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THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM "GOSPEL"

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THE Greek noun *εὐαγγέλιον* (neuter singular) is rarely found in the sense of "good tidings" outside of early Christian literature. We find *εὐάγγελος* (bringing good tidings) and the verb *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* (to bring good tidings), but *εὐαγγέλιον* in classical Greek means a messenger's reward (e. g. *Odyssey* xiv 152, 166). In the plural it means a sacrifice for good tidings (Xenophon, Aristophanes, Lucian, Plutarch, and inscriptions as early as the fourth century B. C.). In the sense of "good news" the singular appears for the first time outside of Christian literature in a papyrus letter from an Egyptian official of the third century A. D. in connection with the accession of the emperor Julius Verus Maximus. The plural is found in this sense, however, in the Priene calendar inscription of about 9 B. C., which speaks of the birth of the emperor Augustus as "the beginning of good tidings" for the world. The verb *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* is found in a doubtful reading of Dion Cassius (c. 200 A. D.), also in the "*Menandrea*" and "*Daphnis and Chloe*," and in a papyrus from the time of Hadrian or Trajan.

Whatever interest such examples may have for us, however, we naturally look to the Old Testament for the roots of the Christian usage of both noun and verb. In the Septuagint we do not find the neuter singular noun at all. The plural is used in 2 Ki. 4 10 (2 Sam. in the Hebrew) of a messenger's reward (cp. the singular in the example cited above from Homer). The Hebrew תַּרְבִּיטִים seems to carry the same double meaning as the Greek *εὐαγγέλιον*. Some authorities also have

εὐαγγέλια (neuter plural) in the sense of "good tidings" in one or two places, but probably we should read rather *εὐαγγελία* (feminine singular), which is the form used in every other instance to translate **טִיבוֹת**. The use of this feminine noun is most interestingly shown in 2 Sam. 18 19-27, the passage which tells how the news of the death of Absalom was carried to David. Here in eight verses we find the word three times. The cognate verb appears four times in the same passage. Again in 2 Ki. (LXX 4 Ki.) 7 9, where the four lepers, discovering that the Syrian host has fled, begin to plunder the abandoned baggage but think better of it, they say to one another, "We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings" (*εὐαγγελίας*). From these facts it is quite evident that the Christian use of the noun *εὐαγγέλιον* is not derived from the Greek Old Testament.

The verb occurs frequently in the LXX, rendering **בשר**, with meanings varying from the news of a victory to the glad tidings of Messianic restoration and glory. The books of Samuel and Kings have it nine times, Psalms three times, Joel and Nahum once each, and Isaiah six times. It also occurs once in 1 Chronicles in a parallel to one of the passages in 1 Sam. The six occurrences in Isaiah are the most important for us; they are all in the latter portion of the book and refer to the coming deliverance of God's people, the reign of God, and the future glory of Zion (Is. 40 9.9; 52 7.7; 60 8; 61 1). It is hardly too much to say that in this book *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* (i. e. **בשר**) is a Messianic term. At any rate we know that it was so understood by the early Christians. We may be quite sure that in these four passages from the Second Isaiah is to be found the main source for the Christian use of the term "gospel."

But who originated this Christian usage? Many scholars maintain (or assume) that it was Paul, and certainly he spoke of his message very often as "good tidings." The noun *εὐαγγέλιον* is found in every one of his letters (sixty times altogether), and the verb occurs twenty times. But was Paul original in this, or were these words a part of that which also he received? According to the Synoptic gospels Jesus described his own

message as "glad tidings." May their representation be accepted as true to history? It must be confessed that the evidence dwindles somewhat upon examination. For sayings of Jesus containing the noun *εὐαγγέλιον* we are dependent entirely upon Mark. There are only five of them altogether, and in three of these Matthew omits the word "gospel." If Mark was Matthew's source for these sayings, we must suppose either that Matthew had some reason for deleting the word or that he did not find it in his copy of Mark, in which case it was presumably inserted by a later editor or interpolator. In one of the two passages where both Mark and Matthew have the word Luke omits it; the other passage has no parallel in Luke. In fact Luke (like John) does not use the noun *εὐαγγέλιον* at all in his gospel, and in Acts it occurs only twice.

With regard to the cognate verb the case is quite different. Here it is Mark who does not use the word at all. Matthew has it only in 11 15 (Lk. 7 22), which is also the only verse from Q containing either the verb or the noun. Luke, on the other hand, shows a remarkable fondness for the verb, using it ten times in his gospel and fifteen times in Acts. Four times he uses it in sayings of Jesus: one is the Q passage already referred to; another (4 18) has no parallel; the remaining two have parallels but without the word *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* (4 43, cp. Mk. 1 38; 16 16, cp. Mt. 11 12f.).

