

GOSPEL AND THEOLOGY IN GALATIANS

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1. Introduction

The word ‘gospel’ has had a chequered career in the course of Christian history. During the first century, as we shall see, it could refer both to a message proclaimed by word of mouth and to a book about Jesus of Nazareth. In more recent times it has been used to denote a particular sort of religious meeting (a ‘gospel rally’) and as a metaphor for utterly reliable information (‘gospel truth’). Many Christians today, when reading the New Testament, never question what the word means, but assume that, since they know from their own context what ‘the gospel’ is. Paul and the others must have meant exactly the same thing.

The trouble is, of course, that though there are obviously difficult concepts in the New Testament, which send any intelligent reader off to the commentaries and dictionaries, there are others which are in fact equally difficult but which are not recognized as such. ‘We turn to the helps only when the hard passages are manifestly hard. But there are treacherous passages which will not send us to the notes. They look easy and aren’t.’¹ Part of the purpose of scholarship, within both the academy and the church, is to expose the frailty of regular assumptions, to ask the unasked questions and to sketch out alternative possibilities. Whether or not he agrees with the proposals I shall advance, I know that Richard Longenecker shares this vision of the purpose of scholarship. Indeed, it is partly because he and others have carved out ways of pursuing this vision that I, in company with a good many today, now have the courage to do so as well. I am therefore confident that he will be as happy to entertain, and perhaps to controvert, my arguments as he has been to engage in debate on many previous occasions, which, whether formal or informal, have always been warm and cheerful.

In order to arrive at the meaning of ‘gospel’ within the confines of the letter to the Galatians, we must go back to the old question: where did the idea come from and what echoes did the word in consequence carry both for Paul and for his readers? I shall suggest that the two normal answers to these questions have been wrongly played off against one another, and that when we examine them both more closely we will discover convergences which have not hitherto been explored. This will enable us to survey the occurrences of ‘gospel’ within Galatians, with our ears retuned to the nuances which may after all have been present for both Paul and his hearers. We shall thus discover an emphasis within the letter which is not normally given the weight which, in my judgment, it deserves.

2. *Isaianic Message or Imperial Proclamation?*

The two backgrounds regularly proposed for Paul's use of εὐλαγγέλιον and εὐαγγελίζομαι are, predictably, the Hebrew scriptures on the one hand and pagan usage on the other. The line between the two tends to follow the old divide between those who suppose Paul to be basically a Jewish thinker and those who see him as having borrowed his fundamental ideas from Hellenism.² The evidence has been rehearsed often enough,³ though it is my impression that the right lessons have not always been learned from it. We must set out the main features briefly.

The LXX occurrences of the relevant root include two well-known verses from Isaiah:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings (ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος Σιων);
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings (ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος Ιερουσαλημ);
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!' (40.9)

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace (ὡς πόδες εὐαγγελιζομένου ἀκοὴν εἰρήνης),
who brings good news (ὡς εὐαγγελιζόμενος ἀγαθά),
who announces salvation.
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'. (52.7)

These passages, in company with others,⁴ are among the climactic statements of the great double theme of the whole section (Isaiah 40-55): YHWH's return to Zion and enthronement, and the return of Israel herself from her exile in Babylon. They are not simply miscellaneous 'good news', a generalized message of comfort for the downcast; they are very specific to the plight of Israel in exile. That they were read as such in the second-temple period is clear from two post-biblical passages which echo or evoke them. The first is *Psalms of Solomon* 11:

Sound in Zion the signal trumpet of the sanctuary;
announce in Jerusalem the voice of one bringing good news,
for God has been merciful to Israel in watching over them.
Stand on a high place, Jerusalem, and look at your children,
from the east and the west assembled together by the Lord.
From the north they come in the joy of their God;
from far distant islands God has assembled them.
He flattened high mountains into level ground for them;
the hills fled at their coming.
The forests shaded them as they passed by;
God made every fragrant tree to grow for them.

So that Israel might proceed under the supervision of the glory of their God.
Jerusalem, put on the clothes of your glory,
prepare the robe of your holiness,
for God has spoken well of Israel forevermore.
May the Lord do what he has spoken about Israel and Jerusalem;
may the Lord lift up Israel in the name of his glory.
May the mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forevermore.⁵

This psalm is regularly, and rightly, referred to as evidence that the theme of the Isaianic herald was alive and well in the first century. Its significance for our purposes, however, goes further. The psalm speaks of the *return of Israel from exile*. It is generally agreed that it dates from a time several centuries after what is normally thought of as the ‘return’; and yet it still appeals to YHWH to fulfil at last his ancient promises of ‘return’—specifically, the promises of Isaiah 40. It is evident that for this writer, as for many others in second-temple Judaism, the ‘return from exile’, predicted by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, had not yet taken place.⁶

The second and third passages from our period which echo the Isaianic tradition of ‘good news’ are from Qumran:

