



The Gospel and the Gospel Traditions in Early Christianity

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Since the rise of modern historical criticism, it has been customary to speak of several known gospel traditions. Moreover, it has become commonly accepted that these gospel traditions are diverse in their portraits of Jesus of Nazareth and his significance. Nevertheless, even though it is readily granted that there are variegated *gospel traditions* in early Christianity, it is routinely assumed that there is only *one gospel*. That there can be only one gospel may be due to Paul's insistence that there is no other than the one that he preaches (Gal 1:6-9). In any case, the question is worth raising: If there were different gospel traditions, each having its own particular message, can one speak of the gospel in the singular? Today's insistence on diversity within the New Testament—a correct and necessary emphasis¹—makes an affirmative answer more difficult, or at least more complicated.

I. A PLURALITY OF TRADITIONS

In the first century of the Christian movement, the term “gospel” already had several meanings.² In the synoptic tradition, Jesus proclaims the “gospel of God,” the good news that the time of eschatological fulfillment has arrived, and that the kingdom of God is dawning upon the world (Mark 1:14-15). For Paul, the gospel was primarily oral proclamation concerning God's salvation of humanity in the crucified and resurrected Christ. But the gospel, for him, is not just information. It

¹The major work in this area is that of James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

²A survey is provided by Gerhard Friedrich, “*Evangelion*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964-76) 2:727-735.

actually effects salvation as it is heard and believed; it is “the power of God for salvation to every one who believes” (Rom 1:16). The evangelist Mark uses the term at the outset of his gospel to indicate that his own work (our Gospel of Mark) presents “the beginning of the gospel” (1:1), i.e., it gives an account of how the gospel proclaimed in the church had its origins. A few years later, at the outset of the second century, Ignatius wrote of the gospel as “the coming of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, his passion, and the resurrection” (*Phld.* 9.2). Here the main elements of the gospel are precisely those events that the church would come to recount in its creeds and celebrate in its major festivals: Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.

One could go on to list additional nuances and meanings of the term “gospel” in early Christianity. But it can be seen already that the term could mean proclamation by Jesus of

Nazareth (as in the synoptic tradition), proclamation about God's work in Christ (Paul and Mark), or an account of major christological moments (Ignatius). Finally, we must add to this brief list one other meaning, and that is "gospel" as a literary designation. This meaning appears in the second century. It shows up in the Muratorian Canon³ and in the writings of Irenaeus (fl. ca. A.D. 180), who speaks of the gospel first as being preached and then "handed down to us in writings" (*Against Heresies* 3.1). He goes on momentarily to make his celebrated case for the necessity of four gospels—no more, no less (3.11.8).

Various scholars have maintained that the gospel traditions of early Christianity can be gathered under different types, and that each type had its own message (or, we might say, its own "gospel").⁴ These different types appear in both canonical and non-canonical sources. Without contesting for the moment their adequacy, the following four types are sketched out as the most notable in modern scholarship.

1. *Jesus as Future Redeemer*. According to this type, Jesus' coming, his ministry, and his cross and resurrection are but a prelude to what is to be. The present is a time of waiting for the parousia when Jesus will appear as Messiah and inaugurate his messianic rule. This formulation, according to the late John A. T. Robinson, sets forth "the most primitive Christology of all" and is reflected in Peter's sermon in Acts 3:12-26.⁵ There Peter speaks of God's future sending of "the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago" (3:20-21); in the meantime, Jesus is but the "Christ-elect."⁶ In addition, the old Aramaic petition "maranatha" (actually two words, *marana tha*, "our Lord, come") in 1 Cor 16:22 and *Didache* 10.6 (cf. the Greek form at Rev 22:20) seems to look to the future coming of the Lord (Jesus) for redemption.⁷ Finally, the tradition of Jesus as future redeemer is also to be found in the Q material, which does not contain an account of the passion and resurrection but sets forth Jesus as the coming Son of man (Luke 12:8-9//Matt 10:32, etc.), "the

³The text is printed in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 1.43-45.