All this is rather confusing, but the fact remains that in all three gospels Jesus speaks of his message as glad tidings. In specific cases and in the form of the word employed the evangelists differ, but in representing the Master as using the term in some form himself none of them sees any incongruity. This fact would be entitled to consideration even if we could not establish the authenticity of any of the particular sayings in which the word is attributed to Jesus.

To be quite frank, most of these passages prove on examination to be at best doubtful. Beginning with Mark's five sayings, consider first 1 14f.—"Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." Mt. 4 17 reads as

follows: "From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Lk. 4 15 simply says, "And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all," with no statement of the contents of the teaching. Montefiore says, "This verse is one of the cases where Matthew seems to have preserved an earlier and more authentic form of the words of Jesus than Mark." It should be noted, however, that the difference between Matthew and Mark consists not simply in the presence or absence of the words "and believe in the gospel." If these words have been interpolated in Mark, the scribe or editor who added them did not simply insert them in Matthew's form of the saying, but recast it entirely. If, on the other hand, Matthew had before him Mk. 1 15 as it now stands, he did not simply drop these words, but substituted for the whole verse the similar statement which he had already used in 3 2 for the message of John the Baptist, and which he did not get from Mark. Perhaps he made the substitution for the express purpose of emphasizing the connection between the ministries of John and Jesus. If so, he was not following Q, which seems to make a point of contrasting John and Jesus. In any case, we have neither the insertion nor the omission of a clause to explain, but the substitution of a quite different form of the whole saying.

We must remember, furthermore, that to speak of a more or less "authentic form of the words of Jesus" here is somewhat misleading, because we are not dealing with a report of a particular utterance, but with a summary of all Jesus' preaching throughout his early Galilean ministry. The real question, therefore, is simply this: is Mark following an authentic tradition when he makes Jesus speak of his own message as glad tidings and call upon his hearers to accept it as true?

Wellhausen, followed by Menzies and Montefiore, says that Jesus could not have used the term "gospel" at the beginning of his ministry, because it would have been incomprehensible to his hearers. But we are not told that he went about saying nothing but "Believe in the gospel," using a term new-coined and undefined. Some word for good news was certainly in common use, and if Jesus announced the near approach of

the Kingdom, and announced it as good news, there would be nothing hard to understand in an exhortation to believe the glad tidings. Nor is it unlikely that he would utter such an exhortation, for we know that he equated the acceptance or rejection of himself *as a true prophet* with the acceptance or rejection of God. Certainly the conception of a proclamation or announcement of salvation was not new. In addition to the passages in the Second Isaiah already mentioned, Dalman cites the Apocalypse of Baruch as expressing this general idea and gives references to the rabbinical writings in which Elijah and even the Messiah himself are spoken of as heralds of salvation.

But Wellhausen and the others say that Jesus' message was not good news at all, but a proclamation of wrath and judgment, like the messages of Amos, John the Baptist, and Mohammed. It may be worth noting in this connection that the Aramaic words ܩܘܼܫܼܐ and ܩܘܼܫܼܐܼܢܼܐ do not necessarily refer to good news. They are used of any announcement, sometimes with qualifying adjectives, ܩܘܼܫܼܐܼܢܼܐܼܘܼܬܼܐ or $\text{ܩܘܼܫܼܐܼܢܼܐܼܘܼܬܼܐܼܘܼܬܼܐ}$ as the case may be. Dalman (*Worte Jesu*) gives instances from the rabbinical literature and also cites 1 Sam. 4 17 as showing that the same thing is true of Hebrew usage. An illustration of the latter fact is afforded by an amusing bit of translation Greek in 2 Sam. 18 27. The LXX here reads *εὐαγγελίαν ἀγαθὴν*. Surely the adjective is superfluous; we do not say "good good-news!" The Hebrew, of course, is $\text{בְּרָקָה בְּשׂוֹרָה}$, and the tautology of the Greek is simply the result of a very literal translation. בְּשׂוֹרָה is regularly rendered *εὐαγγελία*; בְּרָקָה is certainly *ἀγαθός*; if equals be added to equals the sums will be equal; therefore $\text{בְּרָקָה בְּשׂוֹרָה}$ equals *εὐαγγελίαν ἀγαθὴν*! Jesus might have used the word ܩܘܼܫܼܐܼܢܼܐ to describe his message even if it was, as Wellhausen maintains, a message of stern retribution. But we need not quibble about words. The proclamation of the coming Kingdom was not one of doom but of comfort and joy. However closely it may have been related to the Baptist's message, the two were certainly not identical.