[that he might be], according to Thy truth,
a messenger [in the season] of Thy goodness;
that to the humble he might bring
glad tidings of Thy great mercy,
[proclaiming salvation]
from out of the fountain [of holiness
to the contrite] of spirit,
and everlasting joy to those who mourn.⁷

This is the day of [Peace/Salvation] concerning which [God] spoke [through Isa]iah the prophet, who said, [*How*] *beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who proclaims peace, who brings good news, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion: Your ELOHIM [reigns]*. Its interpretation; *the mountains* are the prophets. . . and the messenger is the Anointed one of the spirit, concerning whom Dan[iel] said, [*Until an anointed one, a prince. . .*] [And he who brings] *good [news], who proclaims [salvation]: it is concerning him that it is written. . . [To comfort all who mourn, to grant to those who mourn in Zion]. To comfort [those who mourn: its interpretation], to make them understand all the ages of t[ime]. . . in truth. . . will turn away from Satan. . . by the judgment[s] of God, as it is written concerning him, [who says to Zion]; your ELOHIM reigns. Zion is. . . those who uphold the Covenant, who turn from walking [in] the way of the people. And your ELOHIM is [Melchizedek, who will save them from] the hand of Satan.*⁸

Here again it is clear that, within the second-temple period, some Jews at least were still looking earnestly for a fulfilment of the Isaianic promises. The ‘good news’ or ‘glad tidings’ would be the message that the long-awaited release from captivity was at hand. And, as the last passage clearly shows, within this expectation Isaiah 40 and 61 could be combined with each other, and with a passage from Daniel (9.25) interpreted Messianically.

For some, this evidence is quite sufficient to win the verdict: this is the background against which the New Testament ‘gospel’ is to be understood. Others, however, still insist upon the non-Jewish background as the vital one. In the Greek world, ‘εὐαγγέλιον is a technical term for “news of victory”’.⁹ More specifically, it refers to the announcement of the birth or accession of an emperor. Not least at the time of Augustus, who became the first Roman emperor following a long period of civil war, the coming of a new ruler meant the promise of peace, a new start for the world:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere. . . ; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him. . .¹⁰

Which of these backgrounds, then, is the appropriate one against which to read the New Testament evidence? Is ‘the gospel’, for Paul, an Isaianic message or an Imperial proclamation? I suggest that the anti-thesis between the two is a false one, based on the spurious either-or that has misleadingly divided New Testament studies for many years.¹¹

The trouble with history-of-religions study is that it regularly fails to see that what matters is not so much where an idea has *come from* as where it is *going to*. The problem is not merely that we now know that ‘Jew’ and ‘Greek’ in the first century did not live in watertight worlds—though this itself ought to make us wary of a strict either-or. It is, rather, that the Isaianic message always was about the enthronement of YHWH and the dethronement of pagan gods; about the victory of Israel and the fall of Babylon; about the arrival of the Servant King and the consequent coming of peace and justice. The scriptural message therefore pushes itself of its own accord into the world where pagan gods and rulers stake their claims and celebrate their enthronements.

A further aspect of the problem has lain in the insistence (not least in influential articles such as that of Friedrich in *TDNT*) upon a strict division between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ meanings of the root words.¹² The Isaianic meaning is supposed to be ‘religious’, and the imperial one ‘secular’. But matters were not so clear-cut in the first century. The exchange between Bultmann and Schneemelcher as to whether εὐαγγέλιον was a sacral term in the Imperial cult likewise misses the point:¹³ once the emperor was

venerated as a god (a development already well advanced, at least in the East, by Paul's day), any proclamation of his rule had clear 'religious' connotations, even if a particular word within that proclamation did not happen to feature in the more narrowly 'cultic' setting. And it was precisely against such 'religious' connotations—the boasting of pagan emperors from Babylon and Egypt, through the megalomania of Antiochus Epiphanes, and on to Imperial Rome—that the Jews of Paul's day had set their face. When their god,¹⁴ YHWH, acted within history to deliver his people, the spurious gods of the heathen would be defeated. If and when YHWH set up his own king as the true ruler, his true earthly representative, all other kingdoms would be confronted with their rightful overlord.

Once we grasp the historical setting of Paul's gospel, therefore, we discover something for which the abstract categories of traditional history-of-religions research had not prepared us. *The more Jewish we make Paul's 'gospel', the more it confronts directly the pretensions of the Imperial cult, and indeed all other paganisms whether 'religious' or 'secular'.* It is because of Jewish monotheism that there can be 'no king but god'.¹⁵ In the history of ideas, and in lexicography, derivation is important; but so should be confrontation. The all-embracing royal and religious claims of Caesar are directly challenged by the equally all-embracing claim of Israel's god. To announce that YHWH is king is to announce that Caesar is not. Thus even the apparently 'secular' uses of εὐαγγελίζειν in the LXX are brought into the immediately relevant background: again and again, the "news" that is brought has to do with the royal house, whether for good or for ill.¹⁶ The death of one king means the accession of another; the acclamation of a would-be king spells a dire threat for the present one.