⁴One of the best known typologies, on which much of our own survey is based, is that of Helmut Koester, "The Structure and Criteria of Early Christian Beliefs," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity* by James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 205-231.

⁵John A. T. Robinson, "The Most Primitive Christology of All?," in *Twelve New Testament Studies*, SBT 34 (London: SCM, 1962) 139-153.

⁶*Ibid.*, 144.

⁷Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (Cleveland: World, 1969) 93-103.

redeemer of the future."⁸ The gospel in this type of gospel tradition would be that those who repent and become disciples of Jesus will be vindicated in the final judgment.

2. *Jesus as Teacher of Wisdom*. The mention of Q shows how complicated it is to speak of types of gospel tradition in early Christianity. The Q tradition, it has been suggested, not only portrays Jesus as future redeemer but also as teacher of wisdom. He calls upon his hearers to have faith in their Father in heaven, rather than to have anxiety (Luke 12:22-31//Matt 6:25-33), and he reveals knowledge that even the wise and understanding lack (Luke 10:21-22//Matt 11:25-27). According to James M. Robinson, certain sayings of Jesus were collected together into a literary form which he calls "words of the wise," and this form is exhibited primarily in Q

and the Gospel of Thomas.⁹ The gospel in this type of gospel tradition varies according to differing lines of development (or “trajectories”). In Q the gospel, as indicated above, would be the vindication of Jesus’ disciples, while in the Gospel of Thomas it is knowledge (*gnosis*) of one’s true self, and one’s origins and destiny, as imparted by the Revealer.

3. *Jesus as Wonder Worker*. Besides gospel traditions of the sayings of Jesus, there are those which emphasize his mighty deeds. It has been suggested that here we have another type of gospel tradition.¹⁰ The best evidence for this is the existence of the so-called infancy gospels, of which the Infancy Gospel of Thomas is the most illustrious. Among the canonical gospels, it is possible that a Signs Source, basically a collection of miracle stories, existed prior to the writing of the Fourth Gospel, into which it was incorporated.¹¹ Moreover, certain traditions within the Synoptic Gospels, primarily the miracle stories in the Gospel of Mark—which may have existed as a pre-Markan collection¹²—together with so-called “legends” of Jesus, have been identified by some scholars as presenting traditions of Jesus as a great wonder worker; according to some interpreters, these traditions are carriers of a “divine man” Christology, which glorifies the deeds of Jesus.¹³ In all these instances the gospel is that the earthly Jesus was mighty in deed, defeating the powers of Satan, and that now, in an analogous way, his followers have divine powers at their disposal as well, and these are manifested in ecstasy and miracles.

4. *Jesus as Crucified and Raised*. Another type of gospel tradition recounts Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection.¹⁴ This tradition is found in creedal formulas, such as in 1 Cor 15:3-7, and in the latter portions of the four canonical gospels. It is disputed today whether there ever was a primitive passion narrative prior to the

⁸Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 2.148. Cf. also Richard A. Edwards, *A Theology of Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 149-150; and Ivan Havener, *Q: The Sayings of Jesus* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 106-107.

⁹James M. Robinson, “LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q,” in *Trajectories*, 111-113.

¹⁰Cf. H. Koester, “Structure and Criteria,” 216-223; and W. Schneemelcher, “Introduction,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1.83-84.

¹¹Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970); and H. Koester, *Introduction*, 2.184-185.

¹²One proponent of such a view is Paul J. Achtemeier, “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenaes,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970) 265-291.

¹³Hans Dieter Betz, “Jesus as Divine Man,” in *Jesus and the Historian: Written in Honor of Ernest Cadmann Colwell*, ed. Thomas Trotter (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 114-133. The concept of a first-century divine man tradition and its application to Jesus has been challenged by, among others, David L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker*, SBLDS 1 (Missoula: Scholars, 1972).