The final count in the critics' indictment against Mark is that we have here only an instance of his "Paulism." Werner,

who follows Wellhausen to the extent of doubting Jesus' use of the word "gospel," definitely parts company with him on the question of Pauline influence in Mark (*Der Einfluß paulinischer Theologie im Markusevangelium*; Gießen, 1923). His discussion of the term *εὐαγγέλιον*, which he regards as a missionary term in common use in the apostolic church, may be commended to those who are inclined to consider it a peculiarly Pauline expression. To be sure, as Swete and Menzies remind us, the introductory expression in v. 14, "the gospel of God," is found in Paul's letters. He uses it six times (out of the sixty times he uses *εὐαγγέλιον*). What Mark means by it, however, is explicitly defined by v. 15 in terms not at all Pauline: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Gould (*I. C. C.*) renders *εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ* here as "glad tidings from God," i. e. the good news of the Kingdom given in v. 15. Harnack vigorously defends the same interpretation. The first clause in v. 15, "the time is fulfilled," does sound like Paul; still, to quote Montefiore, "Whether Jesus used these exact words or not, there is no reason to doubt that their sentiment was his."

With regard to the final clause, "and believe in the gospel," Harnack has pointed out that while "believe" and "gospel" are both favorite words with Paul, he never uses them together. Certainly the form of the expression is not Pauline. *Πιστεύειν ἐν* is not Greek at all but Semitic. Outside of this verse, so far as I have been able to discover, it occurs nowhere but in the Septuagint, and even there the dative without a preposition is the common construction after *πιστεύειν*, as in classical Greek. In the New Testament the verb is followed by the genitive, dative, or accusative without a preposition, by *ἐπί*, and most common of all by *εἰς*, which (like the *ἐν* of the passage before us) undoubtedly represents the \beth of Hebrew and Aramaic usage; but *πιστεύειν ἐν* occurs only in Mk. 1:15 (in Jn. 3:15; Ac. 13:39; and Eph. 1:13 the phrase with *ἐν* probably does not modify the verb *πιστεύειν*). The expression is quite unPauline.

I have given this passage a disproportionate amount of attention because it is the only one in which we have any clear clue, either in modifying words or in context, to the

sense in which Mark understood the word "gospel" and expected his readers to understand it. What, then, did the word mean to Mark? Montefiore, following Wellhausen, says that, while Matthew and Luke mean by it the content of Jesus' teaching, in Mark Jesus *is* the gospel and is made to use the word in this sense himself. Surely the connection between vv. 14 and 15 is sufficient to refute this; besides, as Werner observes (*op. cit.*), Mark would hardly make Jesus begin by broadcasting his Messiahship and thereafter consistently treat it as a secret not to be divulged. Montefiore admits on another page that the word may mean here the good news that the Kingdom is at hand, and Wellhausen himself, as Harnack points out, although he takes the word in v. 15 to mean the apostolic tidings of Christ, and therefore claims that it is incorrectly attributed to Jesus, says in another place that in v. 14 it means the glad tidings of the Kingdom. But if this be admitted for v. 14, there is no ground whatever for denying it in v. 15.

Mk. 8 35 and 10 29 need not detain us long. 8 35 reads as follows: "Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it." This saying occurs six times in the New Testament, but only here do we find our word "gospel." To be sure, the form varies widely in other particulars also, and since the saying must have been often on Jesus' lips, it is not impossible that he sometimes said "for my sake and the gospel's," if he used the word "gospel" at all. We can hardly use the verse, however, to prove that he did so use it. As regards 10 29, which speaks of the man who "hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or mother, or father, or children, or lands, for my sake, and for the gospel's sake," we find again that both Matthew and Luke omit *καὶ ἕνεκεν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου*, though it is true here also that we have not simply an addition or omission but three quite different forms of the saying.

