like the same outline and fascinatingly expanding on Markan themes.⁷⁵ The author very likely also knew Luke and perhaps also Matthew,⁷⁶ but his (or her?) eschatology—sometimes called “realized”—is written as if this author understood and agreed with the hidden speech of Mark and brought the matter to yet more open expression. In any case, in John the whole outline is filled out with extensive theological discourses as well as with a series of “signs” that reveal who Jesus is.

None of these three was as Pauline as was the author of Mark. Still, they were certainly interested in the “gospel.” While the singular noun “the gospel” occurs less frequently and less centrally in these other books, Luke does use the verbal form extensively. Indeed, the angels at the outset of “According to Luke” “proclaim good news” to Zechariah and to the shepherds (1:19; 2:10) about the preparation for and the birth of Jesus. And Jesus, at the outset of his ministry in Luke, quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 and inhabits its promise of “good news to the poor” (4:18). In “According to Matthew,” the most extensive beginning of Jesus’ preaching is the Sermon on the Mount, and there, at the outset, in the Beatitudes, beginning with “blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3), Jesus may be being presented as doing exactly the announcement of good news to the poor that the text of Isaiah 61 envisions.⁷⁷ In Matthew, furthermore, the phrase “this gospel of the kingdom” (24:14) or simply “this gospel” (26:13) may very well refer to the book itself or, at least, to its content.⁷⁸

While there is no such word use in “According to John,” there in the first line of the book is that startling reuse of the Markan word ἀρχή, “beginning.” In the Fourth Gospel, of course, what is there in the beginning is “the word.” Already

73. Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels*, 235.

74. White, *Scripting Jesus*, 358.

75. So, for example, in the Markan passion story, the “temple-builder” image and the “I am”—the divine name—both play a role (Mark 14:58, 62). In John, the former has become a story at the outset of Jesus’ ministry (John 2:13-22) and the later an astonishing, revelatory event at Jesus’ arrest in the garden (John 18:6).

76. Cf. White, *Scripting Jesus*, 354–55.

77. Cf. 4:23. See Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 14–15.

78. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

in Paul, “word” and “gospel” can be used synonymously (e.g., Phil. 1:12-14).⁷⁹ The same is probably true for Mark (2:2; 4:14; 4:33). In any case, in both Paul and Mark the content of the gospel is Jesus Christ himself. The same is true of the Fourth Gospel’s “word,” as this idea is illumined by Hellenistic *logos* speculation and by a play on the opening words of Genesis. Moreover, in this prologue to “According to John,” the interest is in how this content of the word relates to what the Priene inscription calls “the beginning of all things.” It seems as if the antiimperial character of “According to Mark” has spilled over into this further Gospel book, this further reworking of the intention of Mark. All things have come to be through Jesus Christ the Word, not through the emperor.

When one recalls that the calendar inscriptions and the imperial cult, generally, were also deeply interested in the birth of Augustus, then it is no surprise that “According to Matthew” and “According to Luke” start with diverse versions of the story of Jesus’ birth. Indeed, Luke even dates the birth story with “a decree . . . from Emperor Augustus” (2:1), demonstrating at once both the obedience of Mary and Joseph to the imperial decree, their peacefulness, and the radical difference of this birth of another sort of “savior” or benefactor among the poor.⁸⁰ It is also fascinating to note that the author of Luke also begins the book with a reference to the beginning, the ἀρχή (Luke 1:2).⁸¹ Perhaps this word is to be expected at the outset of a book. But I think it more likely that both the power of Mark’s evocation and reversal of the imperial cult and the importance of this first Gospel for the formation of the others have carried further reflection on “the beginning” into both Luke and John. Luke thinks of the beginning of the gospel (of Jesus Christ, not the emperor), that gospel now called “the word” (Luke 1:2). John juxtaposes Genesis 1:1 and thus thinks of the beginning of all things in that same word (and not in the advent of the emperor). In any case, besides the general shape of the book, all three of the other Gospel books do seem to catch some version of Mark’s interest in “gospel” (or “word”) and some breath of the countercultural sense of that gospel.

They catch yet more. I am arguing here that the first example of the Gospel book genre, created in about 70 c.e. and called by us “According to Mark,” was

79. *Ibid.*, 47–49.

80. Frederick Danker thinks that Luke intentionally sets the image of Jesus as “benefactor” against the kind of imperial “benefaction” praised in the Priene inscription. See his *Luke, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 29–30.