¹⁴H. Koester, “Structure and Criteria,” 223-229.

writing of any of our four gospels. At one time that was a virtual given,¹⁵ but today it is widely held that Mark composed his passion narrative out of smaller units of tradition in the writing of his gospel.¹⁶ In any case, the gospel of this type of tradition is that either the cross as means of atonement, or the resurrection as means of exaltation over death and the powers of evil—or some combination of both cross and resurrection—is the saving event by which humanity is set free from the condemnation of sin, which leads to death, and is given life and an open future with God.

II. IS THE GOSPEL ONE?

Given the plurality of gospel traditions, each with its own good news, can one speak of the gospel in the singular? Is there a particular message that can be designated as *the* gospel?

From a historical point of view, one must say that, just as the term “gospel” has more than one meaning in the New Testament and other early Christian literature, as well as in the church ever since, so too the gospel traditions had a variety of meanings and messages in various communities. But what happens if one (1) pushes back to the beginning and then (2) observes lines of development from there through the remainder of the first century?

1. *The Beginning.* The very earliest traditions we have, as set literary forms, present Jesus as crucified and raised from the dead. These traditions are contained in the letters of Paul, our earliest extant writings. They include the creedal formula of 1 Cor 15:3-7, which Paul must have received from Peter and James (both are mentioned in the formula itself, 15:5,7) on his first visit to Jerusalem as an apostle in the early to mid-30s (Gal 1:18-20).¹⁷ Other passages suggested as creedal or hymnic, which are considered to be of early origin and which set forth allusions to Christ’s death and/or resurrection, are found in Rom 1:3-4; 4:25; 10:9; Gal 1:4; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; 1 Tim 3:16; and 1 Pet 3:18.

But, it can be argued, there are other formulas which lack reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection. These include all those passages which focus on Jesus as future redeemer, such as Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:12-26, the “maranatha” cry, and the future-oriented Q material. Yet it must be said that while in each case the future is the time that salvation is completed, that future is based on the cross and resurrection.¹⁸ Peter’s sermon makes explicit reference to the suffering of Christ (Acts 3:18), his crucifixion (3:13, 15), his resurrection (3:15), and his glorification (3:13). In the maranatha prayer, the words are directed to Jesus, not God, which presupposes that he is the risen Lord. Since the prayer comes from an Aramaic-speaking community of the first generation, those who uttered it could think of

¹⁵Examples can be found in Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934) 22-23, 178-217; Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 275-291; and Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: G. Duckworth, 1966) 89-91.

¹⁶This view is represented in the essays published in *The Passion in Mark*, ed. Werner H. Kelber (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

¹⁷Of course the origins of the formula are debated, but here we follow Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981-82) 1.232-234.

¹⁸What follows is worked out in more detail in Arland J. Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 15-23.

Jesus as risen Lord only in consequence of God’s raising him from the dead. Finally, the Q material has allusions to the rejection of the Son of man (Luke 9:58 par.) and his crucifixion (Luke 19:12 par.), and the Q saying that one must bear one’s own cross and follow Jesus to be a disciple (Luke 14:27 par.) presupposes the cross of Jesus. These points call into question whether there ever was a tradition or Christology of Jesus as future redeemer apart from the tradition of Jesus as crucified and raised.

But in the case of the other two types of gospel tradition—traditions of Jesus as teacher of wisdom, and Jesus as wonder worker—it is a different matter. Surely the earthly, historical Jesus

was a teacher of wisdom and a worker of miracles. Therefore these traditions existed from the beginning. In fact, their origins can be traced back to the pre-Easter community of Jesus, while the other two types of gospel tradition (Jesus as future redeemer, and Jesus as crucified and raised) presuppose the post-Easter community for their very existence. It is the post-Easter community that testifies to the passion, death, resurrection, and expected parousia of the Lord. In sum, one can say that the traditions of teacher and wonder worker are older in point of origin than these.