This, however, forces us back to the question: to what extent did Paul participate in this confrontation? What contribution, in particular, does the letter to the Galatians have to make to this exegetical, historical, and above all profoundly theological question?

3. *God, Messiah and Gospel in Galatians*

Two elements in Pauline theology which are normally underplayed, even supposing they are noticed at all, come into crucial relevance here. First, Paul's gospel is a message about the true god as opposed to the false gods. Second, Paul's gospel is a message about the Messiah, the true king of Israel, and hence of the world. In both cases, this 'gospel' only makes sense against the Jewish background sketched briefly above; in both cases, the 'gospel' confronts directly the claims of other gods and lords.

These claims are of course controversial. Remarkably enough, the meaning of 'god' in Paul's theology has regularly been passed over. Equally remarkably, in my view, the Messiahship of Jesus has often been ignored, it being assumed that Paul left such categories behind in announcing his message to the non-Jewish world who would not be interested in Jewish concepts. Partly as a result of these two omissions, the confrontation between the gospel Paul preached and the 'powers'—the other gods and lords of the pagan world—has also regularly been marginalized. I have raised the first and third of these questions elsewhere, though I have not explored them fully in relation

to Paul himself.¹⁷ In regard to the second, I have argued elsewhere that Paul did indeed regard Jesus as Messiah, and that this remained a vital and central category for him.¹⁸ In what now follows I shall attempt to explain, within the brief compass of this essay, how the ‘gospel’ functions in Galatians as an announcement about the true God and about the Messiah, and hence as a challenge to the ‘powers’ of the world. The Pauline εὐαγγέλιον, I suggest, is based firmly in Judaism; at the same time, and indeed precisely for this reason, it functions as the royal announcement which challenges the pagan principalities and powers. Galatians is, as it happens, an excellent example of this whole train of thought.

We may begin by considering Gal. 4.1-11. The word εὐαγγέλιον and its cognates are absent from the passage, but it will not be doubted that 4.1-7 states in one particular form the content of ‘the gospel’ which Paul preached; or that 4.8-11, in referring to the time when the Galatians did not ‘know God’, and then to their present state in which they do ‘know God’, describes substantially the context and effect of that gospel’s preaching. The passage stands, in fact, at a fairly climactic moment in the whole letter, drawing together the argument of the preceding chapter (this is the force of λέγω δέ in 4.1), and laying the foundations for what is to come; it may thus fairly be seen as a summary of ‘the gospel’ which is so clearly stated as a main theme in the opening section of the letter (1.6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16). In particular, the note in 4.4 that God sent forth his son ‘when the time had fully come’ corresponds quite closely to the link in Mark 1.15 between the ‘fulfilment of the time’ and the preaching of the gospel. We shall return to this point later on.

In terms of Gal. 4.1-7, the message of the Pauline gospel is this: the true god has sent his son, in fulfilment of the prophecies of scripture, to redeem his people from their bondage to false gods (described here as the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, 4.3, 9); he now sends his own spirit to make his people truly what they were before only in theory and hope—his own children, heirs of his world. Equipped with this gospel, the Galatian Christians now *know the true god*; or rather, as Paul quickly correct himself, they are known by him (4.9).¹⁹ That is, they have received the great blessing promised by Isaiah throughout chs. 40-55: the one true god has revealed himself in saving them, routing the idols of the nations in doing so. The message of good news decisively confronts the power of the spurious gods.

This raises the old question, whether the regular Pauline phrase ‘the gospel of God’, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ, should be read as ‘the gospel *concerning* God’ or as ‘the gospel *from* God’.²⁰ While I agree with Stuhlmacher and Strecker that it is difficult to divide them up completely, the present passage suggests that the *content* of the gospel is not merely ‘Christ’ but also, and perhaps primarily, God himself.²¹ The Pharisee who, by his own obliquely autobiographical admission in Rom. 10.2, had been zealous for the one true god, looking for his victory over paganism on behalf of his ethnic people Israel, had become convinced that the victory had after all been won in Christ, and that the one true god was thereby revealed. The Shammaite who had believed that there should be ‘no king but god’ did not cease to believe it upon becoming a Christian. He now at last understood who that god really was. The god now revealed in the sending of the son and

the spirit (4.1-7) is the god beside whom the defeated principalities and powers pale into insignificance (4.8-11). That is why, in 1.6, Paul can speak of the Galatians turning away from ‘the one who called you in the grace of Christ’ to ‘another gospel’. The ‘gospel’ is for Paul first of all a message about the true god as opposed to the false gods.