81. See also Acts 1:1, where a verbal form of “beginning” is used.

primarily addressed to assemblies. It was meant to be read at gatherings in the very “houses” that are reflected in its narratives and promised in its “you . . . will receive a hundredfold . . . houses” (10:30). It was to be read there as a means to see the risen one present in the assembly. While the other Gospels do not follow the same method that Mark does, revealing that presence as a kind of hidden epiphany breaking out of the layered and symbolic speech of the text, they have nonetheless gotten the point. All three of the other books conclude with accounts of assemblies, in each case presented as paradigmatic for all Christian assemblies. In Luke, it is Emmaus and then the gathering of all the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24). In Matthew, it is the baptismal sending of the community and the promise “I am with you always,” a reprise of the earlier “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 28:16-20; 18:20). And in John, the meetings are recurring, every Sunday—as, by then, was the pattern of the churches—and are to be filled with the presence, word, forgiveness, sending, and Spirit of the risen Christ. The book is to be read there as enabling faith (John 20:19-31). These final images of the books are important indications of their most basic intentions, of the reasons for the books being written at all. The books have in common that interest in assembly, although they address the assemblies in differing ways.

Second-Century Reception of the Four

What shall we call these books? One of them calls itself “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1). Another may be proposing “This gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 24:14). Otherwise, the earliest forms of the text were without title. But as the books came into the second century, they were increasingly called “The gospel according to ____.” This use, of course, implied that there is a single gospel, a word alive in the assemblies and filled with the presence of the one Lord, but that there are a diversity of witnesses to that gospel. It is a splendid point, and one that ought not be taken for granted. The books themselves, for all that the latter three make use of the first one, seem to envision that each book is quite enough. After all, if the books purported to tell the truth about Jesus, then the inconsistencies among them might be seen as making the Christians vulnerable to a charge of lying or invention. Stanton argues that the very fact that Matthew incorporates most of Mark in his book is “an indication that he intended that his Gospel should replace Mark’s, and that it should become *the*

Gospel for Christians in his day.”⁸² Similarly, Luke is aware of earlier attempts. He proposes to do the thing correctly that others have undertaken, finally writing an “orderly account for you” (1:3). And the Johannine community, in its probably later appendix to the Gospel, does not think they need all those other books that could fill the world. They most likely treasure only the book that they regard as the testimony of the beloved disciple (21:24-25). It is then amazing that the four Gospels survived and even thrived, seemingly against the intention of at least three of the authors. It is the more so, since at least one Christian, called Tatian, in the mid-second century actually attempted to weave all four into a single narrative: his resulting book was called the *Diatessaron*, “arising from four,” and it was a book that was remarkably successful in Syriac-speaking Christianity in subsequent centuries. The temptation was to try to find a single reliable access to history, to Jesus-then.

But Tatian’s text was not the deepest result of the use of the books in the churches. Some time in the second century, bound in a single codex, they began to be called by the names we still use today: “The Gospel according to Mark,” “*kata Markon*”; “The Gospel according to John,” “*kata Ioannen*”; and so on. By such titles, the point was made that the truth about Jesus will be best told in a juxtaposition of these witnesses, not by the absolutizing of one. In fact, as Irenaeus of Lyon would later warn,⁸³ to cling to just one would probably lead to distortions. But then the joint witness finally took place preeminently in the assembly. The gospel in the assembly could be both a transcending and a reconciliation of the original purposes of the individual books. Stanton argues that “by accepting the fourfold Gospel, the early church acknowledged that the gospels are not histories” but “theological witnesses to Jesus Christ in narrative form.”⁸⁴ And the primary place of this witness, as envisioned by the books themselves, was the assembly. Here again, I gladly join the confession of the church that regards both each of the four and the very fact that there are four as gifts from the Spirit of God, but gifts that have a real human history, a flesh that goes with the spirit.

As the years continued, the books began to be called “Gospels,” in the plural. I am following that custom in what follows in this present work, as I also make use of the standard shorthand “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.” I do so hesitantly. Not only do we not really know, from the texts or from contemporary

82. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 87.

83. *Against Heresies* 3:11:7.