2. *Lines of Development.* Even though the aforementioned traditions may be the oldest, it is correct to say with Helmut Koester that the gospel tradition portraying Jesus as crucified and raised “became the central criterion of faith for the ‘canonical’ writers.”¹⁹ But how that happened is not altogether clear. Moreover, as the apocryphal gospels and early Christian writers of the first and second centuries attest, the traditions of Jesus as primarily a wonder worker or teacher of wisdom (or Revealer of *gnosis*) survived and even flourished in certain communities. If one adopts the view of Walter Bauer, it was not until about A.D. 200 that orthodoxy was established and began to make headway in the shaping of the Christian tradition in a particular direction.²⁰

There were several factors at work in making the “crucified and raised” tradition dominant for a wide circle already in the first century, including the canonical writers. First, it was this tradition which was “of first importance” for Paul (1 Cor 15:3) and therefore also of major importance to those from whom he received it back in the early to mid-30s in Jerusalem, i.e., Peter and James. The fact that this tradition was central to apostolic proclamation and teaching gave it a rather “canonical” or normative role early on and in a number of communities. Second, the account of Jesus’ death and resurrection could be presented not only in kerygmatic creedal statements but also in story form. In this regard, this type of tradition had a decisive advantage over the others. Collections of Jesus’ teachings and collections of stories of Jesus as wonder worker could exist on their own, but they were not likely to accommodate or absorb other types of traditions. But the story of Jesus crucified and raised can be preceded by accounts of his teachings and mighty works. In fact, the rehearsal of accounts of the cross and resurrection begs for more information about this figure who was crucified and raised. Therefore, to use examples already given, the Q material could be absorbed by Matthew and Luke,

¹⁹H. Koester, “Structure and Criteria,” 225.

²⁰Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). The first German edition of this book was in 1934. A major critique has been made by Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

and collections of miracle stories by Mark and John, within the framework of narratives leading to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But there is yet another reason, and that is of another kind, why the tradition of Jesus as crucified and raised would have become ascendant for the canonical writers and others. That is that this tradition carries with it the gospel (or good news) that the death/resurrection of Jesus was an eschatological event with saving effect “for us.” Of the various types of tradition, this one is the only one which finally addresses the human predicament, in which it is necessary not only to *know* something—of God, Jesus, and/or the self—but to have something *done* to resolve it. The traditions of Jesus as teacher of wisdom (or Revealer of *gnosis*) can lead one along the path

of understanding, and that can be a way of salvation, but where does the path end, and how does one know when he or she has arrived? The traditions of Jesus as wonder worker can be imitated in the ecstatic and miraculous experiences of his followers, and that can be a way of salvation, but one cannot live in constant ecstasy, and miracles do not happen every moment. But those traditions of Jesus as crucified and raised “for us” or “for our sins” call for the response of faith in and loyalty to Jesus for salvation, rather than exercises in understanding or elevated experiences of ecstasy and power, which finally require faith in one’s self or one’s own spirituality.

III. CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

We have come now to the question whether there is but one gospel, even though there are differing gospel traditions, each with its own message, and each with the potential of creating communities loyal, in one way or another, to Jesus of Nazareth. We must grant that the legacy of Jesus was a bundle of traditions which could be developed in different ways. But from the earliest Christian community of Palestine, which included disciples of the earthly Jesus, his death and resurrection was not only the most memorable event of the story of Jesus, but also the event that marked the turn of the ages, beginning a new era in which sin and death had been surpassed, and righteousness and life were gifts of God through the Spirit. This tradition became the most universal in early Christianity and historically has been the core affirmation of churches through the ages and around the world. In terms of a theological judgment, one must conclude that, whatever else is said as gospel (and of course more can be said), this tradition is the basis for anything else to be said and the core of the gospel in its purest and most articulate form. The only reason that other traditions can be spoken of as “gospel traditions” at all is because they have to do with filling out the story of Jesus as the crucified and risen Christ. The view that the gospel is one is expressed not only in the writings of Paul (Gal 1:6-9); it is expressed implicitly in the convention of the ancient church of naming each of the gospels as “the gospel according to” a particular evangelist. The gospel is one, but its witnesses many.