But the gospel is also, of course, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ—a phrase which, less controversially, focuses attention on the content of the gospel without denying a reference to its origin (as in Gal. 1.12).²² The gospel concerns the Christ, the Messiah; it is through him that the true god has made himself known. Paul’s preaching of the gospel involved him in portraying Jesus Christ publicly as the crucified one (3.1).

Here I part company completely with the majority of the tradition, and explicitly with Stuhlmacher’s recent treatment. In his analysis of ‘the content of the Pauline gospel’, Stuhlmacher states that ‘in his Damascus vision Paul saw Christ exalted to the right hand of God. . .and installed as Son of God in the position of “Lord”’.²³ This simply cannot be right as it stands. Until his Damascus experience, Paul did not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the ‘Christ’. What then? Are we to say that ‘in his Damascus experience Paul saw *Jesus* exalted. . .as Lord’? Are we, in other words, to go from the human Jesus to the exalted Lord, bypassing the step of Messiahship altogether? This would, I believe, be a travesty of Paul’s experience and Pauline theology. ‘Christ’ is not a cipher for Paul, a kind of specialized surname for Jesus of Nazareth. It refers, as I have argued elsewhere, to Jesus as the Messiah, the one who sums up Israel in himself. It is because the crucified Jesus is the Messiah that all the trouble in Galatia occurs, trouble which Paul insists on speaking of in terms of ‘the gospel’. What happened on the road to Damascus, I suggest, was something like this: Paul realized that the crucified Jesus was indeed risen from the dead; that in him the hope of Israel had thus been fulfilled; that he was therefore that which his supporters had claimed, namely Israel’s Messiah; that this Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah of Israel was now enthroned as Lord of all, Jew and Gentile alike; that these events were indeed the inauguration of the ‘age to come’, though not in the form for which he, as a zealous Pharisee, had been longing; and had, as a result of this whole complex of thought (complex for us, reconstructing it; plain sailing for a first-century Pharisee), the pagan idolatry of the world had been decisively defeated, and those who adhered to it—that is, the Gentiles—were to be summoned to give allegiance to this strange and subversive Jewish Messiah. Hence, ‘the gospel of Christ’.

My proposal at this point, then, is that, for Paul writing Galatians, ‘the gospel’ or ‘the gospel of Christ’ refers to this complex of belief and announcement. ‘The gospel’ is not, for Paul, a message about ‘how one gets saved’, in an individual and ahistorical sense. It is the announcement

1. that the God of Israel is the one true God, and that the pagan deities are mere idols;
2. that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen one, is not merely ‘Lord’ in some cosmic sense, but is actually King—King of Israel, and hence (on the

Davidic model of passages such as Psalm 89) the King before whom all the kings of the earth shall bow;

3. that Israel's destiny has been fulfilled, her exile finished, her salvation won, but in a manner which undermines the Jewish ethnic and nationalistic hope that Paul had formerly espoused;

and

4. that the rule of the pagan idols, which have kept the pagan nations in their iron grip has been broken, and that those who follow and serve them are now summoned to share in the blessings of Israel's 'age to come'.

Each aspect of this fourfold announcement is, I believe, vital if we are to understand what Paul means by 'gospel' at all, and particularly in Galatians. It is because Paul sees his Galatian opponents failing to grasp this sequence of thought that he accuses them of purveying 'another gospel'.

This proposal, I suggest, has three merits in particular.

1. It holds together the two backgrounds sketched above as part of the meaning of 'gospel'. It is *because* the Isaianic prophecy has come true that Jesus is now proclaimed as the new King, the King of kings. The Jewish background and the pagan context are not antithetical. One is not 'religious' and the other 'secular'. Both have to do with ultimate worldview issues; in the Jewish case the aspects which Enlightenment thought would consider more obviously 'religious' are firmly anchored to the national hope for restoration, and in the pagan case the aspects which Enlightenment thought would consider more obviously 'secular'—the enthronement of a monarch—are of course inextricably bound up with pagan views of national deities, and already by Paul's time with pagan views of the divine emperor. The Isaianic hope was always conceived as a challenge to paganism at every level; the pagan context always envisaged the new monarch as a gift from, and perhaps in expression of, the divine. Paul's gospel, in declaring that Israel's hope is fulfilled in her Messiah, *ipso facto* declares also that the pagan world is confronted with a new ruler.

2. This proposal explains why it is that Paul sees the 'gospel' as a challenge to the principalities and powers. The στοιχεῖα of 4.3, 9 are best understood as the tutelary deities that hold the nations in captivity. The irony of Paul's exposition at that point of the letter is of course that Israel has used the (god-given) Torah in the same way, locking herself up hereby inside her own nationalism, not realizing that the design of her god was that the covenant should be the means of his saving the world, and that she too needed liberating from the quasi-paganism involved in the idolization of nation, soil and blood. That is why, in 4.8-11, the ex-pagan Galatian Christians are warned that if they become circumcised, that is, become ethnically Jewish, they will in effect be reverting to paganism. They will be embracing again a religion of the στοιχεῖα. The gospel stands

over against any such attempt. Precisely because Israel's hope has been fulfilled, and the Isaianic promises accomplished, *in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth*, Israel's specifically ethnic aspirations are set aside, all paganisms are confronted with the message of the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all pagans, as well as all Jews, are invited to discover true liberty through allegiance to the new king, the Messiah.