84. *Ibid.*

witnesses, the names of the authors of these books, but we also do not know the gender of these authors. At least “Mark,” it seems to me, runs a good chance of having been written by a woman (the apostle Junia, perhaps, of Romans 16:7?),⁸⁵ because of the positive role of women in the text (e.g., 7:24-30; 14:3-9; 15:40-41) but also because of their final failure (16:8). It might be a faithful woman who could best set out that ambiguity. But I hesitate mostly because of our need to see again the remarkable difference of these books. In a sense, they are not themselves “the gospel” but its beginning, its witness, the materials for its proclamation. In a deep sense, they are not plural, like the imperial announcements, for they witness together to one person, one event, one presence. They are not ordinary biographies. They are not, finally, competing narratives. They are not tame. Nonetheless, “Gospels” it will be. And “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John”—but with a constant suspicion that these are the wrong names. “The Gospel according to one like a Lion, one like a Human Being, one like an Ox, and one like an Eagle,” rare beasts all, may be closer to the truth.

There are, astonishingly, four. And they are not the same. Garry Wills speaks of them as four “Reports”: from the suffering body of Jesus (Mark), from the teaching body of Jesus (Matthew), from the reconciling body of Jesus (Luke), and from the mystical body of Jesus (John).⁸⁶ While one might want to be careful with the word *report*, Wills helpfully includes both witness to Jesus and witness to the life of the churches in his titles.

Others have recently argued that there are also more than four. In that regard, Helmut Koester has wisely said that the texts that continued to be central to the life of the churches were texts that carried centrally a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the very death and resurrection that was also celebrated at the heart of the ongoing meal tradition of the church.⁸⁷ We will explore this connection between Gospels and meals further in what follows.⁸⁸ But Koester also points out that the “sayings tradition,” the possible source of the “Gospel of Thomas” and others of the various second-century texts that were later treasured by Christian Gnostic groups, had little accent upon historic, communal continuity.

85. Were Junia the author, interestingly, “Mark” would indeed be the “memoirs” of an apostle, as Justin calls the Gospels (1 *Apology* 66 and 67), and not because it was attributed to a companion of Peter, as Papias and Irenaeus later did. See above, n.58.

86. Garry Wills, *What the Gospels Meant* (New York: Penguin, 2008), vii.

87. Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels*, 38.

88. See chap. 2 below.

The “sayings,” without narrative, without an interest in communal meals and meetings, and without the passion account, could indeed have religious meaning for individuals but not for communities.⁸⁹ They could express general religious ideas, even “wide truths of life,” but not reform proposals for assemblies. What is more, Pheme Perkins argues that much of the second-century “apocryphal gospel” material “was created by the growing prominence of the four-Gospel canon in Christian life and worship. It does not contain much first-century Jesus tradition. Nor should the adoption of a Gospel canon for Christian worship and instruction be viewed as an example of ecclesiastical repression.”⁹⁰ So, while the spread of the four may have evoked competition, there was not an “ecclesiastical structure” to be repressive. There was simply the mutuality between the late-first-century Gospel books and the assemblies. It is those earlier books, the four, the ones that arose out of a clear interest in and mutual coherence with the assemblies, that I am exploring here.

That this communal, reforming, reorienting intention for assemblies belonged to the early purpose of the Gospels seems to have been understood and read in the books themselves by at least some Christians in the second century. So, for example, already Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the church at Smyrna sometime in the first two decades of that century, calls for the church to pay attention to the prophets and “especially to the Gospel, in which the Passion has been revealed to us and the Resurrection has been accomplished” (Ign. *Smyrn.* 7:2b).⁹¹ The “gospel” here, of course, could be the Pauline word meaning the oral proclamation of Jesus Christ, but when it is paired with “the prophets” it seems more likely that Ignatius is already envisioning the reading and preaching from a book. That book then shows forth the death of Jesus and the presence of his resurrection in the assembly. Ignatius appeals for attention to these things as a way to correct misconceptions of what God is doing and a way to ground the unity of the assembly: “flee from divisions” (7:2c). Then, the *Didache*, probably an early-second-century writing and compilation (that included some much earlier material), mentions “the gospel,” perhaps meaning a book, and does so in connection to matters of assembly practice: the text of the Lord’s Prayer, the reception of traveling prophets and apostles, and the

89. Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels*, 234.

90. Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, xvi.

91. Translation in Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* I, 57. Cf. also Ign. *Smyrn.* 5:1.

practice of mutual correction (8:2; 11:3; 15:34).⁹² It is even more clear that Justin, writing in Rome in the mid-second century, has the books in mind. In describing the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he first says, “For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread . . .” (*1 Apol.* 66),⁹³ and then he continues with one version of the “institution narrative.” It is these “memoirs of the apostles” which are reported as being read in the Sunday meeting of Justin’s assembly (*1 Apol.* 67). Justin then asserts that this whole meeting and its content, the content being presented in the *Apology* and being summarized by the report of the baptismal and eucharistic practice of this assembly at the end of the *Apology*, is the result of the teaching of the risen crucified Christ, a teaching that may be especially known in the Gospels.