Only in 13 10 and 14 9 is Mark supported by Matthew in the use of the word "gospel." Mk 13 10 reads: "And the gospel must first be preached unto all nations." The parallel to this particular paragraph is in Mt. 10 17 α , which omits this verse; but in chapt. 24, which parallels Mk. 13 as a whole,

Matthew inserts at a different point the following: "And the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come." Here we seem to have two quite different versions of the same saying, both containing "to preach the gospel" (*δεῖ κηρυχθῆναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον* in Mark; *κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας* in Matthew). Luke does not have the saying in any form. The other passage is Mk. 14 9: "And verily I say unto you, Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, that which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." The parallel (Mt. 26 13) says: "Wheresoever *this* gospel shall be preached" &c. Wellhausen says of this passage: "The gospel is here as always (except 1 14) the proclamation of the apostles about Jesus, especially about his passion, death, and resurrection." Wellhausen's "always," replies Harnack, covers only 1 15; 8 35; and 10 29, where the word really means exactly what it does in 1 14. Werner in this instance accepts Wellhausen's interpretation, remarking that the word here refers to the message to be proclaimed by the apostles after the resurrection, which was that Jesus was the Christ, and that the incident from the life of Jesus—"that which this woman hath done"—is to be told only as an appendage to this. But if Jesus foresaw his death, did he not contemplate the continued preaching of the gospel by his followers? If he did, what was to be its content? Surely not biography! It was to be the good news which he himself proclaimed—"this gospel." There is really nothing in the use of the word "gospel" in either 13 10 or 14 9 to afford just cause for rejecting the sayings. Neither can they be discarded on the ground of insufficient attestation.

Only once does Mark clearly mean more by the word *εὐαγγέλιον* than the message of Jesus. I refer to the opening verse of the book, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ," which is not a saying of Jesus. Whatever the term means as Mark uses it here himself, he nowhere represents Jesus as using it in any sense but that in which he would naturally use it, and that is all that concerns us here. Our present purpose is not to discuss exhaustively Mark's use of the word, but to

determine the historical value of his testimony to its use by Jesus. On this point our conclusion, while of a negative character, is quite definite: Mark does not give us sufficient evidence to make us sure that Jesus actually used the term, but the way in which he is represented as using it is not inherently improbable.

What the word meant to Matthew is easily determined. In 4 17, as we have seen, he omits it, but in two other places he uses practically the same words (4 23 and 9 35, the beginning and the end of his first great insertion from Q); and here he not only employs the word but also defines it as "the gospel of the kingdom." In 16 25 and 19 29 he omits it; in 24 14 he again adds the qualifying phrase, "of the kingdom"; and in 26 13 he says "this gospel." In short, as scholars have remarked, he either omits the word or qualifies it, as though fearing that his readers might misunderstand it. To him it means distinctly "the gospel of Jesus," not "the gospel *about* Jesus." Clearly it was possible in the early church to use the term without the specific connotation which Paul gave to it. As regards Jesus' use of it, however, Matthew's testimony has no independent value.

Luke, we have noted, eschews the use of the noun altogether, but uses freely the verb *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι*. His complete avoidance of the noun has occasioned more perplexity than seems necessary. The fact is that he was not so much averse to the noun as he was fond of the verb, and a glance at the passages in which he puts the word in Jesus' mouth will reveal the reason for his preference. In 4 43 Jesus says to the multitudes which have followed him into the desert place, "I must preach the good tidings of the kingdom of God to the other cities also" (*εὐαγγελισασθαί με δεῖ*). This corresponds to Mk. 1 38, which, however, is quite different in form and uses the verb *κηρύσσειν* without an object. There is no parallel in Matthew. In brief, Luke here introduces the idea of glad tidings where Mark does not have it, and defines it as "the good tidings of the kingdom." In 16 16 Jesus says, "The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the kingdom of God is preached" (*εὐαγγελίζεται*). The parallel in Matthew (11 12 f.) puts this

saying in a different context and words it differently, omitting entirely the clause in which we are here interested. Dalman says that Luke's version "raises difficulties to the Semitic translator, the passive of קָבַל meaning always 'to receive a message,' not 'to be announced'." All that can be inferred with any certainty from these two verses is that Luke liked to use this verb.

4 16 ff. and 7 22 are more important. In the former Jesus is represented as reading in the synagogue at Nazareth the opening verses of the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah, including the clause: "Because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor" (*εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς*). After the reading he declares: "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears." Authorities differ as to the historicity of this incident. Assuming, however, that the sermon in the synagogue was composed after the fashion of the ancient historians, presenting not so much what Jesus actually said as what the author thought he should have said, we need not assume that it was manufactured out of whole cloth. Matthew also has a discourse at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which certainly is not a stenographic report of any particular sermon, but with equal certainty is not an original composition by the evangelist. And if, as Montefiore says, Luke chose the passage from Isaiah to sum up the significance of Jesus' mission, what made him think of these particular verses? Without venturing to discuss the composition of Luke, we need suppose only that Luke was acquainted with a tradition, written or oral, that Jesus had used Isaiah 61 in this way somewhere, at some time. Such a tradition he certainly did have in the Q passage which he gives us in his seventh chapter, and to which we shall come in a moment. But if Jesus used this prophecy once, he must have used it often. What we have here, therefore, is probably selection and adaptation rather than creation *ex nihilo*.