3. This proposal explains why the references to 'the gospel' in Galatians are so apparently flexible, covering what, on any other scheme, are quite a wide range of issues. A brief survey of the various occurrences of the εὐαγγέλιον root in Galatians should make this clear.

As we saw, in 1.6 the gospel is a message about the true god. In 1.7 it is the announcement of the Messiah. In 1.11-12 it is that which Paul received on the way to Damascus. In 1.16 it is the announcement of the son of the true god to the Gentiles. In 1.23 (where the verb occurs, but clearly within the same broad semantic field) it is the message of 'faith' (as also in 3.23-25, where 'faith' is more or less personified); here my own guess is that this is a shorthand for 'faith-in-the-god-who-raised-Jesus'.

In 2.1-5, the mention of Titus' circumcision (or not), and the opposition from 'false brethren' in Jerusalem (2.2-4), is sandwiched between the statements that Paul laid 'the gospel which [he] preached among the nations' before the 'pillar' apostles (2.2a), and that, by his opposition to the 'false brethren', what he calls 'the truth of the gospel' might be preserved for his Gentile converts (2.5). This juxtaposition is best explained on the assumption that the same 'gospel' itself decisively confronted and overthrew the pagan powers that had dominated the Galatians before, whereas, if the 'false brethren', or for that matter the Galatian 'agitators', had had their way, the gospel would have become simply an inner-Jewish message, inviting people to get circumcised and to join present Judaism. And Judaism in Paul's day, as all Jews knew, *had not in fact been redeemed within its own terms of expectation*. The only redemption, the only fulfilment of the Isaianic return-from-exile prophecy, which had occurred, was the resurrection of the crucified Jesus; any attempt to purvey a 'gospel' which ignored the implications of this central event was a non-gospel (1.6-9), for the very good reason that it had no good news to offer.²⁴ It could only ever be a Jewish proselyte movement; it could not declare that the great promised day had arrived.

In 2.7 the 'gospel of the uncircumcision' and that of the circumcision are clearly not two different messages altogether. If I send a circular letter to several different friends, it makes perfectly good sense to speak of my sending 'the letter to Brian and Sylvia' by air mail and 'the letter to Andrew and Lis' by surface; it need not at all imply that the letters themselves are different. In Paul's case, 2.2 indicates clearly enough that the letters, the 'gospels', were not different; in any case, he has already declared in 1.6-9 that there cannot be two gospels. The division is one of geography, not content: Paul goes to the Gentile world (though his method, according to Rom. 1.16, remains 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek'²⁵); Peter, to the Jewish world.

The issue of ‘the truth of the gospel’ is again at stake in the discussion of 2.11-14 (the phrase occurs in 2.14). Here the ‘truth’ in question is not simply a set of correct propositions, but an entire worldview, seen graphically in its characteristic praxis. Paul’s reconstrual of the Jewish worldview necessarily involved one aspect of praxis which broke the bounds of previous Jewish ways: those who hailed the Messiah Jesus as their Lord formed a single family, whose common table functioned as a vital symbol. Remove that symbol, cease that praxis, and the entire worldview is under threat. Unless they are in place, the ‘gospel’ which he has announced is a lie. The powers have not been defeated; there is no new king, no lord of Jew and Gentile alike, no new family from Jew and Greek alike.

This is why Paul can speak of scripture ‘preaching the gospel in advance’ to Abraham (3.8). ‘The gospel’ which is thus ‘preached’ is, once more, not the summons to a new dimension of religious experience (that might make Christianity into simply another mystery religion); not the invitation to a private experience of salvation, either in the present or the future (that might simply create a new sense of shut-in privilege in place of that which Paul had renounced); but the message that *all the nations would be blessed in Abraham* (3.8b). The gospel narrative, the story of Jesus the Messiah, is the story of how that promise has come true. It tells of how Israel’s own exile at the hands of the pagans, which might have seemed to block the promises for good, has been dealt with in the execution of the Messiah (3.10-14).²⁶ It tells of how the single ‘seed’, the one family promised to Abraham, has been created, despite the division between Jew and Gentile which the Torah, if absolutized, would have maintained (3.15-22, 28-29).²⁷ In other words of how a new family has come into being, a family composed of Jews and Gentiles alongside one another.