Then, toward the end of the second century, it was Irenaeus of Lyon who compared the four books to the four faces of the living creatures of Ezekiel 1 and the four Beasts of Revelation 4–7 and 14.⁹⁴ In the midst of the living creatures of Ezekiel is the fire of the presence of God. In the midst of those same Beasts, as the image was reused in the Revelation, are the throne of God and then the presence of the Lamb who was slain. Around them, in Revelation, is the assembly of the elders, surely a reflection of the assembly of the church. The first thing that the Lamb does is open the scroll in the hand of God. The Lamb is the key to the book. Perhaps it is not only that Irenaeus found the image of the beasts apt to what he regarded as the single aim of the diverse Gospel books, apt because there is a single presence in the midst of the four different creatures. He may also have found the image apt to the very use of the Gospels: their witness in the midst of the assembly, calling the assembly toward the throne and the Lamb and toward the Lamb as the key to the very book of God. The Gospels are not simply like the Beasts in their fourness and their difference. They are also like the Beasts in their common function: witness to the presence of the one crucified living one, the one who is the meaning of the book of the will of God; witness to that presence in the midst of a book-reading, meal-keeping (cf. Rev. 3:20; 22:14,17), singing-and-

92. Cf. Matt. 6:9-13; 10:5-10; 18:15-20. It seems as if the community of the *Didache* knew “according to Matthew.”

93. Translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, 185.

94. *Against Heresies*, 3:11:8. Note that Irenaeus identifies John as the Lion and Mark as the Eagle, unlike the common and ongoing tradition of the West. Iconography in the East knows both traditions. See Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 113.

praying assembly of the church; and witness to that presence as witness against the murderous structures of the world. Irenaeus thus gives evidence for the fact that by the late second century the widespread practice of the churches included the four.

* * *

So what was a Gospel? If we are speaking of the four, of the books that belong to the genre first inaugurated by Mark, then it was a book intended to bear witness to the meaning of Jesus Christ and to do so, for the most part, in assembly. Such a book aimed at the ongoing reform of that assembly. It meant to be received as scripture, side by side with and interpreting any other scriptures read in the meeting. It meant to be word of God, witnessing to Jesus, in an assembly gathered in the Spirit. Or, rather, it meant to be the ground for and the beginning of the spoken and signed announcement of the gospel in that same assembly, an announcement that invited and gave birth to faith and that turned its hearers, in countercultural ways, in love toward their neighbors. More: this Gospel book functioned itself as a symbol of the presence of the crucified and risen one, and it spoke a symbolic language as it enacted that function. In its writing, it articulated the Jesus-then in order to enable speech about the Jesus-now. And it did all this with an explicit interest in resistance to destructive religious and cultural patterns of the time and an interest in the well-being of more than only the community that read the book.

The four did this common work in different ways. As time went on, the four also came to do this work side by side. We need to explore both those different ways and that side-by-side work, after we first look at the manner in which the Gospels, in one way or another, addressed the meals of the church. There are many ways to read these books, many questions that may be asked of them. We will be reading them here with primarily one question in view: As they speak of Jesus-then becoming Jesus-now, what are they saying about and to assemblies?

These Gospels are still read among us, in present-day Christian assemblies. The genre "Gospel," its coherence with assembly, and its ancient calls to reform still resonate in our time, in our liturgies. The very coherence between Gospels and assembly has an edge. As we have considered that edge in the first and second centuries, as we have looked at the origin of the Gospels and their early purpose, questions have also arisen for us.

Thus: Do we read the Gospels in our assemblies in order to hear the gospel there? What would that mean for our understanding and practice? Do we too easily turn the books into historical reports of Jesus-then, with no interest in Jesus-now? Or do we make the linkage between our times and those times only by our imagining “what it must have been like” or by our turning the teaching of Jesus into universal laws and “wide truths of life,” even though the Gospel books themselves are interested in neither thing? Do our preachers deal with the texts as if they were literal reports? Does our general practice meld the four into one, single story, overlooking the striking differences? Does the ancient rejection of the imperial cult and its “gospels” have continuing relevance for us? What functions like that cult in our times? Do we help the people of our assemblies to know that these books arose in the late first and early second centuries, as witnesses to Jesus Christ crucified and risen, as calls to assembly, as countercultural moves—like the Beasts?