However that may be, 7 22 (Mt. 11 5) may be confidently accepted as an authentic saying of Jesus. In reply to the question from John the Baptist, "Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?", Jesus sends the reply: "Go and tell John the things which ye have seen and heard; the blind

receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good tidings preached to them." This clear reference to the same passage which Luke has represented Jesus as using in the synagogue at Nazareth indicates that Jesus himself regarded his mission as fulfilling that prophecy. Here it can hardly be said that Luke has selected the quotation. Prof. E. F. Scott pronounces this incident "one of the most certainly historical, as it is one of the most illuminating incidents in the Gospel narrative"; and Cheyne says in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*: "the authenticity of this saying of Jesus is proved by Luke's failure to comprehend it." Luke was not the last who failed to comprehend it, for our modern authorities differ so widely in its interpretation that some of them must be woefully mistaken; but all of them seem to agree that Jesus actually said on this occasion "the poor have good tidings preached to them," and said it with intentional reference to Isaiah 61.

Harnack says that this sole occurrence of the verb in Q proves very little, because the word has here no technical significance. May we not rather say that for this very reason it is of supreme importance for our present purpose? It shows exactly how the Christian use of the term arose. For that is not first which is technical, but that which is natural; then that which is technical. Jesus saw in the prophecies of the book of Isaiah a description of his own mission, and the designation of his own message as glad tidings was suggested to him by the use of the expression in that book. What was at first hardly more than a literary allusion came easily and naturally, because it was so obviously fitting, to be a quasi-technical term, on his own lips and in the speech of his followers, for the news which he proclaimed.

If we are right in finding the origin of the term "gospel" in Jesus' application of the prophecies of the Second Isaiah to his own mission, perhaps we have stumbled upon the reason for Luke's consistent use of the verb *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* rather than the noun *εὐαγγέλιον*. As 4 18 and 7 22 show, he was aware of the connection between Jesus' use of the term and its use in the book of Isaiah, and it is the verb that we find

in Isaiah. Why Mark was so fond of the noun I cannot say. Perhaps the influence of Paul had something to do with it, but verb and noun alike were probably in common use among Palestinian Christians. In Hebrew and Aramaic, indeed, the noun is quite likely to be found along with the verb, and it is not at all improbable that Jesus himself, having adopted the verb of the Second Isaiah, employed also the noun which went with it. As for the absence of both noun and verb in John, what use would John have for the word "gospel"? Why should we expect to find it in a book which does not present Jesus as a proclaimer of good tidings? The Kingdom itself is hardly more than mentioned; it does not appear at all in the sense in which its coming is announced in the Synoptic account.

One more question remains to be considered. If we suppose that Jesus used the term himself in the sense of the message of the coming Kingdom, how shall we explain the change in meaning which it has undergone when we meet it in later apostolic writings? How did it come to mean the story of Calvary and the resurrection, the divine gift of redemption through union with Christ and life in the Spirit? Exactly, I would answer, as it has kept on changing and developing in meaning ever since, and now means one thing to some of us and another to others. The "gospel" is the message of Christianity; it means whatever the person who uses it understands the message of Christianity to be. But if Jesus employed it in one sense when he went about among the villages of Galilee, and Paul used it in another sense when he wrote to the churches of Greece and Asia Minor, the change did not all take place after the crucifixion. We can hardly doubt that the Master's conception of his own mission underwent some development during the course of his ministry. Let me quote a few sentences from Prof. B. W. Bacon's book on "*Jesus and Paul*": "From the time when he had taken up the message of the Baptist his one effort had been to prepare for the reign of God by bringing Israel through repentance and faith into 'reconciliation' with the Father in Heaven. As prophet and teacher in Galilee he had failed. Out of defeat he snatched victory. He made the cause national by his appeal as Son of

David and Son of Man in Jerusalem. Again he had failed. There was but one thing more he could do for the 'reconciliation'. He could dedicate his body and blood as an atonement offering for the forgiveness of sin, that God might be reconciled to His people." "Thus the 'glad tidings of reconciliation' was no Pauline novelty. It was the general and common gospel." Now if the thought and the teaching of Jesus developed in some such way as this, then the connotation of the term by which he designated his message grew accordingly and the word which in Galilee meant simply that the Kingdom of God was near had acquired already at the time of the Last Supper essentially the meaning which made it to Paul and makes it to us "the power of God unto salvation."