This family, uniquely among families (in a world where family and racial loyalty were all-important in a way of which the post-Enlightenment West knows little), bore only one distinguishing mark, and that was πίστις, faith. ‘Justification by faith’ was not, for Paul, a doctrine about how people could ‘find a gracious god’ without moralism. Nor does it speak merely, as the Romantic movement has encouraged some Protestants to speak, of the difference between outward and inward religion (a difference well enough known to first century Jews in any case). Nor is ‘justification by faith’ to be equated with ‘the gospel’ itself; it is, rather, its direct corollary. ‘The gospel’ is the announcement of the kingship of Jesus; ‘justification by faith’ reminds those who, abandoning their varied idolatries, have given their allegiance to Jesus that this very allegiance is the only distinguishing mark by which the renewed and united family of Abraham is to be known. All other possible distinguishing marks undermine the gospel itself, implying that the crucified and risen Jesus is not after all the one true king. Allegiance and loyalty to Jesus, ‘faith’ in this full and rich sense, is not the gospel itself; it is what the gospel is designed to produce and by the power of the spirit, does produce.

For this is where Galatians has its equivalent of the statement in Romans that the gospel is ‘the power of God for salvation to all who believe’ (Rom. 1.16). When the message of King Jesus was announced it brought forth faith, and the only explanation of this is that the spirit works as and when the message is proclaimed. That, at least, is how

I believe Gal. 3.2-5 should be read, not least in light of 1 Thess. 1.4-10 and 2.13. The royal proclamation is not simply the conveying of true information about the kingship of Jesus; it is the putting into effect of that kingship, the decisive and authoritative summoning to allegiance. That is why it challenges the powers. That is why to retain, or to embrace, symbols and praxis which speak of other loyalties and other allegiances is to imply that other powers are still being invoked. And that is to deny, 'the truth of the gospel'.

4. *Concluding Reflections*

I have proposed, all too briefly, a way of reading 'gospel' in Galatians which, it seems to me, does more justice both to the history-of-religions background and to the exegetical content of the term than the various alternative views currently available. This generates, for me at least, several concluding reflections, of which I confine myself to three.

First, I suspect that this conception of Paul's 'gospel', which is of course considerably more wholistic than some others, goes a lot further than competing analyses in explaining why this gospel provoked opposition, including violent opposition. Offering people a new religious mode of being, in a private sense, is not particularly threatening. It becomes so, and provokes violence, the minute it challenges the life and worldview of a community; this is so just as much in the modern 'Christian' western world as in first-century Asia Minor. The message of the cross was, as Paul ruefully noted, a scandal to Jews (1 Cor. 1.23; Gal. 5.11); the entire gospel was also a scandal to Gentiles, inviting them to abandon their long-held, and sometimes politically useful, allegiances and to give allegiance only to the still-very-Jewish, and therefore scandalous, Jesus. The idea that the early preaching of the gospel carried no particular political implications only shows, I think, how far we have gone in projecting the privatized nature of western Christianity back onto Paul.²⁸

Secondly, I suggest that if we read Galatians in this way we discover a new coherence in the letter, and by implication in Paul's theology as a whole. There is a current fashion in Pauline studies for playing off 'covenantal' categories against 'apocalyptic' ones. Since I have myself stressed the importance of 'covenant' in Paul, let it be said here, and backed up by the argument of this essay, that I believe in the essentially apocalyptic nature of Paul's covenantal theology, and vice versa. 'Apocalyptic', rightly understood, is not about the destruction of everything that happened before Jesus and the ushering in of a totally new world. It is about the new creation breaking into the old.²⁹ Paul speaks at the start of Galatians about the true god 'rescuing us from the present evil age' (1.4), and at the close of the letter about the 'new creation' which was the only thing that mattered, over against the questions of circumcision and uncircumcision (6.15). This cosmic and apocalyptic vision, however, is in no way antithetical to covenant theology rightly understood, or at least Paulinely understood. For Paul as for the Isaiah passages he knew so well, it is when the true god acts to fulfil his covenant to Israel that the new world order will be ushered in. As in the sequence of thought in 2 Corinthians chs. 3, 4 and 5, it is the new covenant (ch. 3) that, proclaimed by the suffering apostle (ch 4) brings about the new creation (ch. 5). The

gospel of the true God, of the Messiah Jesus, announces this total message. The real 'apocalypse' has taken place in the resurrection of the Messiah Jesus (compare Gal 1 13); but that event can only be understood, and its significance elaborated, through an exploration of the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3-4).³⁰ What has been left behind in the revelation of the new world through the gospel is not covenant theology itself, but the restriction of covenant membership to 'those of the Torah'.

Thirdly, the significance I have posited for 'gospel' in Galatians may have something to say about the relationship between 'gospel' as Paul's own term for the message he announced and 'gospel' as an early-church term, so far as we can tell in the period later than Paul, for books like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The detailed history of this transition is a subject for another time.³¹ Suffice it to say here that once we reinstate the Pauline emphasis, there is far less of a strange break between Paul's 'gospel' and the written 'gospels' than there is if we suppose the former to be the announcement of a new, non-historical, way of being religious, or of finding a non-historical salvation, and the latter to represent a failure of nerve, an attempt to ground the supposedly ahistorical gospel in history after all. If we take Paul's 'gospel' to denote the announcement that the true god has acted in fulfilment of his promises, sending the Messiah to die and be raised, and so ushering in the new world order in which the false gods are confronted and confounded and their adherents summoned to a new and liberating allegiance, then we may realise that that description would do fairly well for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as well, for all their obvious differences from one another and from Paul.³² Mark's Jesus ('the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel')³³ is quite at home with Paul ('when the time had fully come, God sent forth his son...').³⁴

Whether this would do so well for the *Gospel of Thomas* is a different matter altogether. But then, Paul has always been a problem for those in the ancient and modern worlds who have sought to advance seriously gnosticizing interpretations of the message of Jesus. Despite the claims sometimes advanced to the contrary, to enter the enclosed little world of *Thomas* is not to confront the real issues of the real world, or the real questions of theology or even history, but to avoid them. Paul's gospel, like Isaiah's, confronts the tyrants and summons their victims to freedom.³⁵ If history, theology and exegesis can join hands at this point, perhaps together they might persuade the contemporary church to rediscover aspects of Paul's message to the world which we, like his opponents, have often enough found it convenient to ignore.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. vii.

² In favour of the OT background: see esp. P. Stuhlmacher, 'The Pauline Gospel', in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991 [1983]), pp. 149-72 for citations of other literature and discussion of the debate; U. Wilckens, *Die Briefe an die Römer: Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Cologne/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benzinger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), VI, p. 74-75. In favour of pagan usage: above all G. Strecker, 'Das Evangelium Jesu Christi', in G. Strecker (ed.), *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie: Festschrift für H. Conzelmann* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 503-48; also Stuhlmacher, 'The Pauline Gospel', pp. 151-52; G. Friedrich, 'εὐαγγέλιον', *TDNT*,

II, pp. 721-36, pp. 724-25; and W. Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha. I. Gospels and Related Writings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 71-75. It is remarkable that there is no article on 'Gospel' in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. On the history-of-religions debate which underlies all this see S.C. Neill and N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988 (19641)), pp. 367-78.

³ See above all P. Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium. I. Vorgeschichte* (FRLANT 95; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 1968).

⁴ 60.6; 61.1; the Hebrew root בטר, which underlies these, occurs in a similar passage in 41.27.

⁵ Cited according to J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. II. Expansions of the 'Old Testament' and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature. Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judaeo-Hellenistic Works* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday. 1985), pp. 661-62. The *Psalms of Solomon* are usually dated to the mid-first century BCE.

⁶ Cf. N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 268-70. See also Ezra 9.8-9. Josephus, in *Ant.* 11.64-65, speaks of Zerubbabel announcing (εὐηγγελίσσατο) to the Jews in exile the good news that Darius was allowing them to return from exile; one textual variant gives this as 'he gave them the good news about [rather than 'from'] the king'.

⁷ 1QH 18.14-15, cited according to G. Vermes. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth. 3rd edn, 1987 [1962]), p. 200.

⁸ 11QMelch., cited from Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 301,

⁹ Friedrich, 'εὐαγγέλιον', *TDNT*, II, p. 722. For the whole field of pagan usage cf. esp. Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium*, pp. 180-206.

¹⁰ Inscription dated to 9 BCE: quoted from U. Becker, 'Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist', *NIDNTT*, II, p. 108.

¹¹ One writer who has attempted to combine the two backgrounds is C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), I, p. 55; see below.

¹² Friedrich, 'εὐαγγέλιον', p. 708, claims to detect a transition from the one to the other, and declares that 'in the OT בשרה is used only in a secular sense. There is no religious use of the subst. whatever' (p. 721). To project the modern distinction between religious and secular onto material from ancient Israel seems to me quite anachronistic. Another problem that has bedevilled the discussion, as with so many others, is an over-use of precise lexicography, as though the connection between two areas of discourse lay in verbal identity rather than content; a good example is Wilckens' dismissal of the analogy with the emperor-cult on the grounds that there the plural εὐαγγέλια, not the 'technical' singular, is found (*Die Brief an die Romer*, p. 75).

¹³ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. K. Grobel; London: SCM Press; New York: Scribner's. 1951-55), I, p. 87; Schneemelcher and Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁴ Use of the lower case for 'g' in god is deliberate; for a full explanation see my *Christian Origins and the Question of God. I. The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁵ Cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 170-81; 302-307

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. 1 Sam. 31.9; 2 Sam. 1.20; 4.10; 18.19, 20, 27, 31; 1 Kgs 1.42. It is not true that 'in pagan and Jewish literature the term designates any kind of message' (italics added) (pace H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London, Philadelphia: SCM Press, Trinity Press International, 1990) p. 4).

¹⁷ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. passim, esp. ch. 9.

¹⁸ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, passim, esp. chs. 2, 3.

¹⁹ Cf. I Cor. 8.4-6.

²⁰ These are sometimes described as the 'objective' and 'subjective' genitives respectively; but this is misleading. Object and subject only strictly apply when the noun governed by the genitive denotes an activity (as in 'the love of God'). What we have here are the genitives of *content* and of *origin*. Cf. BDF § 163: 'the division of the gen. into obj., subj. etc. is really only an attempt to set off several special lypci among the manifold possibilities. . .'

²¹ Against Stuhlmacher, 'The Pauline Gospel', p. 153.

²² Cf. R.N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC: Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990) P. 16.

²³ Stuhlmacher, 'The Pauline Gospel', p. 154. Other similar statements occur frequently in the article.

²⁴ I find it strange that B.R. Gaventa should suggest that there is no implicit reference to the resurrection when Paul speaks of the cross. If we are to think truly historically, without the resurrection the cross could only herald another failed Messianic mission ('The Singularity of the Gospel: A Reading of Galatians'. in J.M. Bassler [ed.], *Pauline Theology. I. Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991], pp. 147-59, 157).

²⁵ Cf. too Rom. 15.8-9.

²⁶ Cf. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, ch. 7. I hope that the fuller exposition of the 'end of exile' theme in my *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 268-71, and the primary and secondary sources referred to there, will help to convince those who were puzzled by that earlier statement.

²⁷ Cf. Wright. *Climax of the Covenant*, ch 8.

²⁸ Against, for example, Wilckens, who writes: 'in der Fruhzeit der Entstehung des urchristlichen Wortgebrauchs jeglicher politisch-polemische Bezug fehlt' (*Die Briefe an die Romer*, p. 75). Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 55, sees in principle the point I am making, but generalizes it away from the immediate political context: it is not a matter simply of 'the pretentious claims of self-important men', but of the political claim of worldly rulers.

²⁹ Cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, ch. 10.

³⁰ The rarity of the word διαθήκη (cf. 3.15) is of comparatively little importance here, except to those who cannot see beyond the pages of the concordance. What matters is that, as in Romans 4, Paul is dealing again and again with whole passages (Genesis 12. 15, Deuteronomy 27. etc.) that speak of the covenant and relate it to Israel's history and future.

³¹ Cf. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, pp. 71-75 and Koester *Ancient Christian Gospels*, Part I.

³² I am thus approaching, from a different angle, the same set of issues as R.B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3.1-4.11* (SBLDS; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), with an arguably similar result. Cf. too Gaventa, 'The Singularity of the Gospel', p. 154.

³³ Mk 1.15.

³⁴ Gal. 4.4.

³⁵ On the theme of freedom in Paul see Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty: The Origin and Nature of Paul's Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976 [1964]).

To persuade the Galatians to return to the true gospel, Paul related his own conversion story, appealed to the example of Abraham, and cited other support from the Old Testament. Galatians contains Paul's earliest written presentation of the doctrine of justification: "we are not justified by the works of the law of Moses but by faith in Jesus Christ." Paul reproved the Saints in Galatia for embracing the falsehood that Gentile Saints had to observe the rituals of the law of Moses (see Galatians 1:6-7; 3:1-3; 5:2-4; 6:12; see also Acts 15:1-31). Gospel glimpses, whole-Bible connections, theology, practice, and more. A 12-week practical study series on the book of Galatians. Written by Geoff Ziegler. In partnership with Crossway. Share. Knowing the Bible: Galatians. SHARE. Course Sections. Week 1: Overview. Week 2: The Irreplaceable Gospel (Gal. Read the Book of Galatians online. Scripture chapters verses with full summary, commentary meaning, and concordances for Bible study. This summary of the book of Galatians provides information about the title, author(s), date of writing, chronology, theme, theology, outline, a brief overview, and the chapters of the Book of Galatians. Author. The opening verse identifies the author of Galatians as the apostle Paul. Apart from a few 19th-century interpreters, no one has seriously questioned his authorship. Date and Destination. The date of Galatians depends to a great extent on the destination of the letter. There are two main views: The North Galatian theory. The Epistle to the Galatians, often shortened to Galatians, is the ninth book of the New Testament. It is a letter from Paul the Apostle to a number of Early Christian communities in Galatia. Scholars have suggested that this is either the Roman province of Galatia in southern Anatolia, or a large region defined by an ethnic group of Celtic people in central Anatolia. Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians are three short but rich books among the letters of Paul in the New Testament. Because of their brevity, their contribution to the theology of work is combined here into a single chapter. However, the three letters have their own distinctive themes, and we will explore each letter on its own. Galatians and Work. Back to Table of Contents Back to Table of Contents. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.